



VIOLA

Finger Before Bow

by Annette Caruthers

For years I've heard teachers mention the importance of helping students find notes with the fingers of the left hand before trying to play them with the bow, often saying "Fingers Before Bow" or "FBB" as a basic principle of playing any bowed string instrument. Yet I don't think I fully realized why this was emphasized so much until after many years of teaching. It was always obvious that FBB would clean up anyone's playing and help with coordination issues. The finger has to be on the desired note or everyone can hear the sloppiness of having a note be started by the bow and then corrected or changed by the fingers.

Less obvious is how trying to get the left hand to find notes before hearing them requires a change in thinking that is critical to the player's overall development. Many students can figure out instantly when they have played a wrong note, and some are so good at correcting in a microsecond that they never actually stop to figure out what they should have done in the first place to avoid having to correct. I find that asking students to note which intervals are half-steps and mark those, so they can feel for them before hearing the notes, is an important step in this process. This also

reveals any problems they are having in identifying notes or understanding intervals, and often changes the way they think as they play—which some students will say feels very difficult. It does take real focus to figure out how to place fingers accurately after identifying notes and intervals, but only needs to be repeated several times before students start to see that each short section becomes fairly automatic once it's worked out.

When doing this, it is also helpful to identify half-steps that occur across strings, such as F \sharp on the D string and D \natural on the A string. These can be felt in the fingers just as half-steps on the same string can. Steps across strings require a mental map of fingerboard geography, which also takes time and patience to develop, but is always an advantage.

One practice technique that helps is to stop the bow completely when figuring out a short series of notes, then play the complete series and stop again. Repeat as often as necessary. When it seems like the player is ready for it, try removing the stops and just keep playing. Most players get a surprise and discover that taking the stops out is very easy.

Using a staccato or martelé stroke also helps give an instant to place a finger before starting the next bow stroke, so that the FBB process can continue even when playing a bit faster. Last of all comes true legato playing.

P. S. I will not be writing these pieces on pedagogy topics regularly in the future. I want to put my energy into other things, and can remember so many times when I learned a tip from someone else that I am looking forward to learning from the next Viola Column writer. I'm still here, and still enjoy teaching, and will continue to learn as I go along. Thanks for reading!

Annette Caruthers is a violist and teacher of violin and viola in the Twin Cities. A former member of the Minnesota Orchestra and Utah Symphony, former Principal Violist of the Minnesota Opera Orchestra for many years, she is now teaching full-time from her home studio in St. Louis Park, close to the borders with Edina and southwest Minneapolis. Her students have gone on to careers in music and often play on the first stands of the youth symphonies. To contact Annette email Annettemusician@gmail.com, or call 952-924-0663. ♪