



CELLO

Random Rants and Ruminations

by David Holmes

For a change, I thought I would bounce from topic to topic, as opposed to focusing on one subject only. I hope something grabs you.

Tone

Lately, I have had excellent success in lessons by using sandpaper as a kinesthetic analogy to the grab of the bow on the string. I started with one coarse sheet of sandpaper and had students first touch a small furry stuffed toy owl (Ooh, feel how soft that is!) followed by touching the sandpaper (Wow, that is so rough and grabby!). Now, as the student plays, I ask them to think of the sound point to produce the “owl” sound then the “sandpaper” sound. The student notices the sandpaper sound is the better of the two. Now I have 3 sheets of sandpaper with varying degrees of coarseness and color. I have the student touch each one and then I set them on the floor in front of the student and I make reference to them as they play during their lesson. Which sandpaper is best for this passage? The cello sandpaper lab results have shown much promise...

Swan hunting (for notes)

The *Swan* is the most popular cello piece in the world, and when just looking at the music, one is struck by how little there is on the page. This is as deceptive as is the ease with which a swan glides across a lake, his body smooth and serene as his unseen feet are madly paddling. There are 113 notes in the *Swan*, but there are 41 shifts (the paddling feet of the piece). That makes for a very high note to shift ratio, or one shift for every 2.75 notes, perhaps one of the highest ratios of any piece. When I was teaching the *Swan* to a student recently, to improve his accuracy, we went over every shift many times. Tanya Carey's suggestion of shifting quickly back and forth multiple times on each shift and adjusting as one plays, was very helpful to this student. This very rapid shifting lightens the shift, creates the optimal ease in the shift motion and makes clear that the arm is the shifter, not the hand. The tendency to use the hand or finger to

help with the shifting motion is especially common in the neck positions (5th, 6th, and 7th). This rapid shifting technique also alleviates the tendency to miss and then correct the shift and it increases accuracy quickly and seems to initiate better listening as well. All shifts in the *Swan*, whether they are new finger, old finger, slide pluck, or slide tap, can all be practiced this way.

Movement From Larger to Smaller Body Parts:

As Victor Sazer notes in his book *New Directions in Cello Playing* (published by ofnote, 1995), “Every act you perform includes preparation.” (pg. 101) He also believes that, “When your arm moves, the heaviest part (the upper arm) leads the way, followed by your forearm and your hand in that order. The sequence of motion is always from the heavier to the lighter part of your body.” (pg. 45) These ideas relate to shifting and to the movement of the bow arm, and have been helpful to me and my students. I noticed when watching Tony Ross play one time that he seemed to be preparing his shifts with a discreet upper arm motion slightly ahead of the actual shift. I realized, when I went home and explored this idea that I was waiting until it was time to shift to actually shift. When I added a slight anticipation/preparation motion with the upper arm, it really helped my shifting, whether ascending or descending. It also has made me aware that the largest arm part—the upper arm—should be the leader in a shift, not just the forearm, and that indeed, the upper arm pushes and pulls the rest of the arm along.

The larger to smaller body parts sequence of movement is helpful in creating the pulling motion that is so crucial to a loose and flexible bow arm. Recently, if I take my students' arms and show them how the upper arm can lead both on a down and up bow (and that the rest of the arm follows) there has been immediate improvement in sound and in ease of playing. Leading with the upper arm makes clear just how passive the bow hold and the

forearm can be when the arm unfolds or folds up this way. The arm can seem more cloth and rubber than bone and muscle with this approach.

Diving into the Learning Styles Labyrinth

By what I assume is an inborn tendency, I have always been very skeptical of many ideas that seem to be popular in the world. Perhaps I'm just ornery. My wife, who is a clinical psychology researcher at the University of Minnesota, understands and reinforces my innate skepticism. That is why she bought me the really nifty book titled *50 Great Myths of Popular Psychology* (by Lilienfeld, Lynn, Ruscio, and Beyerstein, published by Wiley Blackwell in 2010). The four authors of *50 Myths* are all very accomplished scientific researchers. I highly recommend this book!

One topic that has always befuddled me is the ubiquitous reference to “learning styles.” I've heard lectures on it and have run across the topic of learning styles in the print and electronic media and, truthfully, I've never quite understood it. In the above mentioned book, the subject of learning styles is “Myth #18: Students Learn Best When Teaching Styles are Matched to Their Learning Styles.” The authors make a strong case for why the previous statement is a myth. Here are several of their criticisms:

1. Although it is appealing to believe that all children would learn at a similar pace if only they were taught using the proper learning style, there is no evidence that this is the case.
2. There are over 71 LS (learning style) models: which is to be believed? One model targets visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners, and another model classifies kids into “activists, reflectors, theorists, and pragmatists.” (pg. 94) Therefore, the many LS tests used to categorize students into learning types cannot all be valid.
3. Of the 3,604 ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center)

database articles on learning styles, less than one-fourth are peer reviewed. There have been few well-controlled studies on learning styles and the results of those have been mixed: “In other words, much of LS literature is flying ‘under the radar,’ bypassing anonymous critical feedback by expert scholars.” (pg. 94)

4. Using LS in a classroom could

backfire: teachers should teach to a student’s weaknesses as much as to their strengths, since a student’s weaknesses need to be strengthened, not avoided.

The authors conclude: “So the popular belief that encouraging teachers to match their teaching style to students’ learning style enhances their learning turns out to

be an urban legend of educational psychology.” (pg. 96)

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