

Establishing a Quality Sound in the Beginning Orchestra

Presented by Karel Butz

The Midwest Clinic
Chicago, Illinois
Wednesday, December 14, 2011

KEY INGREDIENTS FOR QUALITY SOUND

- Proper instrument set-up
- Proper bow balance
- Rhythm & ear training
- Singing
- Mastering the martelé, détaché, and legato bow strokes

INSTRUMENT SET-UP

Establishing proper instrument set-up and posture is the first priority for establishing a quality sound. I avoid the bow for approximately the first two weeks of instruction so students focus on one thing at a time. I only allow violin and viola students to use sponge pads since this allows freedom of motion in playing. In order for students to earn their bow, they must demonstrate proper instrument posture and left hand position. Here is my quick overview of establishing proper instrument position in a heterogeneous class:

VIOLIN / VIOLA

- Stand tall with feet together; Make a “V” with feet; Take a step apart; Rock back and forth “Like a tree blowing in the wind”; Bend the knees “Sprinter’s Start”
- Slide on “Magic X”: Use pen at first knuckle crease on left hand index finger to mark this spot. This establishes proper left hand shape.
- “Statue of Liberty”: Hold violin up with left hand over “High Dot” (sticker at mid-harmonic). Count to twenty. This builds strength in the arm!
- Bring the violin/viola from above down to the shoulder. The instrument ALWAYS comes to the body.
- Nod “yes” or “no”; Open the jaw and keep it relaxed
- Tap fingers over High Dot using Kodály rhythms
- Students are now ready for left hand pizzicato

CELLO

- Stand tall with feet together; Take a step apart; Rock back and forth “Like a tree blowing in the wind”; Bend the knees “Sprinter’s Start”
- Sit at the edge of the seat with back straight; Feet pointing forward; Knees should be at level with the seat or slightly lower—knees should not be higher than the chair.
- “Roller Coaster!”: Rest cello between knees with hands up in the air. This checks to see that the cello is comfortably balanced between the legs.
- Check to see that back of cello comes to middle of breastbone.
- Neck of cello should pass over left shoulder with peg box and scroll behind student’s head.
- “Hug the Cello”: Arms should be able to come around cello. If not, lower endpin.
- Make “Coat Hanger” with the left hand. Students create a “C” shape with left hand and the arm is at a 45-degree angle.
- Place left hand on cello with thumb across from second finger. Slide up and down the fingerboard. If students have a collapsed left hand, you can put toilet paper tube at side of neck so that left hand has to stay out.
- Tap fingers at base of neck using Kodály rhythms
- Students are now ready for left hand pizzicato

BASS

- With bass end pin in front of left foot, stand tall with feet together; Take a step apart with left foot slightly forward; Rock back and forth “Like a tree blowing in the wind”; Bend the knees “Sprinter’s Start”
- Bring bass onto left side with upper bout leaning into upper left hip
- Bring right foot slightly forward
- Make “C” in the air (again, toilet paper tube can help fix collapsed wrists).
- Bring left hand to the neck. In general, keep the thumb across from the second finger.
- Tap fingers at base of neck using Kodály rhythms
- Students are now ready for left hand pizzicato

IMAGERY REVIEW: SET-UP

I incorporate many images into teaching proper physical set-up. Below are a few for each instrument.

ALL INSTRUMENTS

- **Boiled Spaghetti Noodle:** If the arms and hands are tight, imagine a boiled noodle that is flexible to do anything. This helps create the loose sensation needed to play correctly.

VIOLIN/VIOLA

- **No Serving Food:** To be used if students have a bent right wrist.
- **Picnic Table Fingers:** This refers to keeping the left hand fingers properly curved which gives the image of a table top

CELLO

- **Roller Coaster:** Students put hands up in air to see if cello is properly balanced between the knees.
- **Rotten Egg:** Imagine the horrific stench if you let the scroll rest on the rotten egg sitting atop your left shoulder! You can use images of pet animals as well.
- **No Sipping Tea:** If the student pronates the hand too far back to the scroll
- **Ski Jumps:** Students slide hand from first position and travel up the fingerboard, bringing the arm around the instrument. When the hand approaches the edge of the fingerboard, the student plucks the string with the thumb and circles the arm into the air.

BASS

- **Like a Friend Leaning On You:** In reference to bringing the bass towards the student’s body
- **Bear Claws:** For students who struggle with finger distance and finger strength. This image helps with spreading the fingers further apart and making sure they are set in the string.

INTRODUCING MUSIC FUNDAMENTALS

While students are diligently learning proper playing position and new notes on the instrument with pizzicato only, I use this time to also expose them to ear training, rhythm reading, and singing. Here are just a couple of ideas:

EAR TRAINING

- Sunflower: Sing through the scale using solfège syllables or notes names of a scale. Start with hands on feet (Do) and work your way up until hands are up in air (octave Do). Sing familiar songs (Twinkle or Hot Cross Buns) using solfège.
- Identify intervals. Start with largest and smallest intervals at first and work in.
- “Capri Sun Challenge”: Divide the class into teams, team that identifies the most correct intervals wins the cool beverage! Other prizes or gimmicks work just as well.

RHYTHM

- Clap and count rhythms
- Begin simple rhythmic dictation exercises
- Have class compose and perform rhythms
- Rhythm Flash Cards by James O. Froseth is a fun way to learn duple and triple meter with Funk, Blues, Rock, Swing and Rap play-along CD tracks
- Associate a different movement for each rhythm (ex: tap shoulder for quarter notes, tap head for eighth notes, bend knees on rests, etc.)

SINGING

- **Show Your Brain:** Students show beats with right hand in air while singing the note names. This helps students keep track of the beat and also understand pitch relationships.
- **Tap the String:** This is the next step before actually playing a piece with pizzicato, students lightly tap the string while silent fingering and singing the notes names.
- **Pluck & Say Note Names:** Students are now ready to pluck the entire melody saying note names.

ESTABLISHING PROPER BOW BALANCE

Why the term “bow balance” instead of “bow hold” or “bow grip”? I have found that when using the term “balance”, students have a better idea of avoiding any tension in the hand.

Students are ready for the bow only when they can successfully demonstrate proper instrument set-up and correct hand position/fingerings within the one octave D Major Scale. My advice: don't rush students towards using the bow. Take your time and enforce correct posture and accurate intonation with pizzicato. Establishing proper playing position and learning basic music fundamentals typically leads to greater success when students finally start to use the bow since they have developed a more discerning musical ear and will not have to concentrate so much on fingerings and position when adding the bow to the mix of playing. Students should practice finding proper bow balance using a pencil during the beginning weeks of instruction as well.

BEFORE STUDENTS GET THEIR BOW...

- Divide the bow into fourths by placing three tapes on the bow: at the middle, and the other two to divide the upper and lower half of the bow. Students will refer to these tapes as Tape 1 (lower half); Tape 2 (middle); Tape 3 (upper half)
- Violin and Violists are given a “Pinky House”. This is put on as an aid to help the pinky stay curved on top of the bow stick. This is used during the first year of playing.

HOW TO MAKE A PINKY HOUSE

- Using electrical tape, cut a piece of about 1.5 inches in length
- Thinking of the tape in thirds, fold a third of the tape – sticky part onto sticky part
- Wrap the tape around the pinky with the sticky part facing out
- Once wrapped around the finger, crush the sticky part of tape on top of itself
- Cut two small pieces of electrical tape to be used to keep the house on top of the stick. The house will sit above the “eye” of the frog (at middle of frog). The two tapes are attached to the house and drape over the frog.

BEFORE STUDENTS SET BOW ON STRING...

- Must successfully demonstrate proper bow balance using pencil in place of bow
- Help students at individual level attain proper bow balance
- Reinforce the “balance” concept: tap each finger on the bow and check for a “thumb bump” (curved thumb across from second finger)
- Exercises: Pinocchio, Elevator, Unicorn, Stirring, Blast Off!
- Practice proper bow balance with movement by using Froseth’s Rhythm Flashcards. Bass players will shadow bow with bow vertical in the air. Cellos will place toilet paper tube in front of body and draw bow through the tube. Violinists and violists will hold toilet paper tube on left shoulder and draw bow through the tube. The toilet paper tubes help students to focus on keeping a straight bow, proper bow balance, and distinguishing down and up-bow direction. Violinists and violists can think of the “frog being in front of the belly button” when approaching the tip of the bow in order to keep a straight moving bow.

BOW ON STRING...

- Set the bow on the D string at Tape 2. The middle part of the bow is the easiest for students to check their proper bow balance.
- After students have tapped all fingers and checked for a thumb bump, travel to Tape 3, the tip, then back towards the frog (stopping at each tape along the way).
- Monitor students’ bow hand and help to guide keeping the straight bow. Keeping the left index finger on the student’s elbow while moving the bow with your right hand significantly helps violinists and violists in keeping the bow straight. Hands-on is key!

MARTELÉ, DÉTACHÉ, & LEGATO BOW STROKES

Mastering the **martelé** bow stroke becomes the first task to learn with the bow since this enforces correct bow balance and contact with the string. I view this as the most fundamental bow stroke. Like before, I have students first place the bow at the middle and travel to each tape listening for a “poof” and “ring” in the sound. Monitor to see that the bow stays on the string and that students’ fingers are loose and flexible.

After establishing a healthy martelé bow stroke, I introduce the **détaché** stroke which is just the connection of the martelé stroke at the middle to upper-half of the bow. Again, learning these strokes is best on an open string. Listen for a rich resonate sound and ring to the sound.

The last basic stroke to introduce is the legato stroke which is the slow-down of the **détaché** stroke. I use a “conveyer belt” image to help students understand the concept of keeping the bow in constant motion.

Once students are accustomed to keeping a straight moving bow, you can incorporate the Rhythm Flashcards and play along with the CD using open strings as a class warm-up exercise.

METRONOME TIME!

Developing rhythmic accuracy is just as essential as playing in tune with a beautiful sound. I am a HUGE fan of the McAdams Metronomes which are made in Houston, Texas. This is your life-saver and well worth the cost. Using quarter note = 60, students should religiously practice Kodály rhythms on open strings and with scales to reinforce the martelé, détaché, and legato bow strokes. While the metronome is keeping the beat, this is your time to walk around the class and fix problems with posture and bow balance. Hands-on help is the best way to develop healthy playing habits. Use détaché on sixteenth notes, martelé on eighth notes, and legato on quarter note bow strokes. Three part and four part harmonies are also a fun way to hear each section, check intonation, and introduce harmony to the class.

Mis-sis-sip-pi Ri-ver / It's My Birth-day Par-ty

Grass-hopper

Pea-nuts (Bend on rest) and Pop-corn

Mis-sis-sip-pi is a Ri-ver

BOW CIRCLES

Like the Paul Rolland philosophy of big to small actions, bow circles help students establish a clean start to the stroke after a bow lift in addition to strengthening bow control. The catch-phrase is "Circle-Touch-Go!" Here are the steps:

- Set the bow at the frog
- Tap each finger, check for thumb bump
- Travel to the tip on an open string
- Circle above the string (start with LARGE motions)
- Return to the frog
- TOUCH the string first before repeating process

As always, walking through this process with verbal and visual cues helps students grasp this concept. For added variety, perform this exercise starting at the tip. Gradually decrease the size of the bow circle while increasing the speed in which to perform bow lifts. A metronome helps!

TUNING

Once students are using the bow, I tune their instruments while they bow four strokes on each string. Individually tuning students this way helps the student to monitor correct bow balance and posture and also allows them to hear the sound they are creating. While students are waiting to tune, they can be doing a music worksheet or silently practicing (showing their brain, silent fingering and shadow bowing). The time spent on tuning is crucial. Tuning at the individual level is one of the best ways to monitor a child's progress.

BOW WANDERINGS

Traveling from frog to tip and vice versa with short back and forth motions checks to see if students' wrists, fingers, and shoulders are loose and flexible when playing. Shaking the hand in the air without the bow can help students understand the correct motion and flexibility needed in the hand.

THE WAVE

"The Wave" refers to the swell in sound created by applying slight index finger pressure on the bow when traveling from frog to tip. This exercise develops dynamics, bow control, balance of bow fingers, and helps establish the sensation in the index finger needed in bowings such as slurred staccato, portato, and Viotti. Keeping the bow in constant motion, you can perform one up to several waves (swells in sound) per bow direction. Think of keeping the stick on top of the hair when doing this exercise to gain the maximum sound quality. Putting a visual of a sound wave on the board helps students understand the increase and decay in sound as well.

POPCORN SCALES

"Popcorn Scales" is a fun approach to practicing scales while monitoring a student's physical set-up, intonation, and sound production. The approach is simple: each student takes turns playing one pitch from the scale. Practice by using different bowing techniques as well.

SMALL ENSEMBLES

The best way to informally assess students' sound is by playing in small groups. After the class has played through a tune, ask for an octet to play while the others shadow bow and silent finger. Continue to ask for smaller groups—such as a quintet or quartet, eventually arriving at the solo. This builds confidence in young performers, enforces listening across the class, exposes any flaws (or strengths!) in your class, and mentally prepares students for individual playing tests.

RHYTHM CHALLENGE COMPETITION

Rhythm packets don't have to be boring. Creating a competition between two beginning classes concerning which ensemble can play the rhythms with 100% accuracy while following the same bow direction and style is a great motivator for young students to tackle rhythm reading exercises (especially when a prize is included). How I have taught rhythm reading is as follows:

- Clap the rhythm while counting the beats aloud
- Shadow bow the rhythm while counting the beats aloud (teacher can clap the rhythm)
- Play the rhythm on an open D-string while counting aloud

Set the McAdams metronome at quarter note = 60 or 75 (depending on difficulty of rhythms). Again, students can perform these rhythms using all types of articulations. Students should shadow bow in the correct style they will actually play the rhythm line. This exercise is excellent to prepare for sight-reading at contests.

ASSESSMENT

Informal and formal assessment activities are a must in order to enforce accurate playing position which leads to quality sound. I give students individual formal playing tests on a regular basis in front of the class. Students prepare one exercise or melody to perform and are graded on the following: bow direction, physical posture, correct bow balance, intonation, rhythm (able to play with metronome), articulation, and dynamics. Individual playing tests during the first year are not meant to decide where students sit in class. I do not care about this matter during the first year of playing since all students need to demonstrate quality sound and self-confidence in order to musically progress at a rapid rate. Sitting a stronger player with a weaker player can help strengthen the sound of the orchestra. Using a Star Chart of some sort of other tangible reward system can motivate young students to reach for higher standards at a quicker pace.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

This is how I develop music reading that encompasses sight reading skills, rhythm reading, singing, and nurturing a quality sound. It is important to always help students understand the four main practice elements as well: **bow** (style? direction?), **fingers** (shifting? tunneling?), **form** (ABA?), and how to **isolate the difficulties**.

- **Show Your Brain:** Students show beats with right hand in air while singing the note names. This helps students keep track of the beat and also understand pitch relationships.
- **Silent Finger & Shadow Bow:** Students practice correct fingerings and bow direction while singing note names.
- **Set Bow on String & Play:** Students should be aware of what style to use and know the general form of the piece before they perform the tune.

The process of isolating one aspect of string playing at a time creates stronger sight-reading musicians as well as better ensemble accuracy as opposed to jumping right in a playing the tune without any mental preparation. Of course, as students become more proficient, this process is no longer necessary—yet the review of the four elements of practice is life-long.

IMAGERY REVIEW: BOW BALANCE AND USAGE

ALL INSTRUMENTS

- **Ahoy, Captain!:** With proper bow balance, students should be able to look through right hand (like a pirate's telescope). This is only possible with a thumb bump!
- **Thumb Bump:** Making sure that the thumb is curved
- **Pet the Frog:** In reference to making sure that the second & third fingers are hanging loosely over the frog.
- **Highway Lanes:** Divide the area between the bridge and fingerboard into 5 lanes, with lane 3 being the middle lane. Tell students which lane they need to drive in order to avoid a car accident. Remember: "Stay alive when you drive!"
- **Dipping Hand in Bucket of Water:** To shake out excess tension, pretend to dip hand in bucket of water and shake excess water (loosens the hand), then help student find natural bow balance.
- **Eyeballs Looking Towards the Tip:** Imagining that two eyeballs are on the middle two fingers of the hand, these eyes should be looking toward the string and the tip of the bow so that correct pronation of bow hand is established while playing.

CELLO

- **Check the Time:** Pretend to look at wristwatch on right hand so that wrist is not locked. This reinforces proper bow balance.
- **Waterfall:** With proper right arm and wrist, imagine water falling from your shoulder off of the loose wrist. If the opposite occurs (a locked and bent-in wrist), you would end up with a lake.
- **Kayaking:** Student has both hands on the stick of bow while it is resting on the string—the left hand helps to give support as the right hand exhibits proper bow balance. Pretending to go kayaking with the bow stick as the paddle, this also helps feel the weight of the bow in the string.

CELLO/BASS

- **High 5:** Have student give you a High-5 with right hand. With fingers naturally spaced, student hangs hand in air while you adjust proper bow balance.
- **Dipping Hand in Bucket of Water:** To shake out excess tension, pretend to dip hand in bucket of water and shake excess water (loosens the hand), then help student find natural bow balance.

KAREL BUTZ has performed in several orchestras, including the National Repertory Orchestra, National Orchestral Institute, and Spoleto Festival USA. He has served as associate instructor for string techniques and music theory at the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music. In addition, he taught violin for the Indiana University String Academy, Bands of America Summer Symposium Orchestra Division, and the Oklahoma Summer Arts Institute. Butz taught orchestra in Carmel, Indiana and served as adjunct violin faculty at Purdue University. He is a frequent guest conductor, lecturer, and clinician around the country. His music is published by Musica Propria and has been performed at the Midwest Clinic. Butz received both his Bachelor of Music Education and Master of Music in violin with high distinction from the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music, where his principal violin instructors were Nelli Shkolnikova and Mimi Zweig. Currently, he teaches orchestra at Smith Middle School in the Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District in Houston, Texas.

Email: karel.butz@cfisd.net