



VIOLIN

Using Imagery: Teaching Technique with Imagination

by Katie Gustafson

Have you ever considered the amount of precision it takes to make a beautiful tone on the violin? You must pull the bow across the string with enough weight to grip the string, but not so much weight as to crush it. You must pull with enough speed to engage vibration, but not so much speed that the bow loses its contact with the string or swerves out of control. You must keep the bow near enough to the bridge to capitalize on the string tension, but not so close that the tension prevents you from initiating a vibration.

In other words: pull fast (but not too fast!), strong (but not too strong!) and near the bridge (but not too near! Ok, maybe a little closer than that. No, that's too close!!) This can be a dilemma with students. Explaining the complexity behind each technique can be both dry and cumbersome. In some cases, detailed knowledge is helpful, but it must be used strategically.

Often it is faster and more effective to use imagery to help a student understand the technique. For example, when helping beginners get started with their bow, I often give them a prompt like this: "Have you ever gone ice skating before? Can you remember how it felt to push off with your feet and glide across the ice? Imagine that your bow is ice-skating across your string. Try to make it glide very smoothly." If the child hasn't gone ice-skating before, you can substitute a similar activity, like roller blading or riding a scooter. You can later extend the analogy for straight bowing by encouraging them to "Skate in a straight line! Don't swerve into a snowbank!"

Giving your student an image to focus on has several advantages: First, it helps them relate the new skill to something that they already understand, allowing them to operate from a position of greater confidence. Second, it invites the student to use their imagination, which helps keep them interested and engaged in the lesson. Third, with imagery you can describe the same concept in many different ways. One explanation might work well for one student and

fall flat with another, so it helps to have a large bag of tricks at your disposal.

One pedagogue who was well known for this strategy was the late Phyllis Young, who was the professor of cello at the University of Texas in Austin. She wrote a book called *Playing the String Game*, which is filled with what she called "mini-games" for teaching various techniques on stringed instruments. Each mini game involves some kind of creative mental image that will help the student understand some aspect of cello technique.

One example is what she called The Puppet Dance. In the Puppet Dance, the teacher invites the student to imagine that they are a puppet that is controlled by strings. The teacher would then pretend to pull on the "strings" above the student's shoulders, and the student responds by jiggling their shoulders up and down, with their arms dangling. The teacher would then invite the student to observe how relaxed their shoulders felt after the jiggling, and ask them to maintain that feeling while playing their instrument. This is a great tool to encourage relaxed posture and to observe whether there is any tension in the shoulders or arms.

Even though much of *Playing the String Game* was written primarily for teaching the cello, many of the games she provides in the book are easily transferrable to other stringed instruments, and I have used many of them on violin. I highly recommend the book as a creative supplement to your teaching resources.

If you are interested in trying to add some colorful imagery to your lesson routine, I have provided a few ideas below. Most of the ideas are mine, but a few are from *Playing the String Game*, which are noted accordingly.

For Posture

- **Balloon Head:** To keep your head and shoulders upright, imagine your head is like a balloon that is light and floaty. Imagine it gently lifting up off of your

body and lengthening your spine.

- **Scroll Buddy:** To keep your instrument level, imagine a tiny mouse is sitting on the end of your scroll. Try not to let your scroll drop down too far, or the mouse will fall off!
- **The Jack-in-the-Box** (from *Playing the String Game*): For good sitting posture, sit in such a way that you can stand up quickly. Then, pretend to be a Jack-in-the-box. Stand! Sit! Stand! Sit! This will help position your weight forward on your chair, and slightly on the balls of your feet.

For Bowing Technique

- **The Ice Skater:** For smooth, even bow motions. (see above)
- **Spreading Peanut Butter:** For richer, more powerful tone, imagine that you are using your bow to spread a thick, gooey glob of peanut butter. Feel the resistance and put power into your bowing!

For Left Hand Technique

- **No choking!** To reduce tension in the left hand, imagine that your violin needs to breathe. If your fingers squeeze too hard, you will choke it! Your thumb especially should be gentle where it rests on the side of the neck.
- **Tippy-Toes:** To avoid collapsed or flatted fingers, imagine that your fingers are tip-toeing on the fingerboard.
- **Helicopters** (from *Playing the String Game*): To avoid fly-away fingers, pretend that each of your four fingers is a tiny helicopter that hovers over the string, ready to land in a split second!

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