

I'm Teaching Strings? Techniques for Non-String Players

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Three key components to developing a successful string ensemble are:

Careful Tuning, Good Technique, and Great Music.

I. Careful Tuning

As with any good ensemble, the time spent in tuning the instrument is not only a time to develop an individual sense of pitch, but it also sets the stage for the rehearsal that is to follow. Like an Olympic runner preparing for their event, a musician must tune with great care; in peace and calm. Try to follow these steps:

1. Room must be quiet (use a visual, like having your Concert Master stand on the podium)
2. Concert Master (CM) tunes with pitch source (tone generator or piano)
3. Concert Master plays the A for each section to tune: celli/bass, violas, 2nds, 1sts (no talking or noise)

This process must transcend the usual classroom etiquette. The director should, in all seriousness, insist on 100% compliance. Be consistent, stress the importance, and reward cooperation.

Tuning-Pegs and Fine Tuners

With younger groups (elementary/middle school) tuning strings can become scary and costly. Strings break when the person tuning is not listening and does not know when to stop (dads are helpful, but notorious string breakers). In the beginning, teachers or aides must do "gross" tuning and let students help with fine tuners. Each student should have a pitch-pipe for home tuning. Order them from your supplier and sell them to the students at cost.

When students are introduced to tuning with the pegs they should first loosen the peg, then tune the string **up** to pitch.

Teaching Tuning

1. Groups should be guided by the instructor through the tuning process using a tone source (CM or piano etc.). Start with tuning the "A," listening, establishing an understanding of what "in tune" sounds like as well as what *flat* and *sharp* sounds like. "How does *flat* make you feel?...heavy? How does *sharp* make you feel?...dizzy?"
2. Have one student play their "A" and ask questions: "How's this? Sharp? Flat? or in tune?" It can become like a game and even younger students will amaze you with their ability to judge pitch. Take the focus off of the student who is tuning and place it on the activity itself. Often times (with younger students) the student tuning for the class will be too self-conscious to have an objective view, but will learn from the process. Have fun with this and don't let students be negative.
3. Next, introduce the tuning of the open 5ths, how they sound both in and out of tune, demonstrate this yourself or have a student demonstrate it for you, the class will hear the difference.

These steps are important early in the year and should be reintroduced periodically to reinforce concepts. While this activity can't be done every day, careful tuning can.

Note: Be ready to see how your own sense of pitch is effected through this process. Your bands will benefit greatly!

Games (to strengthen matching and adjusting in both tuning and playing).

1. Radar: Student or director plays a note and asks one student to find that note on any string by sliding into it.
2. Radar (Group): Student or director plays a note and asks class to find that note on any string by sliding into it.
3. Memory: Play any note and allow 15 seconds of silence before having the group locate it on the string (audiation).
4. Psycho: Group matches pitch and slides away (up or down) and back on directors queue.
5. Singing: Any of the above activities can be done vocally as well.

II. Good Technique

Many good texts are available today that were not around ten years ago:

Essential Technique and Essential Technique 2000 (Hal Leonard)

Strictly Strings books 1-3 (Alfred)

The First Ten Minutes, by M. Isaac (Wynn Music)

All For Strings books 1-3 (Kjos)

Choose a book that meets your needs and work out of it daily. Scales, rhythms, bowings, style, shifting and vibrato should be covered. Teach with authority, ask questions and rely on your musicianship. You may be surprised how much you will learn from this time spent in a good text.

Position

Be able to demonstrate correct bow and instrument position. Having a student do this for you is fine, but when you the instructor demonstrate, the students watch with eagerness. You can describe things better as you do this (demonstrate both good and bad position).

Bow Technique; Developing Strength and Control

The left hand creates pitch and expression (vibrato), but the right hand and arm creates rhythm, dynamics, expression, and musical style. We can spend most of our time dealing with left-hand issues (pitch, keys, fingering) and by concert time we scramble to establish appropriate musical style.

Bow technique can only be developed when the muscles that control the bow have been developed.

Below are some exercises that are effective:

1. Marathon Bow (use second hand or stop watch), who can play the longest/smoothest note in one bow.
2. Long Tones (use second hand or metronome), 30 seconds each bow, then 1 minute (control).
3. "Ten" (count or use metronome) 4 ones (Π V Π V), down for two, up for two, down for three, up for three, etc. up to ten, then reverse. The bow should be drawn completely from *Frog* to *Tip*. Make them fun and encourage the weak.

Dynamics and Bow Technique

Considerations: Bow direction (down bows are stronger than up bows), Amount and speed of bow, Point of contact on string, Amount of pressure, Amount of hair in contact with the string; these create dynamics.

Forte: Exert pressure on the bow w/1st finger, use longer stroke (faster), bow closer to bridge, flat bow hair.

Piano: Less pressure on bow, use less bow (slower), less hair; bow closer to or over the fingerboard.

Bowing Styles

1. *Détaché: Smooth, separate bow strokes.....
2. *Slurs: Two or more notes played while the bow moves in one direction.....
3. *Staccato: Notes are played with abrupt beginning and end, notes are shortened.....
4. Louré: Groups of notes played in one bow, with slight pauses.....
5. Slurred staccato: Two or more notes of the same value played in one bow with stops between.....
6. *Hooked bowing: Two or more notes of different values played in one bow with stops between.....
7. *Marcato: Accented attacks with full note length.....
8. Martelé: Heavy accents with space between notes.....
9. Spicatto: Bouncing bow strokes that leave the string after each note.....
10. Ricochet: Bow bounces along the string while moving in one direction.....
11. Tremolo: Very rapid bow movement (down-up), usually toward the tip.....

* Essential styles for most intermediate ensembles.

Vibrato (introducing and teaching)

Violin/viola vibrato is much more difficult to obtain than cello/bass. Cello/bass vibrato uses a similar wrist/arm motion used to shake down a thermometer. The principals of movement and relaxation discussed below apply to all string instruments.

Before you begin: All violins and violas must have the proper shoulder pad for their instrument. The left-hand cannot function when it is helping to hold the instrument up.

1. **Vibrato Machine:** Empty film canister filled 1/3 with uncooked rice. Hold in fingers and practice 8th notes with the wrist ("The Girl from Ipanema" works well as an accompaniment). Make sure the hand is moving at the wrist.
2. With the instrument in playing position (no bow) and the left thumb at the base of the neck (palm above top), wave to yourself. Move from wrist (not knuckles), relax thumb and hand. Then practice "tapping" on the top (other side of fingerboard).
3. In the same position, polish the string with a tissue under the 2nd or 3rd finger. Watch for correct movement.
4. Polish string without the tissue.
5. With either 2nd or 3rd finger stationary, add the bow and practice wrist movement.
6. Slowly introduce other fingers (1st is the least flexible) and try scales in whole-notes or slow unison melodies.

III. Great Music (all tried and true; some guaranteed winners)

Just in the last ten years, publishers have focused more attention on producing dynamic and interesting string music.

- Adra's Dance*, by McBrien (Gd. 3, Alfred)
Air for Strings, by Dello Joio (Gd. 3, Edward B. Marks)
Allegro, from Concerto Grosso Op. 6, No. 1, by Handel, Arr. Dackow (Gd. 3, Ludwig)
Andante Festivo, by Sibelius (Gd. 2.5, Lucks)
Arlington Sketches, by Del Borgo (Gd. 3, Alfred)
Dance of Iscariot, by Mosier (Gd. 3, Kjos)
Diversions, by McBrien (Gd. 3, Alfred)
Dorian Variations, by Williams (Gd. 2, Alfred)
Elegy, by Elgar (Gd. 3, Lucks)
Espressivo, by Nelhybel (Gd. 2, J. Christopher Music Co.)
Fantasia for Strings, by Del Borgo (Gd. 2, Belwin)
Farewell Symphony, (first movement) by Haydn, Arr. Jasinski (Gd. 4, Alfred)
The Game, by McBrien (Gd. 3, Kjos)
Geometric Dances, by Meyer, (Gd. 3, Alfred)
Holberg Suite, by Grieg, Arr. McBrien, (Gd 3-4, Alfred)
Legend, by O'Fallon (Gd. 3, Alfred)
Lo, How a Rose E'er Bboming, Arr. Goldsmith (Gd. 3, Belwin)
Mantras, by Meyer (Gd. 3, Alfred)
Nabucco Overture, by Verdi, Arr. Dackow (Gd. 3, Ludwig)
Nocturne, by Fauré (Gd. 3, Lucks)
Pagodas, by Meyer, (Gd. 4, Alfred)
Rustic Danœ, by Del Borgo (Gd. 1.5, Kendor)
Serenade, by Gustovson (Gd. 3, Alfred)
Sinfonia in D Major, by J.C. Bach, Arr. Dackow (Gd. 3, Ludwig)
Sinfonia in D, by Del Borgo (Gd. 3, Alfred)
Spring Breezes, Arr. by Meyer (Gd. 2, Alfred)
Star Dancer, by Williams (Gd. 1, Alfred)
Symphony No. 47 in G Major (finale), by Haydn, Arr. Dackow (Gd. 4, Ludwig)
Symphony No. 12 in G Major (First Movement), by W.A. Mozart, Arr. McBrien (Gd. 3, Alfred)
Symphony No. 29 (First Movement), by W.A. Mozart, Arr. McBrien (Gd. 4, Alfred)
Three Little Pieces, by Haydn (Gd. 3, Lucks)
Three Mannheim Sinfonias, by J. Stamitz (Gd. 4, Lucks)
Three Outdoor Sketches, by McBrien (Gd. 3, Kjos)
Three Scenes from a Green Valley, by Harbison (Gd. 2, Alfred)
Two Icelandic Mebdies, by Svendsen (Gd. 2, Lucks)
Two Swedish Folksongs, by Svendsen (Gd. 2, Lucks)
Winter Walk, by McBrien (Gd. 3, Kjos)

Order a *Luck's Music Library* Orchestra Catalog (also ask for a school music catalog) 1-800-348-8749, www.lucksmusic.com.

Order a *Pepper* Orchestra Catalog 1-800-345-6296, www.jwpepper.com

Some Basic Truths I Have Learned Through Teaching Strings

1. *When you consider the various instruments of the wind ensemble and their respective embouchures and techniques, teaching the string ensemble can seem much less complex.*
2. *Most wind technique is invisible, while nearly all string technique is not.*
3. *The greatest deterrent to deep learning can be concert preparation.*
4. *Good technique is best developed in small steps, through daily practice. Be enthusiastic, confident, and be open to learning through your experiences.*
5. *Never be afraid to ask questions, even of your students, and always rely on your musical judgment.*
6. *I will forever be a student of teaching. I am always looking for new ways to get more from my groups and improve myself as an educator.*
7. *If you have friends who are string players, pick their brains with questions, ask for insight.*
8. *Watching professional string players perform is worth a thousand words. Attend symphony concerts (bring binoculars)*
9. *You can't be burned out if you were never on fire.*

Other Important Points

- Don't be "married" to printed bowings and markings; try what you feel communicates the music more effectively.
- Make sure your players have enough room to bow and move (chairs 2 feet apart).
- Bass players should each have their own stand and music.
- Buy a good set of cello stops for performances on stages (the type that attaches to the chair work best).
- Keep a supply of strings for all instruments (and sizes) on hand.
- Finger strips tend to stay on longer than dots. Use thin, white auto detail tape found in auto parts stores.
- A good metronome like "Dr. Beat" is essential. Have patch cords set up to a stereo or amp for rehearsals.
- Each student should have their own: shoulder pad, rosin, cleaning cloth, pitch-pipe/tuner.
- Especially with beginning/intermediate level groups, every string should have a fine tuner.
- Buy bass rosin for your bassists. Don't let them use violin/cello rosin.
- A moth-ball or cedar block inside each case will keep the "bow bugs" away.
- Feature a local professional with your orchestra in a solo piece. Vivaldi composed many concerti that are accessible.
- Invite your principal to join you at festival (not on bus). Have them stay with you from warm-up through sight-reading.
- Invite a string specialist to work with your group two weeks prior to a performance (college directors love to do this).
- Always be on the lookout for good coaches. College students will work cheap and can be a great help.

Excellent Resources:

Guide to Teaching Strings, by Norman Lamb, Wm. C. Brown Company Publishers.

Orchestral Bowings and Routines, by Elizabeth A. H. Green, MENC Publications.

Dictionary of Bowing and Pizzicato Terms - 4th Edition, by Berman, Jackson, and Sarch, American String Teachers Assn.

A History of Musical Style, by Richard Crocker, Dover Press.

Playing and Teaching the Strings, by Vincent Oddo, Wadsworth Publishing Company.

How to Design and Teach a Successful School Orchestra Program, by Dillon and Kriechbaum, Kjos West.

Performance Practice: Music After 1600, edited by Howard Mayer Brown and Stanley Sadie, Norton Press.

Credits

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