



## CELLO

### A Grumpy Cello Teacher's List of Pet Peeves

by David Holmes



It's so great to have a cello column with which to blow off some teaching steam. Yes, I know—teaching is a noble profession that shapes the minds of young people, developing both musical and life skills that will be important to them as they mature. Enough of the platitudes for today, ok? Down in the trenches of private lessons we all can get peeved and here are a few of my “pet” ones.

**Pet Peeve #1:** Students who don't practice and, especially, naturally gifted students who don't practice. Is steam coming out of your ears as you think of the students you've had who don't practice enough? There is a correlation between a natural affinity for an instrument and the desire to play it, but it is way less than 100%. So many other characteristics are essential to achieve cellistic success, like perseverance, intelligence, an innate love for music, and a student's environment, to name a few. We can inspire, threaten, bribe, and cajole, but the truth is we just don't know if the cello will “take” with a student.

**Pet Peeve# 2:** Students who have no ownership of their cello playing. It was so nice of your mom to pay for your cello lessons, to drive you to my house, to bring your cello and cello chair down the stairs and to unpack the cello and bow and to rosin it for you while coaxing you to get ready, why are you dawdling, hurry up, etc. Wow! I think I should teach this mom cello. She seems to really care about and to have taken ownership of this cello lesson thing. Oh wait, I'm teaching *her kid*, the one who is about to play *March in G* a bit like a zombie who will be awakened from his stupor only after hearing the suggestions that his teacher gives on his playing of a piece that the student didn't actually really even hear, though his body went through all the motions. Hmmm...something about this scenario is disturbing.

We probably all have students with various degrees of commitment toward the cello. As a Suzuki teacher, guiding a little one to ownership of their music life is a vexing and occasionally a frustrating endeavor. Part of the problem comes from not knowing how

things will go from scratch with such a young one. The child has no musical history, and though we perhaps have trust in the parents as co-equal partners in the learning process, we don't really know how this will proceed. Some kids latch onto the cello instantly (Oh thank you, wonderful child!), but a number carry a lukewarm, ambivalent, or even negative attitude about their cello life that can go on for years depending on the tenacity of the teacher and or the parent. It's an act of faith we adults engage in, or perhaps it's the “audacity of hope”—surely she'll start loving cello at *some point* in the future, won't she?? The truth is, we just don't know. A whole book could be written on this ownership issue, but I'll just say this as a starting point to the student: at least pack, unpack, and carry your own cello around. To the teacher (that would be myself) I say, quit whining! So many things are uncertain in this life, as you've learned again and again by now. Teaching cello to kids qualifies as a “good” uncertain thing.

**Pet Peeve # 3:** Students who don't ever bow close to the bridge. Playing near the bridge should be part of a cellist's daily practice. I don't care if you don't like the tone because it's scratchy down there. Get over it! The only way to get good at it is to do it. Start at the frog with a little bit of bow at a time and gradually do a Pinocchio's nose routine until the whole bow figures out how to play down there. Getting a beautiful tone near the bridge is the ultimate challenge and will make playing in other bow lanes so much easier. The bow arm and bow hold need balance and comfort when playing near the bridge that they don't necessarily need when playing over the fingerboard. First, set the bow deep into the string at the frog with loose arm weight. Second, check for gooey bow fingers that cling like melted cheese, and third, always do a rabies check for the vicious pit bull (with lipstick?) thumb before pulling the bow. We need to hear that rich, dark chocolate sound, not that chicken soup stuff you get over the fingerboard. And remember, all bow strokes involve the *whole arm!!* Let's figure out a

way to make it sound good. Playing over the fingerboard may feel comfortable, but people more than six feet away are going to think that faint buzzing sound coming out of your cello is some kind of bee.

**Pet Peeve #4:** Students who don't use enough vibrato. We've worked hard on your vibrato and you've gotten good at it, so why not use it more often? Here's the rule: if you have time to vibrate, then you vibrate! I'll tell you if it's too much; (in all my years of teaching cello I've only had *one* student who actually did too much vibrato!) When a cellist learns to use vibrato, they sound like they've taken a time machine two years into the future without having to practice to get there. What could be better than that, I ask? Vibrato was considered an ornament back in Bach's time, and you're free to explore that with a performance practice expert at some point, but the sound concept of 21<sup>st</sup> century cellists involves vibrato *as an intrinsic part of one's cello sound*. God, vibrato is awesome! It occurs naturally in the human voice and every cellist's vibrato is as unique as their fingerprint or as their personality, which surely vibrato is an expression of. No doubt, it's great to practice at times without vibrato to check for phrasing and nuance that is bow specific, and it is also useful to practice a piece without the bow, either silently or with pizzicato, to make sure the vibrato is comfortable on as many notes as possible. But for now, go home and listen to several great cellists, perhaps Rostropovich, Isserlis, Du Pre or Maisky, and see how they each use vibrato to great musical effect and how much beauty it adds to their playing.

**Pet Peeve #5:** Students who don't rosin their bows. Geez! Do you *like* that your cello bow feels as if you just sprayed it with WD-40? Does playing with a bow that has rosin on it just make the cello too easy? (I would say these comments, if at all, with a humorous tone, of course.) In group and solo concerts I've noticed a significant difference in the tone production if I make sure everyone has rosin on their bows. *Dub!!!*

**Last Pet Peeve** (hold your applause,

please): that nagging, gnawing feeling of dismay and confusion I've gotten many, many times when I realize in a lesson that I don't quite know what to say or to do to get a point across to a student. This uncomfortable sensation I realize, though, is the seed for growth on my part, if I can just accept its tension as a source for inspiration. Alas, perhaps something good can come out of one's pet peeves.

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