



# VIOLIN

## Creative Teaching for Beginners of All Ages

by Ann Anderson

This year at UMD we have had an influx of college students interested in playing the violin. Some have taken violin in years past using the Suzuki School of teaching and others have played the flute, clarinet, trumpet or guitar and are interested in pursuing skills to play the violin.

I use a basic lesson schedule for all of these varied students and then embellish the lessons with additional skills as I analyze their progress. Obviously, the progress varies from student to student.

Some students are able to progress rapidly and even go ahead independently. I check both hand positions first without music, listen to their assignments, go over new material for the next week and finish their lessons with some easy sight-reading. At the end of lessons, time permitting, I use an old method that has a light orchestral recording. Students are challenged to read music and are helped with intonation problems. It lightens the lesson and gives them a sense of “making music” with a group. I also play the piano with them to keep the music moving.

Those students who are slower in their progress have lessons in “how to practice.” Even if it’s clear that the student hasn’t practiced all week, I try to give him/her a practical lesson on the previous lesson with a new look at the material. I use pitch drilling, adding one measure to another, pizzicato exercises and practicing the passages in various parts of the bow. For beginners, my creativity is limited, but I do try to think of different ideas, depending on the music.

I check basic positions for each hand before going to the literature for the lesson and try to check the positions in less than ten minutes of a half-hour lesson. Here’s my basic lesson schedule:

### 1. Bow

- Open strings - Upper 1/3 of bow
  - Divide the bow in thirds and play in the upper 1/3 of the bow
  - Bow must “track” on the string
  - With bow arm parallel to the violin, draw the bow to the tip and back to the parallel. (Open and close to the parallel with little or no motion of the upper arm.)
  - Speak and play rhythms: “High fiddle, Low fiddle,” “Jingle Bells”
- Open strings - Lower 2/3 of the bow (Frog to parallel)
- Full bow

### 2. Violin

- Place the “end pin” in the middle of the neck and slide the violin over to the shoulder. Shoulder rests are recommended.
- Place the left hand on the neck and gently slide up to “third position” and back to establish a relaxed hand position.
- Tap the thumb, tap the fingers
- Drill the pitches for the *first finger* to establish the hand position.

- Extend the pitches to the D major notes on the D and A strings as the music requires.
- Match 3<sup>rd</sup> fingers on the D and A strings with the well-tuned open strings

### 3. Music Book

Proceed to the music book. I’m back to Sam Applebaum’s beginning book after trying several other methods. I find the beginning Suzuki books are incomplete in the information the student needs to study independently for a week.

### 4. So what’s “Creative”?

Many ideas I learned from Paul Rolland. Once I have a warm-up and hand position check routine set up for the students, I can work with their beginning book.

- Older students are able to change rhythms in exercises so that I can drill them for pitches and change half-notes to quarter notes. Or slow down fast passages with rhythms to increase dexterity and pitch recognition.
- Changing separate bowings to slurs or vice versa.
- Working in varied parts of the bow is also a challenge but possible for good bow control and balance.
- Down, Down bow exercises.
- Up, Up bow exercises.
- Pizzicato is always an option before bowing exercises.
- I’ve tried to have them sing (a Galamian requirement) but that hasn’t worked yet.
- Doubling pitches with wrist and finger motion (an attempt to get rid of gripping).
- Using the “paint the wall” up and down, then sideways routine.
- Placing the right hand thumb under the frog.
- Placing the pinkey on the back octagonal...away from the screw!!!
- Rocking the bow hand back and forth.
- Bowing through a toilet tube.
- Left hand: tap the thumb, tap the fingers, move up and down the neck, strum the strings and move the elbow in and out in 1<sup>st</sup> position and 3<sup>rd</sup> position.
- Bow the students bow with the student holding the bow for weight.
- Play with the student “sometimes” so they can hear a pleasing sound and imitate.

### 5. Vibrato

I’m experimenting with vibrato to help the students play without gripping the violin. I know we are all apprehensive about pitch development, but the slight movement of the hand seems to relax my “grippers.” For older beginning students, the vibrato has also

been an incentive to practice.

## 6. Sight Read Fun Material

*Michael, Row the Boat Ashore; Rocking Ol' St. Nick; Jingle Bells; Chopsticks.* I still have Wisniewski's *Learning Unlimited* books with a band back-up for sight reading. I checked Hal Leonard, but that method is evidently not available any more. It was published at the same time as the Paul Rolland methods.

## 7. Teach Some Familiar Pieces by Rote.

*Happy Birthday* in G Major; *Pop Goes the Weasel* in G Major, with left hand pizz. on

“Pop!” (I have a 1985 Reader's Digest *Children's Songbook* for more repertoire.)

Last week, one of my students came to his lesson with his music...*but without his violin!!!* We sat down and went over his lesson with a review assigned and discussed his next lesson. He's talented and conscientious. I'm sure his lesson will be very fine next week. However, teaching the violin without a violin has been my first in all these years.

Teaching is always a challenge with new experiences every day. Enjoy!!!

*Professor Ann Anderson teaches at the University of Minnesota Duluth and plays in the Duluth Superior Symphony Orchestra as the Associate Concertmaster Emeritus. She received the Distinguished Service Award, Clinic Presenter, Master Teacher Award, and Orchestra Educator of the Year from the Minnesota Music Educators Association. She holds a Masters Degree in violin performance from Indiana University. Josef Gingold, Ivan Galamian, and Norman Carol were her major teachers with a master class with Yehudi Menuhin. †*