



VIOLA

Three-in-One

by Annette Caruthers

Tactile Sense in Memorization

Just lately, in working with two high school students who have difficulty memorizing and performing from memory, I discovered that neither of them could sense which fingers should play the notes they could easily hum and/or recall in their minds. For most students, being able to hum a melody in their minds as they play ties in automatically with knowing which fingers play each note. I know that both students do practice regularly, but this tactile sense was not connecting, and I was very surprised.

To remedy this, I suggested singing through the music (even silently, singing only in the mind, if others might be disturbed by the sound) and feeling for each finger while reading the printed page. Practicing this way, they are able to put in extra time working on the music even when they might not have their instrument with them, as in study hall, or riding somewhere. One of the students had really good success with this approach when she played in the recent Solo and Ensemble Contest. The other one will not have a performance until April, but appears to be making better progress than usual. Visualization is known to be a very successful form of practice, and I think what I am suggesting is a form of visualization. If any of you have worked on this with your students, I'd love to hear from you.

Bad Habit of the Day

One I've been working on lately involves left thumbs that pull up across from the 3rd or 4th finger and turn inward, with the base joint collapsing. I know this is something to watch for in beginners, as they often try this to help out a weak 3rd or 4th finger. This also happens with students who do not practice regularly and therefore don't develop much strength in their hands. An exercise ball, just like the ones given to computer professionals, can help a great deal, as do the *Exercises for Finger Strengthening* given at the beginning of the *Preparing for Kreutzer* book by Whistler. This is a violin book,

but the page can be transcribed for viola, and the same etude is in *From Violin to Viola* also by Whistler. For young students, I draw a face on the thumb and position the face so that it looks at the student when the thumb is properly placed; they seem to like this, and pay attention to it. We can also work to strengthen the left fingers by doing "finger pops" which involves placing all 4 fingers on one string, and lifting and re-placing each one many times, being sure no other fingers pop up with the one we're working on. It's more difficult than it seems; try it. Trills seem to help some students, especially if we try for a full minute. They don't believe how long a minute really is! But my favorite "trick" is to have the student wiggle the left thumb loosely along the fingerboard as they play 3rd finger notes. It takes concentration, and they can't believe I'm asking them to do this, which makes it actually fun. Some will try to move the thumb and squeeze it at the same time, but a little checking will tell you if that's what they are doing.

Sight Reading Books

I told you I was waiting for a selection of sight reading books last time; and they did come. I have a good dozen of them now. But I don't see anything in them that you don't get in a good method book. My favorite is the old Applebaum volume, *String Builder*, by Belwin, and I still use it for many students because it is so good for giving step-by-step note reading and including duets to keep the student's interest. But as for sight reading books, I'd say save your money and just be sure to include step by step reading in lessons as soon as the student can hold their instrument and play well on easier pieces from memory.

Annette Caruthers is an experienced former performer and private teacher with studios in St. Louis Park and Southwest Minneapolis. Many of her students play in the youth symphonies and go on to continue their studies in college. ♪