



CELLO

Chopping Online

by Faith Farr

Last May I had an 8th grade student finishing up Rick Mooney's *Thumb Position* books. When we played the *Boil Them Cabbage Down* duet, I commented that cellists who knew how to chop would be adding that to the off-beat accompaniment. My student said, "I'm interested in that." For his next lesson I dug out a 2-page handout from Renata Bratt's presentation on chopping at the Suzuki Conference in 2010. I understand how to get 3- and 4-note chords under my hand reading a chord chart, but my chopping skills are minimal. This student also plays saxophone in the jazz band and has improv skills that I don't. It occurred to me that somewhere on YouTube someone must have a demo on how to chop on cello that would help my student. A google search came up gold.

I found cellist Mike Block teaching how to chop on two free YouTube videos: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QvSdj2Qmh74> for basic chop and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UjA3n8rTXXw> for more advanced patterns. I also discovered Mike Block gives online tutorials at <https://artistworks.com/cello-lessons-mike-block>. You can sign up for 3, 6 or 12 months of unlimited access to his website for the nominal prices \$105 / \$179 / \$279, but there seem to be frequent "deals." Last summer, my student didn't want to attend a music camp, so we made a pact to do our own "stay at home" summer camp by signing up for 3 months of access. With the Memorial Day "deal" we each paid only \$55.99 and the summer adventure began.

Mike Block divides his material into beginner, intermediate, advanced, bluegrass, jazz, classical, rhythmic & chordal playing, 30-day challenge, contemporary cello etudes, cello reference topics and VIP bonus content. Each area has many (20 or more) lessons. And each lesson has two or three videos where Mike demonstrates the skill and gives clear practicing assignments—e.g. chop on an open string, then on a scale, then on a I-IV-I-V chord progression. Each lesson video is shot from two camera angles—straight on / the normal audience view of a performance, and overhead /

straight down. For me, the overhead view is the first genius feature of Block's material. I found it exceptionally valuable as I worked on chopping, because the overhead view makes really clear the change in contact point from fairly close to the fingerboard for normal / sideways / horizontal / down-bow, up-bow strokes, and the new-to-me vertical / forward / scrape motion towards the bridge that is 90° to the sideways stroke. The subtle change in angle of the bow is also really apparent in the overhead video—use a straight bow for the pitched notes, but the bow tip angles towards your shoulder on the chops.

Chopping

In the basic chop video, Mike explains that a chop is sometimes thought of as a violent attack of the bow on the string to create a non-pitched, percussive sound. But he prefers to think of a chop as "a sophisticated physical movement that allows you to activate a range of textures in your percussive and chordal playing." Drop your armweight towards the string, and allow the bow to do a very small scrape at the moment of impact, and you have a chop. We're trying to create a sound like a snare drum in a drum set, and the chop is almost always on the back beat. Separating the forward / scrape motion from the sideways / horizontal bow stroke motion is important. If you have a scrape with some horizontal motion, you'll get a crunch. "A crunch is cool, but it's not a chop." You need to chop very close to the frog (under the finger of your right hand / under the wire on the bow). If you try chopping at the balance point or towards the middle, you'll likely get a bounce / rebound from the bow. "A bounce is cool too; but it's not a chop."

Chopping also involves putting the left-hand fingers lightly on the strings to dampen the strings to ensure the chop is a non-pitched sound. So chopping on an open string involves lifting the fingers to play open, and then dampening the string on the chop, and lifting the fingers again for the pitched notes.

The first chop patterns were "Note,

Chop, Note, Chop" and "Down-Up, Chop-Up, Down-Up, Chop-Up."



Strum Bowing

As my student was exploring the chopping lessons, I went back to Mike Block's more basic "Strum Bowing" lessons. In developing the skills to play rhythmic accompaniment, it is important to develop the steady down-up motion of continuous notes where, like a player strumming a guitar, the motion is always back and forth, but the notes have different accents. Mike Block recommends always practicing with a metronome; he appears to have a click track in his ear on his performances. He challenges us to be as picky and precise with our rhythm as we are with our pitch.

The first groove was really comfortable to my classical bow arm.



The second groove was pretty comfortable too, because I know that bluegrass music needs the kick on the off-beat.



The third groove (3+3+2) was more challenging at first to play at a quick tempo.



As the "strum" lessons continued, Mike introduced the idea of a ghost note—your bow moves (up bow or down bow) but you don't play a note. The "air bowing" helps you keep your place in the rhythm. I can play this rhythm leaving my bow on the string in the rests; I'm working on the skill

to keep my down-up going continuously in the air.



As I worked through the Strum Bowing material, I came across the second genius aspect of Mike Block's website—Video Exchanges. When you sign up for the program, you are allowed to upload a video of yourself up to 5 times in the session. Mike takes time about once a month to comment on the videos. The student submissions and Mike's comments are part of the wealth of material that is available. A few of the students who have submitted videos are school age, but most are accomplished adult performers and teachers who are expanding their skills. Like every masterclass, it is so worthwhile to see someone play a technique quite well, and then have the master teacher make comments on how to improve. By watching the Video Exchanges, I have learned subtleties that I didn't notice my first time through the lessons.

Contemporary Cello Etudes

Last summer, after working with the material for about a month, I found a place on Mike Block's site that encouraged me to "claim your free book" *Contemporary Cello Etudes*. I entered my address and received the 120-page glossy-bound book containing 28 etudes by Mike Block, Rushad Eggleston, Natalie Haas, Mark Summer, Matt Turner and others. Wow. Each etude is about 2 pages long. Most have several paragraphs to a page or more of text describing the

techniques involved, and explaining the special notation used.

By August, my student and I knew the "summer camp" experiment was so successful that we signed up for a full year and my student is now working his way through these etudes. For each one, Mike Block has a performance video that you can watch from the audience view or the overhead view, plus several lesson videos where he explains the special techniques and gives practice tips. I've made use of the video speed control—I find listening / watching at 75% speed helps me take in the details. The number of student Video Exchanges varies with each etude—depending on how many students have worked them up to a high level. They are all really useful.

Nice Tuxedo by Mike Block works on 3 against 2 polyrhythm and includes an improv section.

Cradle Song by Stephan Braun is a steady-eighth etude with double stops and 3-note chords, and both arpeggiated and scale-wise motifs. The skill to be developed is using your right hand like a fingerstyle guitar player would—using your thumb for the bass on the low strings and alternating your other fingers for the melody/chords on the upper strings. Several students submitted Video Exchanges and I learned a lot about creating dynamics in pizzicato (pizz closer to the bridge for *f* and around the half-string harmonic for *pp*). I also developed more nuance in my left hand—keep the fingers down strongly for a ringing, legato sound, and release the LH quickly for a more staccato effect. Although I've played pizz forever in orchestral works, I'd

never taken the time to really refine my pizz sound—when the conductor wanted loud or soft I just pulled more or less hard. Last September, around the time my student and I were working on this etude, I was playing Haydn quartets with friends and did some experimenting with the *Andante cantabile* movement of Op.3 No. 5, which is continuous pizzicato. I'm pleased that my pizz were more varied and more musical than my previous performances of that movement.


Slap by Eugene Friesen raises the pizzicato stakes quite a bit. The tempo is quick $\text{♩} = 140$ and the rhythm syncopated. The C notehead indicates a left-hand slap on the fingerboard with all the fingers across all strings. The x notehead is a muted pizzicato—the left hand fingers lie lightly on the indicated string while the right hand pizzes. H is a "hammer-on"—strike the string hard enough with the finger to make the pitch heard without plucking. In the performance video, Mike Block does a lot of "finger drag" with his right hand, which I wrote in under the notes, to show the pizz finger number and then using a dash — to indicate the drag. The first note of this excerpt, B \flat , is a slide from the previous pizz B \natural . Then for the F-G-F on beats 2 & 3, you place your best pizzicato finger (Block uses finger 2) between the A and D strings, then drag through the D/G/C strings in a sort of rhythmic strum to your right to pluck the strings successively. Meanwhile your left hand is a normal firm finger 1 to play the D-string F, touches the G string lightly with finger 4 to mute the open G, and is firm again to play the C-string F. I watched a lot of overhead video at 50% tempo to see the right-hand technique Block used on the performance. This etude is one my student and I got up to a moderate tempo before we set it aside for now.

Currently my student is working on *The Investigator*, a Celtic style tune by Natalie Haas. Both the first part (a $\frac{6}{8}$ jig) and the second part (a $\frac{4}{4}$ reel) are challenging for changing slurs and accents, and both fingered and bowed ornaments. He hopes to perform this at a recital in a few months.

What's next?

I'm not terrific at multi-style playing (yet). But with Mike Block's videos and student Video Exchanges, I am learning enough to coach my student in an area that interests him a lot. Mike Block is helping me achieve my goal of helping my students become better than I am.

There are many other multi-style



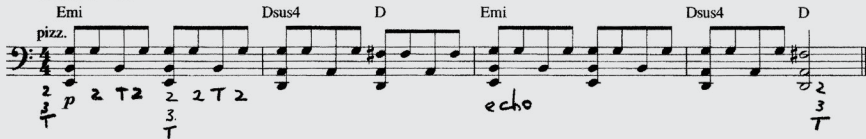
Cradle Song

Caprice for Right-Hand Pizzicato

Stephan Braun


Lento $\text{♩} = 60$

Emi Dsus4 D Emi Dsus4 D



In this etude to learn "fingerstyle guitar" pizzicato, I put right-hand fingering under the notes, using T for thumb pizz and fingers 1, 2, 3 the same as cellists use for left hand.

Excerpt from Slap by Eugene Friesen



This etude uses left-hand techniques for rhythmic color and texture. The fingering under the notes is the pizzicato finger, with the dash — indicating drag through the strings.

performer/teachers at ArtistWorks.com. In addition to guitar, banjo and mandolin, Brittany Haas and Darol Anger teach fiddle; John Patitucci—jazz bass; Missy Raines—bluegrass bass; Stu Hamm and Nathan East—electric bass. Perhaps you will find

an area to explore for your instrument and your students.

Mike Block is a multi-style cellist who has toured extensively with Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Ensemble. Since 2012 Block has been associ-

ate professor at Berklee College of Music in Boston. Access his material at <https://artistworks.com/cello-lessons-mike-block>.

Faith Farr teaches at her home in North Oaks. ↗