Cello

Left Hand Thoughts

by David Holmes

Generally speaking, I spend more time with my cello students on the art of the bow arm than on their left hand technique. Lately, though, I have been giving the "cello hand" more consideration, and have had some interesting insights that I thought I'd share.

Let's get immediately to the thumb, that purveyor of tension and tragedy on the cello. Arm weight, that mysterious and elusive necessity, is destroyed by a squeezing thumb.

Tips for arm weight with thumb freedom:

1. Without the cello, one can feel arm weight by hanging with curved fingers on the lip of a music stand with no thumb. I often have a sitting or standing student reach up and under the stand to hang on, so they cannot see their left hands. I aim for students to keep the curve in each finger, feel arm weight, and practice "walking" from finger to finger as well. Notice the arm moves a bit as it balances on each change of finger. Shoulders, as always, should be low and released.
2. With the cello, students can practice playing without the thumb, though it still needs to stay under the fingers (that "C" shaped hand) and must stay tension free. I often move a student's airborne thumb around to see how much residual tension it might be carrying and to see if they can release any unnecessary stiffness.
3. Without the cello, hold the bow horizontally in the right hand at the balance point. Rest your left arm on top of the bow with finger tips resting on the frog. Create a slight arch in the wrist by adding weight to each finger at the frog. No wrist arch also means no arm weight in the fingers.

How much pressure (weight) each finger needs to "stop" the string is an enlightening topic. Too much pressure is the normal tendency: as with many cello technique issues, we often engage in physical overkill. Here are a few thoughts on developing finger board sensitivity:

1. Play a note without any weight (yep, this sounds bad), and gradually add just enough weight until it sounds good. This is helpful in that it makes students aware that they don't need to hold the string down with excessive force.
2. For shifting, students can glide up and down the cello fingerboard sounding only harmonics. Follow this activity by adding just enough weight to get the "siren" sound.
3. Ask the student to evaluate on a scale of 1-10 how much pressure they are using to hold the string down. Usually, they will say 7 or 8. I will then ask them to reduce to a 3 or 4. They notice the difference and the increased ease with less pressure on the string.

Transferring balanced arm weight from finger to finger is an important skill in left hand development. Here are some ideas:

1. We don't play with "block" fingerings (all fingers down with weight simultaneously) on the cello. This is crucial, and I wish I had figured this out when I was a young cellist.
2. Place the left hand on the left shoulder of the cello while walking the arm weight from finger to finger. Next, try invisibly transferring weight from finger to finger while all fingers stay down.
3. Hold the string down with all four fingers, but only have weight on one finger of the four. I have students guess which finger I have the arm weight on. This magic trick is challenging and subtle, but seems to pique their interest. Another weight change exercise is to play this pattern: 1, 1 and 2, 2 alone, 2 and 3, 3 alone, 3 and 4, 4 alone. This can be used as a vibrato transfer exercise as well. The arm should move a little bit as the balanced weight is moved from finger to finger.

Proper left hand height is another important balance issue. Here are some ideas:

1. The usual problem is a left hand and elbow that are too low in relation to the fingerboard. A squeezing thumb is the usual cause of a dropped elbow. The "pencil test" is useful: a pencil should go into the palm of a student's hand when slid from the C-string to A-string.
2. Placing a sticky pad on the back of the cello neck for thumb placement can be helpful. A thumb that is more under the D or A-string will help the left hand be taller. A C-shaped (C for cello!) left hand will provide the frame that is needed to carry around arm weight and help the elbow float to a desired position.
3. The left hand needs to provide a "rounded frame" to support arm weight. Look for four curved fingers and for the base knuckles to stand out a bit, like mountain tops. It helps to have the finger nail joint approach the cello at a 90 degree angle, especially in the first and second fingers.
4. "Jumping jacks" are useful too: set up a beautiful left hand then raise the arm so the fingers float a couple of inches above the fingerboard, then drop them back into their homes. Feeling that slight "arch" in the left wrist can raise the left hand and connect it to the weight of the elbow and upper arm.
5. Start at the end of the fingerboard with a C-shaped hand and lightly slide back to first position. This can aid in a proper left hand and arm set up.

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Both I and some of my students have had the issue of overly percussive left hand fingers. This problem arises from an extra "lift and slam" of the fingers as they go from one to the other. This habit disconnects us from our left arm weight. Special focus is required to purge this habit, but it is worth it. Sliding from finger to finger helps alleviate the unnecessary motion.

Happy dexterity!

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