

HABITS OF A SUCCESSFUL STRING ORCHESTRA

STOP RUSHING AND PLAY IN TUNE!

CHRISTOPHER R. SELBY

SESSION OVERVIEW

Introduction: The three levels of ensemble awareness.

Part 1: Playing in Tune

- Technical aspects that affect intonation.
- Teaching students to listen outside of their section to tune their notes.

Part 2: Rushing and Tempo Control

- Are we teaching our students to listen to the wrong thing?
- Technical aspects that affect rushing.
- Teaching students to listen outside of their section to play together.



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TUNING STUDENT ORCHESTRAS IS A TWO-STEP PROCESS

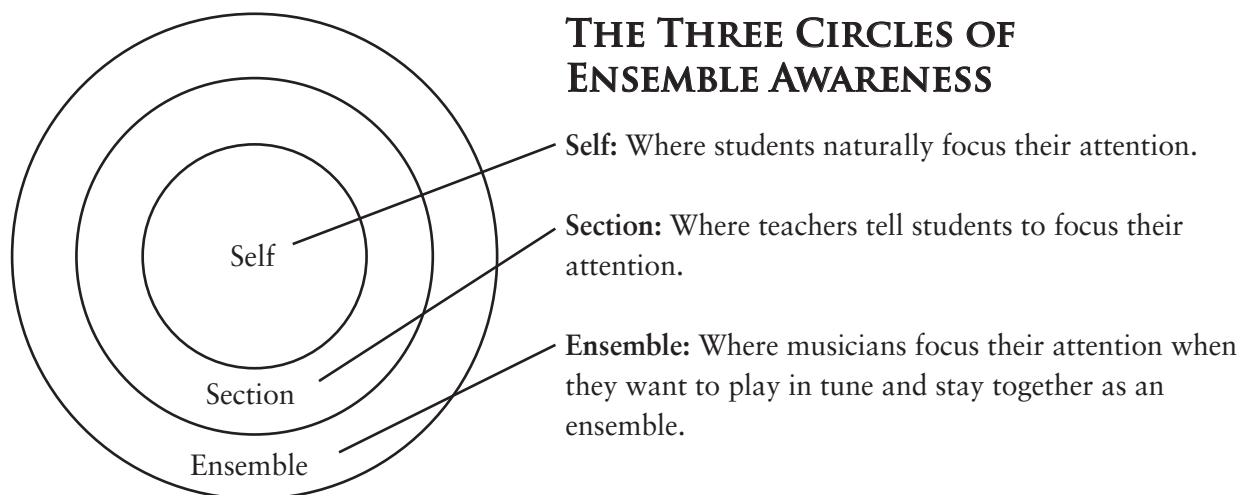
STEP 1: TUNING STRINGS (AND NOTES) BEGINS WITH TONE

Teach “Tuning Tone”: Using a soft, transparent tone allows students to hear the correct pitch while they tune their strings. The leader plays the A. The students listen for 5 seconds and then tune their A string at the tip of the bow. Once the A is in tune, the leader instructs the class to tune their remaining strings using a quiet tuning tone at the tip of the bow.

STEP 2: CROSS TUNE

Even accomplished high school orchestras are still a little out of tune at this point, and the student leader should then take the class through the cross-tuning procedure.

1. Everyone plays their A string again to make sure it is perfect.
2. Violin play their A strings while violas, cellos, and basses tune their D strings.
3. Then violas and cellos play their A while violins and basses play/tune their D.
4. Violins continue to play their D while violas, cellos, and basses tune their G string.
5. Then viola and cellos play their D while violin and basses play/tune their G string.
6. Violins and basses continue to play their G string. Violas and cellos tune their C string.
7. Finally, violas and cellos play their A string while the violins tune their E string. Then violas and cellos drop out and basses tune their E string to the violins. Basses may take a few extra seconds to double check their tuning using harmonics.



KEY POINT:

For our students to tune, listen, and play together as an ensemble, teachers must teach students to listen beyond their own section and to learn how their part fits together with other sections in the ensemble.

PART I: PLAYING IN TUNE

SECTION 1: TECHNIQUE

IMPROVE INSTRUMENT AND LEFT-HAND POSITION

Allocate time at the beginning of rehearsals for reviewing hand, body, and instrument position and technique.

- Have upper instruments stand up; it's easier for them to play and for you to see and correct problems.
- Get off the podium and move around the room.
- Use calisthenics and maintain zero tolerance for position problems and flaws. Don't be an enabler by allowing poor positions.

IMPROVE FINGER PATTERN ACCURACY

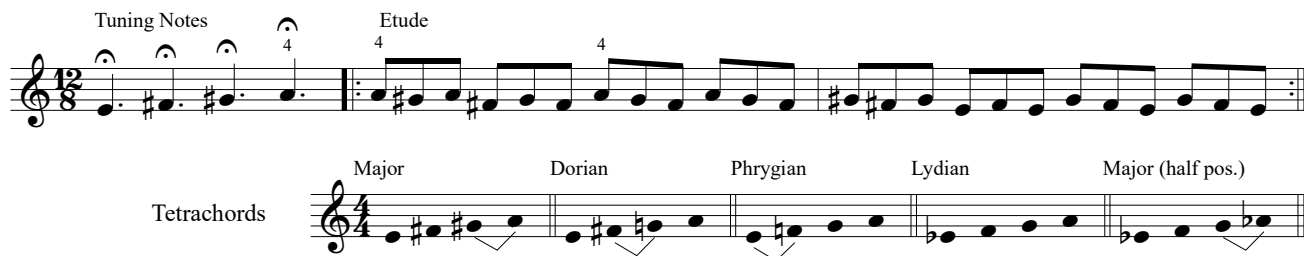
Use exercises that target and improve muscle development and dexterity to accurately perform the finger patterns their instrument requires.

1. FINGER PATTERN EXERCISES AND ETUDES

26. Major Progression

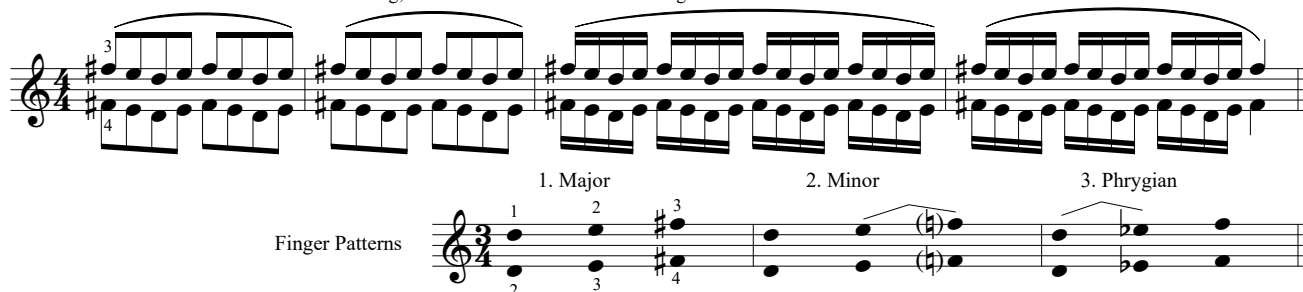


33. Tetrachord Etude



35. Velocity Etude

Violin: Intermediate 3rd Position on A string; Advanced--3rd Position on G String.



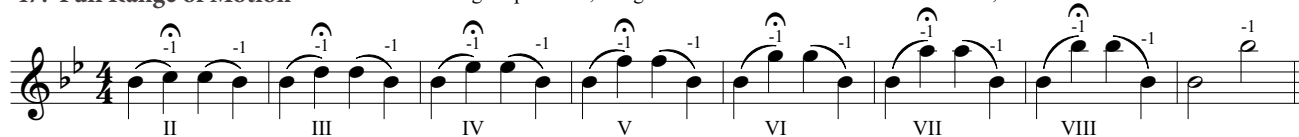
2. SHIFTING EXERCISES AND ETUDES

45. Silent Shifting (The diamond (♦) is the destination of the shifting finger. It is to be hidden, not heard.)

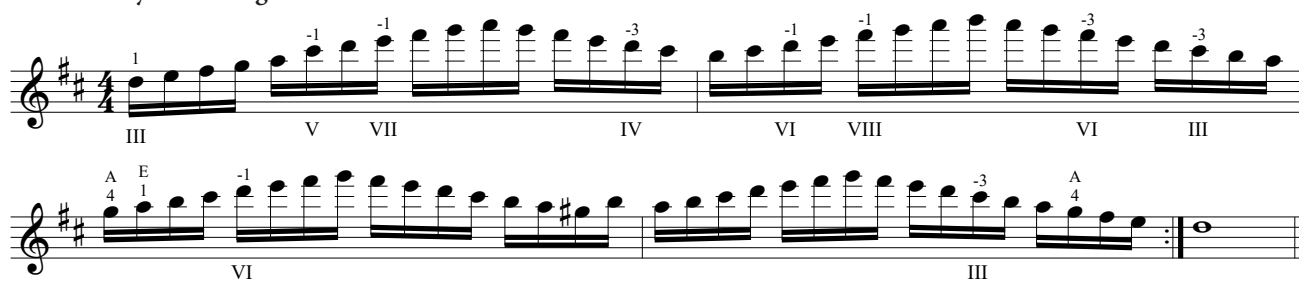


47. Full Range of Motion

To reach higher positions, bring the elbow and arm around the instrument, and the thumb around the neck.



83. Velocity in Shifting



3. SCALES, ARPEGGIOS, AND THIRDS

Tip! Know your ensemble's key limit, and teach scales that border those limits. I call these the "frontier keys."

138. Scales and Arpeggios - One Octave



Two Octaves



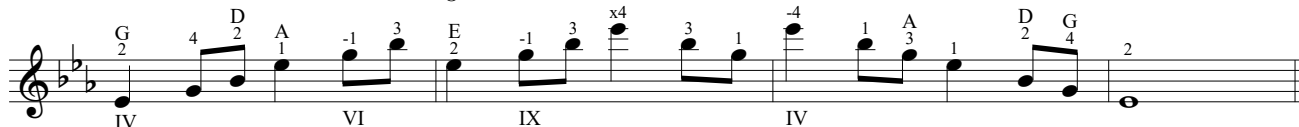
Three Octaves



8va - - - - -



8va - - - - -



4. DOMINANT EXERCISES

These develop the ear and awareness of finger pattern changes on different strings.

24. Dominant Etude ♩ = 72



104. Dominant Arpeggio

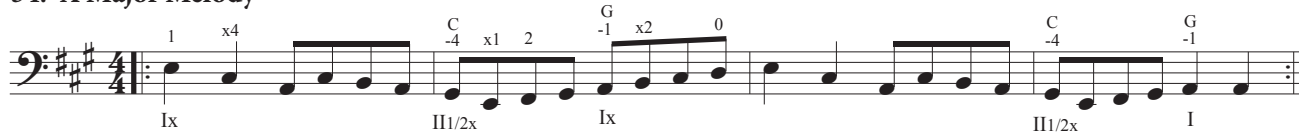


5. SOLVING THE G[#]/A^b PROBLEM IN THE CELLOS

53. A Major Drill #1 (Playing G[#] in tune)



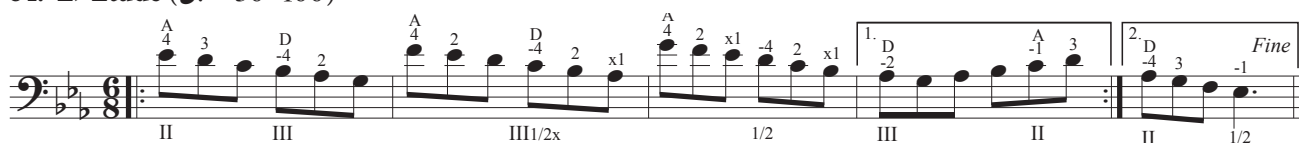
54. A Major Melody



62. Es-calator

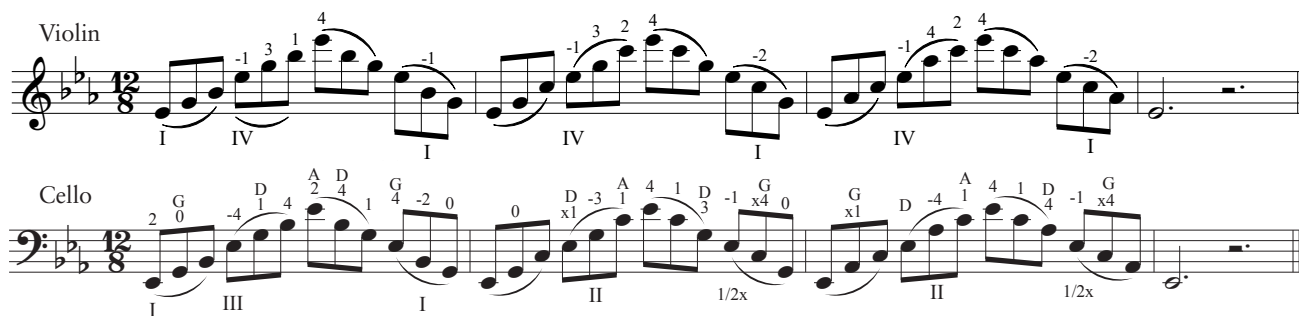


64. E^b Etude (♩ = 50-100)



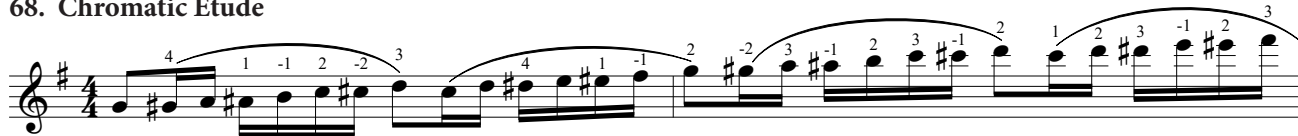
6. IMPROVING ARPEGGIO FLUENCY ACROSS THE INSTRUMENT

59. E^b Major Two-Octave Arpeggios

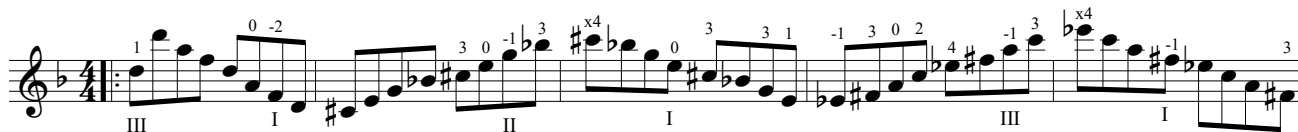


7. TEACH STUDENTS ADVANCED FINGER PATTERNS AND TO PLAY IN KEYS WITH FOUR OR MORE SHARPS AND FLATS

68. Chromatic Etude



69. Diminished Arpeggio Etude



74. Gb Drill



77. B Major Etude (On or off the string)



80. Enharmonic Duet (At the repeat, switch parts)

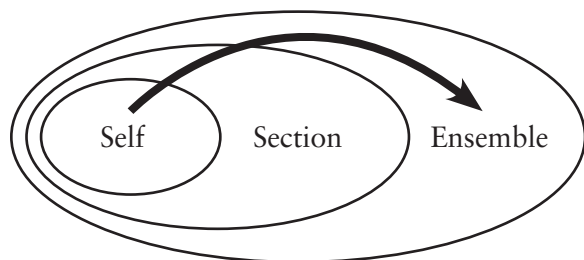
Part A

Part B

SECTION 2: IMPROVE ENSEMBLE TUNING AND INTONATION

When professional string players play “in tune,” they are tuning their notes to each other. There is no playing “in tune” in an ensemble without listening to and blending with the other players in the section, and then tuning with the chord tones played by other sections of the orchestra. **How do we teach this?**

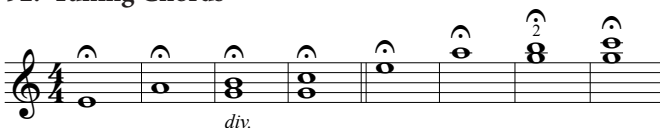
1. TUNING CANON AND CHORDS



91. Tuning Canon



92. Tuning Chords



Tuning Canons, Chords, and Chorales teach students to listen, blend, and finely tune the notes and chords in each key. The tuning canon is a good warm-up to begin class. Students can focus on performing with good pitch and good tone.

2. CHORALES

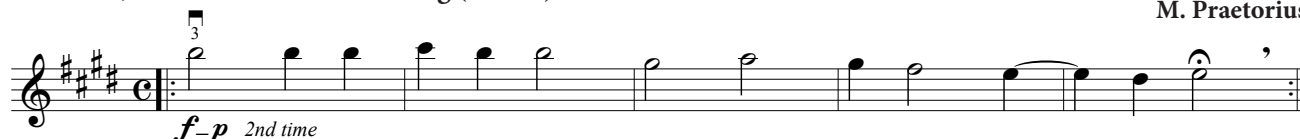
224a. Amazing Grace (♩ = 80) - Violin 1

African-American Spiritual



228a. Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming (♩ = 88) - Violin 1

M. Praetorius



234a. Yigdal (♩ = 92) - Violin 1

Jewish Hymn



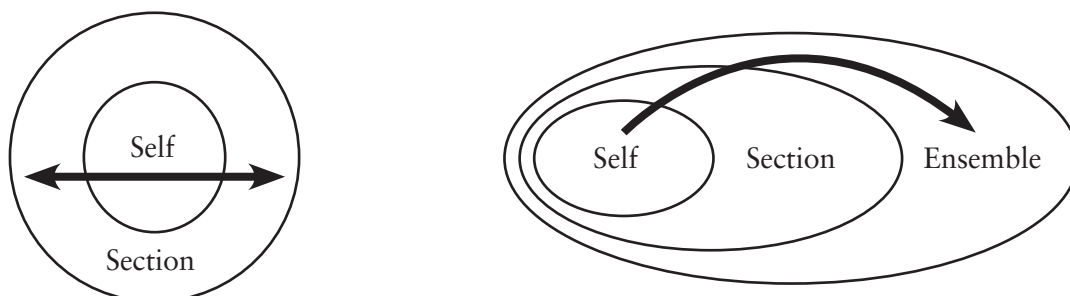
3. REHEARSAL STRATEGIES FOR FINELY TUNING CONCERT MUSIC

Tuning as an ensemble requires students to listen and tune to other sections playing different notes in chords.

- Select concert music with *familiar patterns or positions*. Use technical exercises to introduce and practice new technical skills and finger patterns. After students can comfortably play these patterns in tune, show them how to apply these familiar skills in their concert music.
- Teach students to listen and tune to other sections. Slow down the concert music until you and the students can hear EACH CHORD, and work on playing each chord in tune—just like they do with their tuning canon, chords, and chorales. If a note is out of tune, stop and correct it. Expect students to listen and adjust their fingertips.
- Tune double-stops and short chords, often found at the very end of a piece.
 1. Play the chord as a whole note and tune it.
 2. Play as a half note and then a quarter note, but always with beautiful tone.
 3. Students naturally play notes with short, crushed, stabbed tone. Lighten up a little and vibrate, and try to get even short notes to blend into the ensemble sound.
- Pay attention to the leading tones—the fourth and seventh scale degrees. Poor intonation is less about talent and more about paying attention and focusing on playing in tune.
- Finally, playing in tune begins and ends with TONE. Expect students to listen and blend their tone (agreeing on timbres) and intonation. These two elements are inextricably linked.
 - Long notes are a good place to introduce blended intonation.
 - Short notes should blend too. Encourage students not to “whack” short notes.

PART II: RUSHING AND TEMPO CONTROL

Could we (teachers) be contributing to the problem of rushing? How does listening outside of the section impact rushing differently than listening to others within your section?



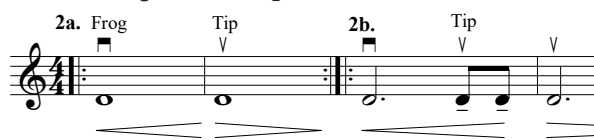
WHERE DO STUDENTS TEND TO RUSH? WHAT STRATEGIES HELP BEST?

There are several bowing issues that lead string players to rush, and the solution depends on each specific bowing issue.

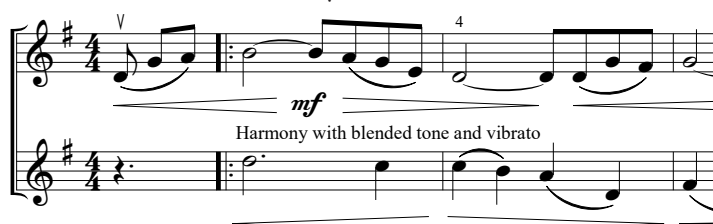
BOW MANAGEMENT AND *FORTES*

When young string students play loudly, they often reach the end of their bow before the end of the note, so they change the note when they run out of bow. Use exercises (like the ones below) to teach students how to play closer to the bridge so they can save their bow on long *forte* notes.

2. More Weight at the Tip (♩ = 60)



4. The Water Is Wide (Melody with full tone and vibrato ♩ = 68)



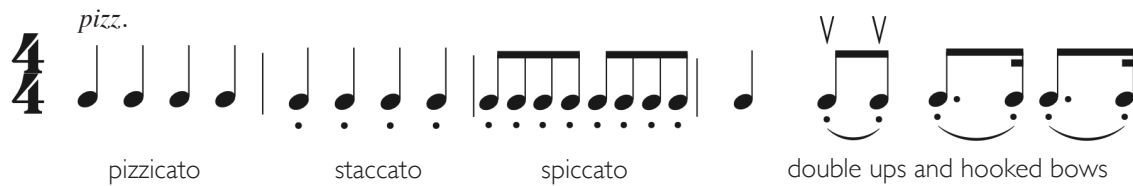
Uneven rhythms also require bow management practice or they will also rush.



Use rhythmic scales with bowing variations and a metronome to teach students to use a faster bow on shorter notes.

STACCATO ARTICULATIONS NATURALLY TEND TO RUSH (Don't we know it.)

Students rush staccato articulations because they do not leave enough time/space between the notes.



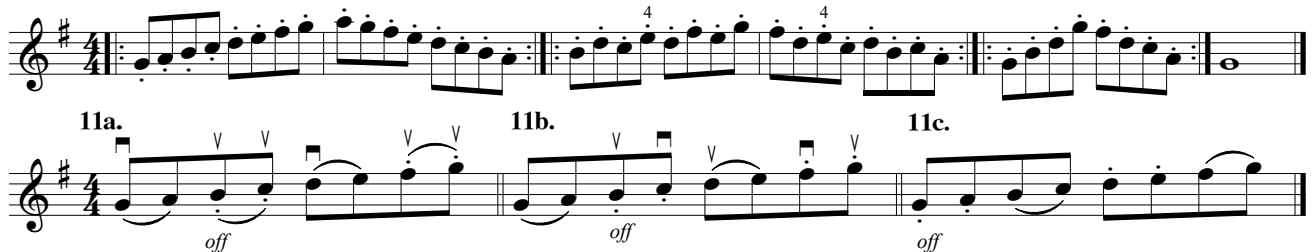
STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING TEMPO CONTROL WITH STACCATO ARTICULATIONS

Playing a piece at the same tempo every day does not help students learn to control their tempo; it may cause student ensemble awareness to atrophy.

1. ISOLATE A STACCATO EXCERPT WHERE THE STUDENTS RUSH AND PLAY IT AT DIFFERENT TEMPOS

1. Play with a metronome at different tempos.
2. Play with a conductor at different tempos.
3. Play without a conductor at different tempos.

11. Spiccato Etude and Variations



2. TEACH STUDENTS TO PLAY ON THE “BACK” OF THE BEAT OR “BEHIND THE BEAT”

- Can you slow down through this section?
 - Teach students to slow down, *ritardando*, through passages that tend to rush.
- Can you play behind the conductor?
 - Teach students to control their tempo by playing after the conductor's beat. “Play as late as you can without being late.” If they can't do this *arco* first, try *pizzicato*.
 - For advanced high school groups performing fast Mendelssohn or Mozart, the faster it is, the more players should aim for the back of the beat.
- Can you play behind another player? Another section?
 - Find a student with a strong sense of tempo and have students play behind that leader.
 - Select a section (e.g., violas or cellos) who are solid and not rushing, and tell other students to play behind them.

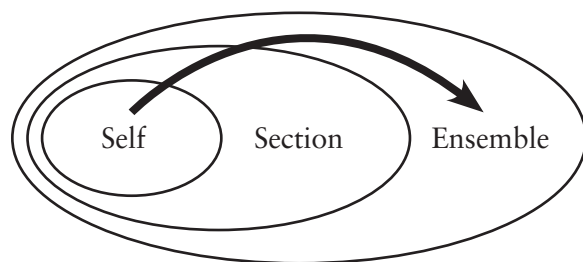
#3. TEACH STUDENTS TO BREATHE DURING RESTS AND BETWEEN PHRASES

- Take a breath here. Now put a breath mark there.
- Create slightly extra space during rests and between phrases.

FINAL THOUGHTS

We know some students are prone to rush, no matter how much we address it. However, by teaching the rest of the orchestra to pay attention, breath, and play behind, you can address the rushing students in a more isolated way. And you can be the good cop, because when they rush the students isolate themselves.

TEACHING STUDENTS TO LISTEN ACROSS THE ORCHESTRA



The outer circle is where the tempo and rushing lessons really lie; this is where we need to focus our attention and our students' attention for them to learn not only how to not rush, but also how to play together during *accelerandos* and *ritardandos*. Stacking/pairing rhythms in combinations teaches students how to listen to a different section to play together as an ensemble.

STEP 1: USE MICHAEL ALLEN WARM-UPS OR HABITS BOWING VARIATIONS TO TEACH RHYTHM PATTERNS SEPARATELY

Bowing Variations

7. Introduction (teacher) Theme (student)

Basic Bow Strokes

STEP 2: HAVE SECTIONS PLAY DIFFERENT COMBINATIONS OF RHYTHMS

Younger students may start with the easier combinations (on the left). The harder combinations (on the right) challenge students more and force them to listen and match each other at higher levels.

Easy (common denominator)



Harder (but better for developing skills)



THE THREE STAGES OF ENSEMBLE AWARENESS

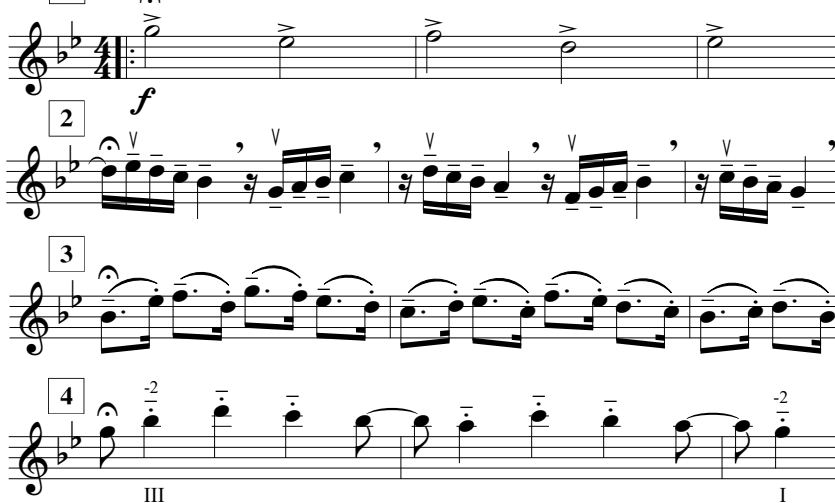
Stage 1. Young students tend to listen only to themselves; they do not automatically pay attention to the players in the other sections. They also tend to rush by playing chronically on the front of the beat and, in extreme cases, by cutting long notes and rests short.

Stage 2. Once students learn to listen and wait for the other sections to play their parts, they will likely start to slow down the tempo and drag. They must be reminded and encouraged to play on the beat, not behind it. They will tend to be a little late when coming in after a long note or rest and need to learn how to get going again after taking time at the end of the phrase. They will also tend to drag when there are multiple rests or syncopated rhythms.

Stage 3. At the highest levels, musicians have the musical maturity to hold their own tempo and the ability to follow the conductor when he or she conducts faster, slower, or simply maintains a steady tempo. In large ensembles, mature musicians have the ability and awareness to look forward and listen backward to keep the group together.

9. Rhythm Canon in Four Parts (♩ = 70–90)

1 Only observe the fermata when ending the canon.

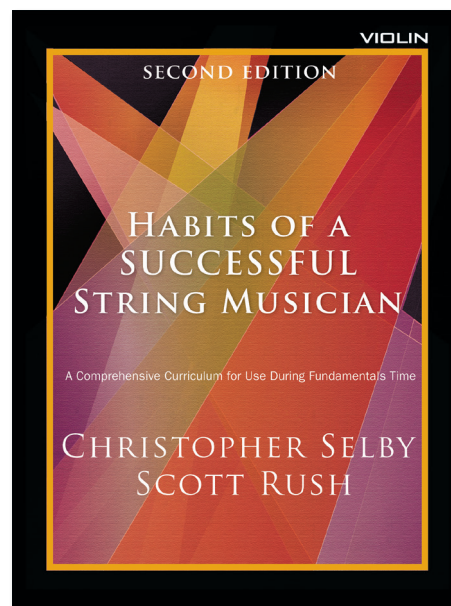


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CHRISTOPHER SELBY, SCOTT RUSH

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Dr. Christopher Selby is the author of *Habits of a Successful Orchestra Director*, *Music Theory for the Successful String Musician*, and is the lead author of the *Habits of a Successful String Musician* method book series published by GIA Publications. He is an active clinician and conductor and has presented sessions at numerous Midwest Clinics, American String Teacher Association (ASTA) national conferences, and state conferences across America. He has been a leader in both NAFME and ASTA and holds degrees from The Hartt School and the University of South Carolina. Dr. Selby currently directs the high school orchestras at the School of the Arts in Charleston, South Carolina. His orchestras have performed at the Midwest Clinic and have twice won the top award of Grand Champion at ASTA's National Orchestra Festival.