



# CELLO

## Cellist Steals from Violinist!!!

by David Holmes

In the early 1990s, as I was becoming involved in the Suzuki method, I was fortunate enough to view two pedagogical video tapes by John Kendall, one of the pioneers who helped transfuse the Suzuki method into America. I was so enamored with his gentle manner and with his encyclopedic knowledge of the art of violin teaching that I was inspired at the time to transcribe the contents of these videos onto paper. These master teaching lessons have been so very helpful to my playing and teaching. I would like to share some of his insights from his *Ideas for Violin Teaching: an Unexpurgated Selection of Pedagogical Points from Corelli to 2001*. (After looking up “unexpurgated” in my dictionary I realized it was meant humorously, since it suggests that none of the offensive or erroneous parts have been removed.) The humor continues with how overblown and ostentatious the complete title is, especially so when actually viewed: Kendall used a decidedly low-tech home camcorder for the taping.

One segment of Kendall’s videos that I have found particularly helpful is his “Seven Practice Families.”

### Family 1: Four steps for a given musical passage

1. One bow per note staccato: every note with a distinct, quick bow stroke (which creates a faster mental process as compared to doing it legato)
2. Hiccup method (each note of a passage is played to the rhythm of 2 sixteenth notes followed by an eighth rest). Perform with fingers lifting or going down during the eighth rest. Also known as “finger/bow/go,” “prepared fingers,” or “hurry up and wait” (the left hand hurries to the next note and the bow waits).
3. Doubles, which are like hiccups, but without the rests. Build for speed and use little bows. This requires very accurate coordination between the hands, quick and alert mental processes, and it forces a very steady tempo. The left hand, however, is still

moving quite slowly.

4. Staccato with slurs (when slurs are in the music, of course). This develops good bow distribution and allows space and resonance for each note.

### Family 2: Accents

Any note of a given passage can be accented in tempo and with or without slurs. This technique is most useful for faster same-note-value passages. Good to use for the notes that need to speak more clearly.

### Family 3: Holds

Unlike the accents family, this prolongs certain notes within a passage. Any note within a series can be held. Holding a note gives one time to prepare for what’s next as well.

### Family 4: Rhythms

This is perhaps the most well-known practice technique for similar-note-valued passages involving groups of 2, 3, 4, or even more than 4 notes. This technique utilizes an alteration between one long note (L) and possibly several short note (S) combinations to secure a passage. So for a passage built of groups of 4 sixteenth notes, it could break down as follows: LSSS, SLSS, SSLS, SSSL. There are endless creative possibilities with a multitude of dotted rhythms too.

### Family 5: Tapping

Students enjoy this one once they get over the initial shock of trying to do it. It involves adding an open string (whatever string you are on at the time) between each note of a passage. The open string is held longer than the fingered note (so it’s a SL pattern, with the L being the open string). The advantages are that tapping keeps the hand from clutching, sends a clear message to the brain about the geographic location of each note, and can help relax the hand, possibly because the “release” (up motion) of the finger is the emphasis, not the “stop” (down motion) of the left hand fingers. This is great for a bunch of notes up one string or a passage that does not change string very often.

### Family 6: Groups by Unit

This involves dissecting a passage into the intrinsic units within the passage itself. One example would be to group notes according to the strings being played on at the time. In other words, play the notes on one string; stop and prepare; play the notes on another string. A further example is to divide up according to shifts, as when there are several shifts in a row on one string. Also, it is helpful to go both forwards and backwards in practicing a passage this way.

### Family 7: Bowings

The “overlap” bowing (with 2 notes slurred and a bow emphasis on the second note, which is when the left hand goes to a new note) can be useful for evenness of action between the left and right hands.

### Over-arching principle and a disclaimer:

Essential for all practice families is the concept of “Stop and think; organize; go.” The mind works best in clusters, and this must be kept in mind with all the practice families, which of course are just techniques that in and of themselves will not develop an expressive musician. One other general point: when practicing these families play loudly and with energy in the bow.

I copy these “families” for my advanced students and will give a homework assignment to determine which practice families might be most useful for a given passage, and to practice using those families. A report back from the student in the next lesson on their preferred techniques used in practice during the preceding week and a demonstration of the passage with the practice families utilized can be enlightening, both to student and to teacher. This would fall under the category of building a self-reliant cellist, which if we succeed in engendering in all our students, means we can, at last, retire.

I have used these families in a variety of situations, both group and individual. The trick is to pick intelligently from these many options, and that comes from experi-

ence (and lots of practice). I love that these methods of practice all *require* mental acuity. “Practice slowly,” the universal cry of all string teachers, can yield less than desirable results if a kid is checked out during practice, even if she is going slowly. There are no practice panaceas, but I have been very impressed with the tendency of John Kendall’s practice families to awaken the student to a new level of awareness and an

improved polish quickly.

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