



# CELLO

## All Thumbs

by David Holmes

Is it the jaws of a pit bull, the squeeze of a boa constrictor, or the death grip of vise grip pliers? No, it's just the thumbs of cello players. Dr. Jekyll during our day-to-day activities, thumbs easily mutate into Mr. Hyde as soon as we pick up the cello. In stark contrast to the glories of the opposable thumb in the human hand, we have the "oppositional" thumb in a cellist's hand. How to convert such a brute into a gentle giant requires much sensitivity training.

When I heard the fabulous Pacifica String Quartet play recently, after the concert I asked the cellist, Brandon Vamos, about thumb tension in cello playing. He called it a "huge issue," and made a couple of suggestions that I have incorporated into this article. I'm sure most cello teachers have thumb obedience tricks up their sleeves. Here is a compilation from many sources of ideas related to cellists' thumbs.

*Seeing the thumbs.* As a teacher, I usually sit directly in front of my students. I have noticed though, that if I sit to the student's right I have a much better view of both thumbs, and truthfully, I have often been shocked and enlightened at what I have seen from this position.

*Arm weight and the thumbs.* Balanced arm weight, that elusive but necessary prerequisite for effective cello playing, is the cure for the common thumb in both hands. How to get there, however, is easier said than done and requires constant vigilance. Hanging both arms with curved fingers on the flat top or edge of hard surfaces (perhaps a table or music stand), can aid in the sensation of clinging without the thumb and with no arm tension. Flicking the thumb with the free hand or moving the thumb in circles while the fingers are arched and carrying arm weight can be helpful, too. For the left hand, while still hanging on a non-cello surface, transfer the arm weight from curved finger to curved finger while the thumb chills. Notice that as the balance changes from finger to finger that the relaxed thumb follows this transfer of weight in a polite manner. This mobile thumb is essential for vibrato. Tanya Carey's

idea, echoed by Brandon Vamos, of a slight arch in the left wrist while maintaining weight in the fingers *and* in the elbow can be effective in liberating the thumb, which can take a holiday when this alignment is true. A "C-shaped" left hand (every finger forming a letter "C" with the thumb) can be helpful toward this goal as well.

*The thumbs in relation to other joints.* In *The String Play*, Phyllis Young writes of the teacher placing the thumb on their own Adam's apple as a visual cue to a student to release their thumb tension. She also points out that any tense joint will lead to further tension down or up the line. For instance, a tight shoulder will make a tight thumb more likely. This can be turned on its head to the cellist's benefit: a loose shoulder makes a tight thumb less likely and visa versa. Perhaps a relaxation routine going from larger joints down the arm is a way of making a student play with more ease: release shoulders, loosen elbows, soften wrists, and relax fingers. Because of "bilateral transfer"—or the tendency for the actions of one side of our body to be mirrored by the other—one tense thumb will almost inevitably lead to another. We have done some good if we can make students aware of the connection between tension (of all kinds) and the poorer quality of sound it produces out of the cello. Tighter players, however, are less able to hear clearly what is coming out of the instrument, since physical tension interferes with the music-making faculties of and between the ears!

*How holding the cello affects thumb behavior.* No one wants to play a cello that is a moving target. Instability in the cello hold by the body is a recipe for a military coup: the vacuum left by a teetering cello will be filled by a squeezing left thumb. The two knees, the chest, and the endpin must be working together to effectively stabilize the cello before the left thumb can be emancipated.

*Placement of the left thumb.* Most cellists agree that the left thumb should be exactly or nearly opposite the 2<sup>nd</sup> finger in the cello hand, including during forward and back-

ward extensions. In the lower positions the thumb promotes a taller left hand (usually considered desirable) if it touches under the A or D strings. In 4<sup>th</sup> position, placing the thumb more to the side of the saddle part of the neck can help the hand position and prepare the arm for 5<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> and thumb positions. In 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> positions an "unbent" but relaxed thumb on the side of the neck and a lower first finger base knuckle can aid accuracy and comfort. For cellists who teach a "square" left hand, the thumb will usually touch the cello a little bit toward the palm. For cellists teaching a more "tilted" left hand position, the thumb often will touch the cello on the side opposite the nail.

*Left thumb training tricks.* Play without the thumb on the cello, but still keep it behind the 2<sup>nd</sup> finger. Put a grape, a round ball of playdough or other squishable substance between the thumb and the neck of the cello. Have a student then play a first position piece without turning the playdough into a pancake. Rotate the thumb in circles while playing a piece. One ultimate challenge is to put a tack through the sticky side of a piece of tape and attach it to the cello, so that the player is feeling the point of the tack while they play! Brutal, yes, but some kids like that kind of challenge.

*Placement of the bow hand thumb.* The right thumb touches the stick on the player's side, exactly where the frog and the stick meet. I like students to touch on the right corner of their bow thumb with its tip pointing toward the pinky. Students, however, have different sized thumbs, which makes its role a bit individual. Most thumbs bend back naturally, so an actual "straight" thumb is really a bent one. How much more bend is needed is an intelligent guess. Too much bend can cause the thumb's backside to touch the hair or ferrule, and too little bend can lock the thumb in a static, tense, "banana" position, so avoiding the extremes is wise. I use rubbery pencil grips with some of my students, since it provides more traction for the thumb and a bit more diameter than the stick alone. I often mark with a sharpie exactly where the thumb

should go and mention that although the pencil grip is soft, the thumb still shouldn't push.

*Right thumb training tricks.* The "door bell" test is a nifty flexibility idea: have the student do an upside-down bow hold, exposing the thumb side. Push down on their thumb knuckle behind the finger nail as the student finds the proper amount of buoyancy to cause it to "spring back" but not to have it so tight that it won't go down in the first place (broken door bell). While the thumb is upside down, check for a pink nail (non-squeezing) as opposed to a snowy nail (squeezing) as a visual aid to a gentle thumb. For a collapsing base knuckle joint, a wine cork can provide thumb support while playing. Brandon Vamos also suggests using the bow without the thumb by putting the pinky behind the bow while playing. Lifting off fingers one at a time while holding the bow very still in a vertical position and lifting off fingers one at a time while playing can alleviate thumb tension and promote a balanced bow hold.

Let's end with a "Newsbreak" from Phyllis Young's *String Play*:

"We interrupt this program to bring you this special news bulletin. Tension has been named the Number One Killer

of potentially beautiful tones by the National Foundation for Tone Control. Statistics released today show that over 90 percent of those people who are unable to produce beautiful tones on string instruments first displayed tight thumbs. The nation's young musicians, their parents, and their teachers are cautioned to be on guard against this potentially hazardous symptom. We now return you to the regularly scheduled program."

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