



CELLO

Profound, Primary, Preeminent: Posture

by David Holmes

Temporary obsessions over something can be referred to as “getting on a jag” or “getting on a soapbox.” My cello teaching and playing have been chocked full of many of these intensely passionate episodes, whatever they might be called. The good thing about these momentary supernovas is that they inspire and motivate me. Their origins are multiple: perhaps something I read captures my imagination, or maybe while practicing something will “click” which leads to a zealous attempt to understand what caused the improvement (and how that might affect my playing and teaching). The down side of these bursts of inspiration is that they inevitably fizzle out in a few days to a few weeks, or until the next one mysteriously arises. I love these passion filled interludes—it’s almost like being a teen again, but without all the unpleasantness that goes along with that.

My latest obsession? *Posture!!* I have considered the importance of posture before, but between my practicing and reading about cello technique (yes, I should get a life, right?) I have had a re-infusion of zeal about posture. Good posture is the oil that keeps the cello-playing engine running smoothly. It is the root and trunk that the branches of cello technique grow from. Optimal posture is not only important for cello playing, but is helpful in all walks of life, including, well, walking. I am a swimmer, so I am aware of how my body alignment in the water improves or hampers my strokes. As I age, I would say awareness of good posture habits becomes even more crucial; I can’t abuse my body like I used to and expect no unpleasant ramifications.

Posture is profoundly important, but posture is also pernicious, which means little things can go wrong with our bodies while playing the cello which cause a crumbling house of cards situation. One posture deviation surely leads to others because of that interconnected system known as the human body.

Let me start from the ground up. But first, in the spirit of full disclosure, let me state this disclaimer: I have experimented

with several ideas on sitting at the cello over the years. The one I give you today is just my “current” method. In a few years, who knows what cello position I’ll be teaching.

Feet

The position of the feet and their relationship to the body is important. Of course we all need the right size and type of chair. I teach that the right foot (and leg) point straight out from the body with the toes below the knee. The left foot is angled to the left and is more of a free agent than the right foot and its position is determined by where the left knee “finds” and supports the cello. The left knee is more active in the cello hold than is the right knee, which, in my opinion can be free of the cello if necessary. This asymmetrical foot position will cause the body to make a slight turn to the left in the chair, perhaps toward 11 o’clock and the cello comes straight in to the body (12 o’clock). This sitting position will make the cello A-string more accessible with the bow.

Hips

The foot bones are connected to the hip bones, so if the hips are relaxed, which they should be, then it will be easy to lift a student’s leg and drop it to the ground with a heavy “thud” sound. Also, a cellist’s two sit bones should balance straight into the chair, like two little tree trunks. One can check for loose hips by swaying side to side (at first without the cello) or having a partner help one sway by gently steering from the shoulders.

Back

A straight back is essential to easy cello playing. The lower back should neither push in (stomach out) nor slump down. A very helpful tip from Tanya Carey is to engage the lower back when playing at the tip of the bow. A lack of connection to the back can result in insufficient contact with the string in the upper half of the bow. Try it. You’ll like it!

Rib Cage

The ribs will align with the hips and the head, in a straight line. With a tall back the rib cage should feel the easy expansion that comes with unencumbered full breaths. The chest or sternum will stay lifted and open. I can’t express enough the importance of breathing while playing (I wrote another article on that topic). Lack of consistent breathing will detrimentally affect posture. Continuous breathing while playing needs to be practiced.

Shoulders and their Blades

Shoulder blades are a new area I have been exploring lately. I am tall and long limbed, and for people built like me it is especially important to set the shoulder blades. Many times I have heard from cello teachers that it is important to “play from the back,” and truthfully, I never really felt I understood what that meant. Now that I am aware of my shoulder blades, I finally have a sense of “playing from the back.”

Here are some steps that helped me find a good shoulder position: roll shoulders forward, then upwards, then back, ending with a relaxation of the shoulders from the “rolled back” position. This shoulder stretch makes my shoulder blades a bit closer together and slightly lower on the back. This prevents the forward roll of the shoulders—which is especially easy to do when approaching the frog with the bow. Rolled shoulders can cause a number of problems, including a chest cave in and forward head drop, neither of which are desirable. I have worked with many lanky teens this summer at the four institutes I taught at, and this back and shoulder blade idea has yielded quick, positive results. Perhaps most significantly, this body adjustment aids in the sense that the bow arm movement is an organic whole from the back to the fingers.

The Head

Like the dot on the letter “i” or like the helium balloon that pulls the string of the spinal cord up, the head is a leader in the pursuit of good cello posture (which is just

good posture, period, really). I am a tall person with a giraffe neck, so the placement of my head is crucial, as I attempt to avoid the all too common forward drop of the noggin. The head can clandestinely lead the body into chaos: the dropped head causes the chest to sink, the ribs to contract, the back to slump, and the shoulders to roll forward. Just a little forward movement of the head can deleteriously affect our cello playing. Many times I've blamed the gods when I didn't sound good on the cello, but often it was the devil of bad posture wreaking its havoc. Keeping one's music stand up to eye level when practicing can help with the head placement, as can avoiding looking down at the bow (I have made a solemn vow to never look at my bow again while playing, unless it's through a mirror). I find the stand on the left side to be most comfortable, but that can be experimented with for optimum comfort. A mirror, by the way, is a good antidote to posture problems, and it reflects well on you, too (yep, I punned). Also, eyeglass issues can play a part of posture

problems. I have progressives, which can cause me to move my head into a less comfortable position when reading music. Reading glasses help alleviate the eye/head problem for me.

Posture and Brain Waves

I am thoroughly convinced that excellent posture promotes a relaxed, calm body and an active alert mind. This results in the kind of focus one needs for good practice. Conversely, I think bad posture makes me less talented and more stupid. I want to raise my cello IQ in any way I can, so I vow that my students and I will have great posture from now on.

Special Considerations

You've probably noticed a huge variation in body types amongst cellists both in and out of your studios. Longer limbed people need to be extra aware of keeping their right shoulder back enough. Long-legged people may need to insert the cello in a different place in the knees than others. Posture pegs

on the G and C string side of the peg box may be the only way for some cellists to ever get comfortable holding the cello. It's worth it thought, because posture is profound, primary, and preeminent.

David Holmes is currently a faculty member at the Augsburg College Suzuki Program and has been a guest clinician at Suzuki institutes in 9 states. In 2006, he presented a lecture on group class instruction at the SAA national conference. David was an adjunct faculty member at St. Cloud State University for two years, where he taught cello and performed with the St. Cloud State University Piano Trio. An active performer and free lance cellist in the Twin Cities, David is cellist in the Northern Lights String Quartet, is an artist member of Thursday Musical, and has been principal cellist of the Minnetonka and Bloomington Symphonies as well as a member of the Minnesota Opera Orchestra. †