

Clinic: It's All Fundamentals

by David Holmes

David Holmes has taught cello lessons for over 30 years, and has been a Suzuki instructor for the past 25 years. He covered a wide range of basic cello topics in his Clinic presentation.

Chair Chat

- It is extremely important to sit in a cello chair that helps, not hinders, a cellist's ability to play well.
- Flat seat or a slight tilt forward, never backward.
- Use the same chair all the time. Transport the chair places.
- Player's upper leg slopes slightly downward.
- Cello strap attached to left front leg of chair, not right.
- Chair accessories: cushions, blocks to raise back of chair.

Cello Player and Chair

- Learn to sit like a cellist without the instrument.
- Player sits tall and straight on "sit bones" at front edge of chair.
- There are many acceptable foot positions. What I teach: Right foot at 12 o'clock with toes below knees. Left foot at 10 or 11 o'clock position. This foot placement causes a slight body turn to the left in the chair.
- The cello "looks" straight out from the chair.
- Left leg holds the cello below bout. Right leg is against flat side of cello.
- To find the correct endpin length, put in endpin, place cello in right spot against the body and drop endpin in place.

Posture Perfect

- Back is tall and straight with no leaning left, right, forward or back. The spine keeps its natural curve and the head is balanced on top of back. Check alignment with the "bow down the back test."
- Feet are settled in their place with relaxed, heavy leg weight.
- Ribs are expanded or lifted and the sternum is tall.
- Slight chin tuck balances head over neck.
- Neck muscles and jaw relaxed.
- Breath test. With good posture you can breathe deeply; with slumped posture you can't.

Getting Cozy with the Cello

- Student holds the cello out with a straight left arm and then pulls it into body, landing on the left knee, then sliding cello into place.
- Hug the cello while keeping tall back.
- Look Ma / Dancing cello / Peek-aboo – hold the cello with your knees and lean around the left side of the cello then back to the right.
- Strum with both hands. Let arms hang down loosely at end of strum.
- Knuckle knocks up and down cello fingerboard with left hand.
- Ski jumps on all strings. Comfort with entire length of fingerboard.

Posture Pitfalls

- The dropping head of doom. As soon as our head drops our shoulders roll forward, causing a slumping torso.
- Slumpy. Cellos can cause chests to cave in.
- Toothbrush head (chin jutting forward). This is a common movement that causes tension in the back of the neck and elsewhere.
- Footloose Feet. Avoid feet under the chair, feet on their tip-

- toes, and dancing feet, or feet that move around randomly.
- Keister on the move. To keep students on the front of the chair, put a book on chair behind the student, or put double sided sticky tape on the chair seat where they are not supposed to sit.
- Collapsing up bow body. It is easy to compromise posture when the bow arm heads back to the frog.

Quick Posture Fixes

- Stand up. Walk around.
- Put bow over the head with both hands.
- Pull in abdominals.
- Lift ribs and feel they are floating above the belly area. This helps line up shoulders, ribs and hips.
- Touch sternum area with a finger and lift upwards.
- Crunch shoulder blades together then relax shoulders downward. This sets the head over the body.
- Put a stuffed animal or other object on your head while playing or just sitting with the cello.
- Stop and breathe a few times.

Bravo to Breathing

- Deep breathing focuses the mind.
- Interrupted breathing causes tension and anxiety, and anxiety causes tension and interrupted breathing. It can be an endless loop of endless tension.
- If posture is unbalanced, taking a full breath is impossible. Conversely, though, by taking full breaths we can fix posture problems.
- Our egos are involved in our playing and our student's playing because we have high standards and we care deeply.
- Breathing connects us to the music in a deeper way. It assists hearing and musicality.
- Tension is always the number one enemy. Breathing can help release tension.
- Hyper student? Have them take several deep breaths.
- We only expend energy to inhale, but our body naturally causes us to exhale. It's a pretty nifty system.

Left Side Stuff

- Feeling Arm Weight: Hanging on curved fingers away from cello. Hang on music stand edge, dowel stick.
- How much weight is enough to "stop" the string?
- Elbow to fingers is a straight road. EWP = elbow / wrist / pinky.
- Hand shape holding an orange/ball, etc. Travel up and down cello for freedom of movement.
- Fingers on cello are tall and rounded. Slight lean to 1st finger. Tunnel in hand. C-Shaped hand.
- 3 left hand set-ups: from left, from right, from end of fingerboard.

Thumbs and Their Evil Ways

- Cello handshake. Hang on objects with curved fingers.
- Play cello without the left thumb.
- Playdoh, grapes, and cushions—go under the left thumb to feel a spot for thumb without squishing. †