



CELLO

Attention to Tension: Helping Students Play with Ease

by David Holmes

Playing cello with comfort and ease is an essential and never-ending goal for teachers and for their students. It is no minor undertaking to play with efficiency and flexibility. It seems, too, that there are variations in approaches to cello playing: Misha Maisky, Alecia Weilerstein, and Steven Isserlis don't all play the cello in precisely the same way, but I imagine that despite their differences, underlying technical principles unite them and all excellent cellists.

We have all witnessed cello playing that is marvelously effortless, and we have seen its evil twin as well—the cellist who, for whatever number of reasons—plays with an awkward tightness that causes our ears to hurt and our hearts to ache for them. Since the seeds from lessons and practice habits inevitably grow into *something*, learning to play cello with relaxed flexibility is the only way to guarantee ending up with a rose instead of a weed.

The path to developing expressive and tension-free cello playing is going to have ups and downs, and occasional backtracks. I suppose persistence (or passion) is the best ally in this journey. My sincere hope is that the many details that I endeavor to present in an organized fashion to my students, will, through our combined effort, eventually make cello playing second nature to them.

A simple definition of tension in string playing—or in most any skill using the body—is over-exertion and inefficiency which causes restricted movement. Almost all cello playing problems are rooted in physical/mental tension.

In general, we can improve our students' chances of tension free playing if we:

1. Assign students appropriate material to work on. Hopefully, the days of giving a student pieces that are way beyond their reach are much rarer than used to be the case. Thank you for that, Dr. Suzuki, and others!
2. Have an approach that has both breadth and depth, so we have multiple solutions to the predictable problems all string students experience.
3. Don't work too long on one point before moving on to something else, both in lessons and in practice. It is proven scientifically that we need to change focus frequently or habituation (boredom) occurs, and that we learn the most when that window of change is opened to us.
4. Try to teach students to understand what improvement is. Toward this goal I often ask these questions: "Did that sound better?" "Did it feel easier?" If both answers are "yes," I then say, "That is what progress is," and add, "Can you remember to practice this at home?"
5. Have students who practice.

To get to the nitty gritty of tension-free playing, I would like to start by touching on a general topic that I feel is crucial, and one that can help all manner of problems, and that is...

The importance of breathing in string playing.

String playing can be severely harmed or greatly enhanced depending on how one breathes—or *doesn't breathe!*—when playing. I have spoken to a number of professional string players, and indeed, they seem to be aware that inconsistent breathing while playing is a pervasive problem. Many times I have had students end a piece and gasp for air, a sign that were holding their breath while playing. They were staying alive certainly, but by not continuously breathing were making cello playing a tension-filled, awkward activity. When I feel uncomfortable or ill at ease when practicing, it is often a side effect of my not continuously breathing. Since playing the cello is such a persnickety endeavor, it is no wonder that the stress of mastering all those details leads to such a problem.

Truly, there is no mind/body disconnection. Each emotion we experience has physical responses. Anger increases heart rate and physical tension. Anxiety, the mental state of worry, can cause shallow breathing and tightness in shoulders and throughout the body. Frustration (a very familiar emotion to me during the 50 years I've practiced cello) can be eliminated by bringing attention to the breath. Respiration can "reset" our emotional clocks, leaving us calmer and ready to proceed.

Here are some breathing tips to use:

1. Whether through the nose or mouth or some combination, *continuous breathing* while playing is the goal.
2. Hands on your sides, breathe in and feel the expansion from an inhale and contraction from an exhale. Feel the natural relaxation of the mind and body as you exhale.
3. Start the breath from the belly button/diaphragm area and let the air slowly expand upward.
4. Alligator pose on floor forces diaphragmatic breathing, the deepest kind. Lie on stomach on the floor with hands over the head.
5. Remember this: It is impossible to have bad posture if you can take full, deep breaths. Breathing is called the litmus test by Victor Sazer in his book, *New Directions in Cello Playing*.

Working on breathing with students

1. Have students sit for a moment and find awareness of their breath.
2. Make a habit of taking a breath each time one stops playing and before resuming.
3. Incorporate breathing moments in lessons.
4. Start with open strings, breathing in on a down bow, exhaling on an up bow. It's helpful to take a complete breath cycle before playing.
5. Tonalizations, easy scales and review pieces are a next possible step.
6. Play a piece and only think of breathing.

Here are a few testimonials on the importance of breathing while playing:

- * Jorga Fleezanis, former concert master of the Minnesota Orchestra, says that “breathing helps tremendously to release tension in the body. An aerated body enlivens the playing.... it lubricates us.... it’s what keeps us going.”
- * Alexander of the Alexander technique said that “maintaining your body’s natural breathing pace, depth and rhythm is best.”
- * From cellofun.eu website: “If we don’t breathe, we don’t get enough oxygen and playing becomes rapidly exhausting.” Breathing is about taking in oxygen and releasing carbon dioxide.

Breathing can help so much with:

Posture

I’m obsessed with posture. (Just ask my students.) I sincerely believe from my own playing and from my teaching, that if there is a holy grail of cello playing, it is breathing and excellent posture. (Well, the real Holy Grail is to practice a lot...) Good posture keeps the cello playing engine running smoothly. It is the root and trunk that the branches of cello technique grow from. Optimal posture is absolutely essential for learning to play with comfort and ease, and like many string playing issues, is much more complex than it might at first seem.

Posture Perfect

1. Player sits tall and straight up and down on the front edge of the chair in such a way that the 2 “sit bones” (hips) are touching near the edge of the chair. This (1) helps the whole body participate in cello playing, (2) is an “active” posture, which wakes up the brain, and (3) makes coordinated and flexible body movements possible.
2. If the chair is the right height, the legs should naturally go slightly downhill so they add weight to the feet. Placement of feet varies with teachers.
3. Back is tall and straight with no leaning left, right, forward or back. The spine keeps its natural “S” curve.
4. Ribs are expanded or lifted and the sternum is tall.
5. Shoulders are in a relaxed, neutral position, and are neither raised nor rolled forward.
6. The head is balanced over the back in a neutral position that causes no tension. Slight chin tuck keeps the head from pushing forward from the neck. Looking left or right should be easy.
7. Neck muscles and jaw relaxed. I read about the neck muscles, which I forgot I even had, in an Alexander Technique paper. It does help!
8. Breath test: practice making it easy to inhale and exhale uninterrupted full breaths with no posture change.
9. Good posture and cello hold enable our body, arms, and hands the freedom to successfully negotiate the cello.

Posture Pitfalls

1. **The dropping head of doom.** The adult head weighs 10-11 lbs. Remove it and you could bowl with it. As soon as our head drops our shoulders roll forward, causing a slumping torso and discomfort up and down the back and neck. When reading music, the music stand kept near eye level can help this problem.

2. **The Eyes Have It.** Sight is our default sense: One-third of our cerebral cortex is dedicated to sight, which is way more than the 3% that goes toward hearing. 8% goes to touch. We need to use our eyes on occasion to keep track of our bow or our left hand. However, it is almost impossible to watch either without compromising posture and often, hearing as well. Playing with eyes closed, with a blindfold, or focusing on a single point in the distance can help a cellist concentrate on the sound instead of giving prominence to the eyes. If a student needs to observe a particular cello issue with their eyes, I suggest practice in front of a mirror or to make a video.
3. **Toothbrush head.** This is a common movement that causes tension in the back of the neck and elsewhere.
4. **Footloose Feet and Dead Legs.** Avoid feet under the chair, feet on their tiptoes, or feet that move around randomly. Lifted feet might originate in the hip or from the Achilles tendon, both possible sources of tension. Feet, toes, and legs should feel relaxed and heavy, like they are resting on marshmallows or on a pillow. If the legs and feet aren’t helping to hold the cello, the left thumb will seize the neck of the cello to keep it immobile. No one wants to play a moving cello target.
5. **Keister on the move.** For kids who perpetually move toward the back of the chair I will put obstacles behind them that make it impossible to move away from the front of the chair.
6. **Collapsing up bow body.** The sternum and ribs should stay raised and flexible. It is easy to compromise posture when the bow arm heads back to the frog. One collapse leads to others.
7. **Cello Pushes Student Back.** Endpin adjustment may be needed. Sometimes I don’t notice this problem unless I get out of my chair and view the student from another angle.

Some Observations About Students

1. I can be the most amazing cello teacher and have all the cello teaching knowledge, but if my students don’t practice almost every day, I am a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal, and my students will sound like they have a crummy teacher.
2. Students who listen to the recordings and review a lot in their first years of lessons are technically and musically superior to those who don’t. Listening and review are *so crucial* in the formative years.
3. Students must learn to practice slowly, must learn the importance of repetition, and must learn to practice in smaller chunks and not always play through pieces. (It is a very rare student who consistently follows any of these 3 tenets of cello practice).
4. Kids are too darn busy these days. I try to start kids at 3-5 years of age so that by the time all heck breaks loose in high school, they will already be solid cellists.

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