



VIOLIN

Lessons from the ASTA 2016 Convention

by Katie Gustafson

This year's ASTA convention was held amid palm trees and balmy sunshine. I managed to tear myself away from the snow and sleet of the upper Midwest and made the trip down to Tampa. Reluctantly, of course. Since I am accustomed to music educator conferences with fewer offerings for string specialists, I was thrilled to find such varied and useful sessions on the subject of string performance and string pedagogy. I would like to share with you a few of the sessions that I found particularly interesting.

Getting from Here to There: Violin Pedagogy in the Early Years *Presented by Anna Cromwell, Eastern Illinois University*

Dr. Cromwell began by addressing an important issue in teaching young violinists. She explained that if teachers show care in taking time to help their students master the early elements of violin technique, they could set their student up for great success later in their music education. It can be tempting to cut corners by allowing a child to play on an instrument that is very slightly too large for them, or to start them playing with the bow before their bow hold is quite right. She even cautioned that sometimes parents or children can become impatient with how long it takes to master early skills, and teachers can feel pressured to speed things along.

However, her suggested solutions provided a welcome and detailed alternative to these scenarios. She first advised that you counsel parents and students to be patient with the slow initial progress. She said that, "slow progress leads to faster progress." She also suggested finding ways to celebrate small successes with students so that they would be aware of the importance of the details that must be mastered early on.

She went on to describe her biggest priorities for young players. One was the importance of finding the correct instrument size for a child. She suggested using the 90-degree left arm angle and the reach of the left pinkie as a gauge. She also pointed out that the lower bout of the violin shouldn't extend past the edge

of the child's shoulder, or the instrument may be too heavy for the child to hold comfortably. Another issue she emphasized was the importance of the right and left hand positions. She encouraged us to use many different games and exercises to reinforce the importance of these, and to continue returning to them until they are secure.

Speaking Without an Accent: Sounding and Playing like a Fiddler *Presented by Taylor Morris, Gilbert Town Fiddlers*

Mr. Morris's session addresses a subject that I was excited to hear about, since I have recently begun playing with a folk band. He began by having us read the words, "Music is incredible" in English, and then had us try to pronounce the words in Spanish. After laughing at our horrible accents, he then had us try to pronounce the words in Icelandic, which was even more dreadful. He used this as an analogy to demonstrate how classical musicians often sound when they try to play folk music. He then outlined several techniques for the right hand and left hand that you can use to get a more authentically "folksy" sound.

In the right hand, he recommended imagining how you would play violin if you had never been trained with classical technique. You would probably get a rougher, more percussive sound in the lower half of the bow, and a smoother flautando style in the upper half, and you would take advantage of these rather than trying to achieve perfectly balanced control in every region of the bow.

He also suggested accenting off beats rather than on beats (i.e. accenting 2 and 4 instead of 1 and 3). He demonstrated what he called "the 3-3-2 groove," which refers to eighth note subdivisions of a four-beat measure. You could accent *one-and-two-and-three-and-four-and*, or *one-and-two-and-three-and-four-and*. As a general rule, he said, accent anything *other* than one and three.

In the left hand, he demonstrated execution of some of the commonly used

ornaments in Celtic fiddling. What we would call a "turn" would be referred to as a "roll," and would be played as quickly as possible. "Flicks" are like upper mordents, and "wiggles" are lower mordents, again executed as quickly as possible. He advised that you not over-use the "slide," which can make your fiddling sound overly affected.

Elements of Alexander Technique: Discovering a Natural Approach to String Playing

*Presented by Tomas Cotik, University of
Miami*

Last year I wrote an article about how voice lessons had helped me to use my body more freely when I play violin. I was excited to learn some skills and exercises that would broaden my understanding of this topic.

Mr. Cotik began by encouraging us to focus weight into our feet. He explained that tapping into the muscles in your lower body allowed you to free up the muscles in your upper body, which would be required to play your instrument. He went on to demonstrate many different exercises that encouraged relaxed use of the body while playing violin. Here were a few that I found useful.

1. Raise and let your shoulders fall, like a coat hanging from a coat hanger.
2. Raise each arm and let them fall, making sure that they do not resist the fall, but slap limply against your body.
3. When holding the violin, rotate your head in different directions to release any tension in the neck muscles.
4. While playing, release the left thumb from the side of the fingerboard to make sure that it is not clenching.
5. Lie on the floor, and feel your shoulder blades resting on the floor. Feel your lower back touching the floor. Attempt to play a tune in this position, and notice how you use your instrument differently when your back muscles are relaxed.

Since the conference, I have tried to use a few of these exercises with my private students, and I was pleased to find that

they were very effective. Even if you already have methods of setting students up with tension-free technique, it can be useful to try out new ones. If students hear the same things from us for too long, the words will

have less impact. If you add a few new exercises or ways of explaining something, they may take greater notice.

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