Cello

Succinct Sayings for the Studio

by David Holmes

Sometimes, an aphorism can have a strong impact on a person because of its succinct wisdom. I have encountered many such illuminating ideas in my musical life. Under ideal circumstances in our teaching studios, these catchphrases can have an instant positive effect on a student's playing or in their thinking about music. Here are some sayings I use in my studio, although I don't often remember where they came from.

Music is always changing. Sameness is boring.

This is to point out that music is rarely, if ever, static. It is, like life itself, constantly changing. I need to remind myself that even in the youngest students it is important to bring this idea to life, since it is one of the hallmarks of future artistry. Perhaps an echo in the third phrase of Twinkle can be a start down this endless, fascinating road.

A related idea I heard a viola teacher at the University of Kansas express is, *"I am always getting louder or softer."* This speaks to the wealth of possibilities of expression and to the dynamic nature of music itself. Telling a story in a monotone to a student can quickly demonstrate that language and music should never stay the same.

Bowing over the fingerboard is like a fast, light sports car. Bowing in the middle lane is like an SUV: slower and heavier, and bowing near the bridge is like a school bus full of kids—lots of weight, little speed.

(Ok, that's a bit long, I know.) This is the way I explain bow lanes to students. However, we should mostly *avoid playing over the fingerboard*, which creates a soft and weak tone and mutes the ringing of the instrument. The tendency of cello students to play primarily in the "sports car" lane is so prevalent that I call it fingerboard disease. *There is no known cure, except through hard work.* (They'll have time to play over the fingerboard in orchestras later!)

Don't change bow lanes without signaling. You might crash into another car or run over someone on the sidewalk.

This is a humorous way to explain that bow lane changes need to be intentional, not accidental.

Spider, goldfish, tuna, shark.

These refer to the levels of bow weight in the string, from lightest to heaviest. Suzuki used this imagery. The tuna was the ideal deep, ringing sound. I added the shark—or "crunch tone" from too much weight and not enough speed—because it is fun for students and teaches them (we hope) a level to back up from to get the ideal "tuna tone."

Practicing is best when it happens between the ears.

Need I say more? It's all about focus, which is all about the brain.

Brains are fast and smart, but fingers are like dogs that need obedience school. If you don't put those dogs on a "leash" there is no telling what they might do.

This can be helpful when a student is experiencing frustration from going too fast or from not hearing what is coming out of the cello because their brain is not yet ready to control things at the speed they want to play it.

The slower you practice, the faster you learn.

Ah, the apparent contradiction of a paradox. There is much wisdom in this.

What speed can you play that perfectly? That's the speed you need to go.

Related to the prior point, students always play too fast too soon, frequently creating a sloppy jumble of notes. I have had success in slowing down a student's tempo using this line, because it helps them focus on what we hope becomes an essential truth: *you should do what you can to sound good all the time.*

If you miss a shift, blame your arm, not your fingers.

This gets to the mechanics of left hand fingerboard travel. It's easy to believe the finger was at fault when it is usually the arm's job to make the finger arrive in the right place. The finger could be at fault during a botched shift if it is stiff and straight instead of curved.

What are your travel plans?

I ask this when shifts are inaccurate. Then we come up with an itinerary, such as, "release the weight, move the finger lightly on the string with the arm, add weight when the finger gets there." A shift has a preparatory part, a traveling part, and an arrival part.

A fixed shift is a missed shift.

Students can get in the habit of fixing missed shifts, sometimes so much so that it becomes a problematic habit. The quick glissando/siren method of shifting can be helpful. This is when a student is forced to play the shift very quickly and continuously in both directions, with no time to "fix" a miss. The rule is to fix it next time after noticing if it went too far or not far enough.

Eyes can help or hurt your playing. Ears will always help.

Playing with eyes closed is very helpful for engaging ears. This is because sight is our default mode since the brain is wired more strongly for sight than for sound. Eyes are useful for noticing specific issues as long as they don't inhibit listening or compromise posture.

The slower you practice, the faster you learn.

Did I already say that? It's still true.

Originally published in MNSOTA's *String Notes* — Winter 2018/2019 (Vol. 21, No. 2)

You can play as much as you want, but if you don't listen, you won't get any better.

Apparently, I said this to my daughter in one of our many daily practice sessions. She remembered it. I didn't. I'm just happy that she retained something positive from those 8 years! I started listening well to my own sound only when I got to college. I was surprised to learn from my teacher that every note was supposed to be *exactly* in tune!!

Did that sound better? Did it feel easier?

If a student answers yes to both questions, then I think they have made "progress," which is an elusive word to define. The next question might be: *will you continue to practice this at home?*

Listening to recordings is essential.

Here are some things I've been known to say: *Listen until you are having earworms of the pieces. Listen until you couldn't possibly forget the melodies. Sing it five times a day. Sing it in your lesson next week. Are you listening??*

Beethoven gives you what you didn't expect, only better.

This came from my music theory teacher at the University of Houston in the late '70s. I thought it was interesting and true. He also said of Handel that his music had a sense of inevitability.

In Bach, chordal parts are arrival points and scales are the journey that got you there.

I think a number of musicians view Bach's cello suites this way. I've heard Yo-yo Ma reference this dual role in Bach. The prelude to the first suite is a great example of the interplay between chords and scales. I sometimes play this prelude and tell a story of traveling (we drove to Target) during scaler parts and arriving (we shopped for some shampoo) during at the harmonic or chordal sections. The story can be prolonged.

Inspiring story for the New Year

I read an essay by the great French cellist Pierre Fournier recently. I was surprised to learn that his first instrument was the piano and that the reason he switched to the cello was because at age 9 he contracted polio, which prevented him from using the pedals with his feet. He was strongly supported by his family during this time. "Had it not been for my mother's wonderful help and faith I never would have had the courage to go on." Later, he said, "I became a cellist by accident but I consider the accident a great benefit; my attack of polio was somewhat of a blessing in disguise."

David Holmes is a former faculty member at the Augsburg College Suzuki Program and has been a guest clinician at over 40 Suzuki institutes in 9 states. He presented lectures on group class teaching and on spiccato and sautillé at SAA national conferences. David was an adjunct faculty member at St. Cloud State University for 2 years, where he taught cello and performed with the St. Cloud State University Piano Trio. David is an active performer and free lance cellist in the Twin Cities, and teaches out of his home in St. Louis Park. 𝄽