

All-State: Basic Cello Technique

presented by Faith Farr — reported by Brenda Radloff and Alicia Corbett

This session was extremely helpful in knowing exactly how to get a student started on the cello.

First we talked about the set up. The first question is what size cello to use? When the student is standing up, the scroll should come to mid-chest without the endpin. That means the minimum height for using a full size cello is about 5 feet. Next is selecting what chair to use. A good rule of thumb is that the heels should touch the floor when the student is sitting back on the chair, even though they won't play that way. One way to improve a bad chair is to add one-inch block on just the back legs. Ideally, you will just get a better chair for the student! The endpin should also be long enough to accommodate a student with long legs and short torso. She showed us her homemade rock stop. Hers is adjustable, so that she can adjust it to different chairs. She recommends having the adjustable kind. Unless you always travel with the same chair, you just don't know what will be at your destination. The rock stop should also be secure, like the kind that attach to the legs of the chair. Any other kind can slip.

Posture was the next topic. The student should sit on the front of the chair with a straight back—do not slouch! The knees should be at or below the lower corner of the C-bout. The student should be able to stand up without changing the feet placement. The cello rests against the middle of the breastbone. The pegs are at about ear level, behind the head. If the pegs hit the head, then pull the endpin out more. The “sit bones” should be centered on the chair. Rock from side to side to tell if this is happening. The head should be balanced—not off to one side. She showed us the book *All for Strings*—it has a picture of a cello student with really bad posture! The student has his head off to one side. When students are seated with the cello have them practice going into “diving position”—hands together, both arms extended fully forward—to make sure the cello centered and supported without the use of the hands.

Bow hold was next. She has 3 ways to set the bow hold. First—dangle the hand

to get a natural shape, then insert the bow without changing anything. Second—the student holds the bow vertically. Set the fingers, then do stirring, rocket ship, and jiggle the fingers. Third—hold the bow horizontally with 2 hands. Holding it with just one hand may create tension. Then point the hair towards the wall and put “fingers on the edge of a table.” Then point the hair to the floor and tuck in the thumb. The thumb should be flexible. She called it “doorbell” thumb. This is where you push on the bent thumb—it goes in—then comes back out. If the thumb is not flexible, the “doorbell” may be stuck (thumb bent, but not flexible) or broken (knuckle caved in).

She had so many ideas and used a lot of imagery to describe the action needed, here are a few: when you get something sticky on your fingers and you rub them, where are you touching them? That is the part of the fingers that touch the bow because that is where our fingers are the most sensitive.

The eyes on your elbow (two little bones), where are they looking? They need to create a crescent shape on the wall behind you, not a straight line for good bowing.

For extensions she used, “the monkey reaches for a banana” for a backward extension and “the monkey swings down from the tree” hanging just by one arm for a forward extension or as someone “rappel(s) down the cliff.” A great way to practice extensions is to play “French Folk Song” the key of D “Arabian” (D, E \flat , F \sharp , G, A, B \flat , C \sharp , D). Students must know when and how long to use an extension. Here is her “Before and After Rule”: “When a note looks like finger 3 (or 4), you *must* play x2 (or x3) if the note Before or After is x4.” To simplify the rule: when you need to extend, you *must* extend all notes Before and After until you play a note with 1st finger or open, a “normal” note.

The second session started with how to get students to bend the wrist when bowing. Put the bow on the string at the tip (hold with the left hand). Wipe the stick with the right hand. The wrist will bend. To make sure the bow is straight on each string, pretend that the tip of the bow is a water pistol.

Have them aim at something different on each string.

Next, we talked about how the arms are attached to the body. She showed us a diagram of how the arms are connected to the clavicle bone. She also had us find our “sit bones” without the cello. We had to rock back and forth, and side to side.

Next was fingerboard geography. She set her cello down, and just went through the musical alphabet. We had to say it with her forward and backward. At the same time, we had to point to knees, hips, shoulders, head—and say two letters per body part. This was not as easy as it sounds. I like how it gets the kids saying just the letters A-G (I heard H a couple of times!) Then she picked up her cello and put her hand in first position. She would point at her fingers with the right hand. We had to name what note she was pointing to. This worked great if she shifted or did an extension—we had to say if the note was flat or sharp. She also did a zig-zag, where we had to name the notes across the strings for each finger.

When asked whether to use tapes or not, her answer is yes for beginners, but only put tapes on fingers 1, 3, and 4. Always encourage kids to not look at the tapes when they play!! Another idea for the left hand is to put molefoam “wall” on the back of the neck where the thumb goes. I have seen a similar idea with the use of corn pads. The difference here is that you put three or four layers of the molefoam on just above where the thumb will touch the neck, with the idea that the thumb just rests against the side of it, rather than putting the thumb right on top of it. This allows a tactile feel for the thumb in first position, while still allowing the thumb to move for extensions and shifts.

Faith Farr now teaches exclusively at her home studio after a long career at MacPhail.

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