

# Clinic: Strategies for Remedial Intonation Problems

presented by Mark Bjork  
reported by Elizabeth Prielozny Barnes

*Mark Bjork made an enlightening presentation of rationales and strategies for teaching intonation at this past fall's MNSOTA workshop. He based his presentation on a paper he presented at Atlanta's national ASTA conference in 2009. Although his original paper was geared to studio teachers, he believes these concepts are relevant to all teachers, whether studio, classroom or extra-curricular.*

## Two overall premises

- Orientation to pitch and tonality is culturally derived. (It is well known that scales from other cultures can use microtones in addition to the 12 we customarily work with here in the west.)
- *Everybody* is able to discriminate pitch unless they have a hearing disability (which can be detected in people who speak in a monotone).

So how can a teacher help their students develop their innate ability to play in tune?

## Begin with good tools and equipment

- Fresh strings
- Properly shaped bridge, nut and well-dressed finger board
- Functional pegs and fine tuners
- A proper left hand set-up

Insist on good intonation from the earliest stages of learning. This makes proper intonation a bottom-line expectation in playing the instrument and can save much trouble later on.

## Three examples of commonly-used, yet ultimately unsuccessful methods to develop students' intonation:

- Verbal direction by teacher (play higher, lower, etc.) This does not teach students to listen to themselves.
- Arrows penciled into music to remind the student which notes were too high or low at a lesson, or placing colored tape on the fingerboard to indicate where fingers should be placed also do not help the student to develop listening skills. Forget about the arrows and tape and just help the student learn to listen!
- Electronic tuners that visually indicate when a note is in tune simply teach a student to respond to a visual cue rather than develop listening skills.

Sometimes we do not hear the sounds that are actually coming out of our instrument, but instead are playing in our mind

an ideal version of what we would like to hear.

## Developing intonation is a sensitization process.

- Start with a well-tuned instrument: Tune one string at a time, bowing (rather than plucking) each string. (In orchestral tuning we tend to play sharp so we can hear ourselves over the common A.)
- Listen for the ringing sound of a unison or octave (using a sympathetic open string, usually an octave lower). This is often taught early in the Suzuki process but then left behind as the student advances. Alternatively this may be taught only to advanced students. However this practice should be a habit throughout the playing career. (On lower stringed instruments you can actually see the sympathetic string vibrating.) Be aware that an improperly set-up left hand can prevent sympathetic strings from vibrating when a finger inadvertently touches an open string.

## To develop melodic or horizontal listening:

Fill in each interval with its intermediary whole and half steps.

Common issues with intervals:

- Leading tones want to sound high
- Half steps are generally not played close enough.

Common issues with finger placement:

- First finger consistently high
- Fourth finger consistently low

Pointing out *patterns* of intonation problems rather than individual notes out of tune is quite helpful for students.

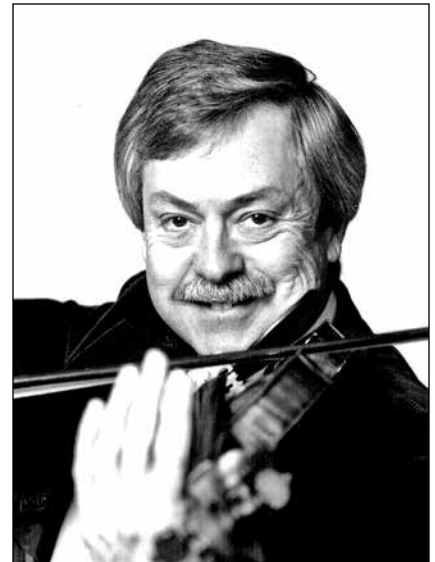
## To develop harmonic or vertical listening:

Practice arpeggios against a set tonic (played on a tuner) to instill the ability to hear what intervals sound like when they are in tune.

- Doing this practice regularly, slowly

and insistently (not going on until each interval rings true) teaches a student that this is an important ritual for practice.

- It is essential that we always insist that students play absolutely in tune, regardless of their age and playing level.
- Standing directly behind your student and playing directly at their ear, an



octave lower, will encourage them to match your pitches and to hear what in-tune playing sounds like.

- Once it is possible for a student to play in tune alone they can develop the skills to play in tune while other notes are being played above and/or below them at the same time (in ensemble).
- Instrumentalists also need to learn to adjust to the tempered pitch of a piano. Working with a piano frequently before performing with one is necessary for a student to learn to hear and match a piano's tuning. (Oftentimes a piano accompanist is only brought in at the last minute, leaving no time for a student to adjust to the piano's tuning, which ultimately results in a performance that sounds out of tune.)

- Chamber music and double stops also create their own intonation problems; in playing the middle voice it is actually not possible to play completely in tune with both the upper and lower voices simultaneously. Subtle adjustments are made all the time and ultimately will occur automatically. But students must learn how to develop this practice.
- Playing with instruments from other families creates additional problems because they each have their own mechanical issues that make certain pitches impossible to tune.

In sum, there is not one answer to the string musician's challenge of intonation, nor only one method or format. The above are methods and techniques Mark developed over many years of learning, teaching, performing and, probably most importantly, observing. It is clear that he offered them in the powerful hope of encouraging fellow teachers to consistently join in the quest to develop students who are aware of pitch orientation from the very beginning and throughout their playing career.

In the same way that he chose to share with colleagues his best thoughts on learning to play in tune, Mark recently published a book, *Expanding Horizons: The*

*Suzuki-Trained Violinist Grows Up*, to offer his perspectives and suggestions on moving Suzuki students from Book 10 out into the rest of their musical lives. Based on what he has learned over his 40+ years of teaching, he offers it in hope that "it serve[s] to tweak the creativity and imagination and expand horizons!" Once can't ask for more than that.

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