



The Secret is the Right Hand

Using Fundamentals Time to Improve Your Orchestra's
Tone, Articulation, Intonation, Rhythm and Reading Ability

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In this session, attendees will learn

- ▣ Strategies for developing better tone and articulation performance skills
- ▣ How to teach well-blended ensemble tone and its relationship to group intonation
- ▣ Exercises for teaching rhythmic bowings
- ▣ Strategies for teaching rhythmic literacy

Which hand tends to get the most attention, and why?

Students (and teachers) tend to focus on the left hand because it controls the pitches (right and wrong notes) on the big instrument. But, what does the right hand control?

- ▣ Tone, timbre, articulation, style, dynamics, phrasing, and most of the elements related to rhythm.

While robotic left hand precision is nice, the right hand controls the most expressive elements in our music—the qualities that make music more human.

PART 1: Tone and Articulation

Tone! The most forgotten part of string education. The musical component that

- ▣ Is the quality we love most about our instruments.
- ▣ Is connected to intonation, rhythm, articulation and dynamics.
- ▣ Is barely mentioned in national standards.

Why do we forget about tone?

In addition to being controlled by the hand that “only holds the stick,” **tone is not visibly depicted in notation**. We use our scores to help us figure out what to teach: notes, rhythms, bowings, dynamics, even tempo markings and musical words. But we forget what we cannot see.

Breaking Tone Into Its Parts

- ▣ Reviewing and Improving the Bow Hand
- ▣ Teaching Tone and Articulation Performance Skills
- ▣ Developing Ensemble Tone and its relationship to intonation

STEP 1. Reviewing and Improving the Bow Hand—Every day is bow hand day.

1. Rest Position. Let the bow rest in the hand with the hair up. Guide students to check the curvature and placement of their thumb and fingers.
2. “Go Fishing” to feel the weight of the bow in a relaxed and fluid right hand.
3. Practice taking the bow to the string without the pinky. This technique is especially important for students with pinky problems.

Golden Rule: The bow is held up by the *string*, and it is held *down* by the bow hand.

STEP 2. Teach students all of the important “tone terms.”

- ☐ Quality instrument, strings, and bow with clean hair that has a good coat of rosin
- ☐ All parts of the bow: balance point, upper and lower half, frog and tip
- ☐ Triangle of tone production: Bow speed, weight and contact point (where on the string between the bridge and fingerboard.)
- ☐ Bow angle and rotation

STEP 3. Use Open Strings to teach basic tone production.

Even Tone - Frog to Tip

With a flawless bow hold, play the open string without counting or keeping time; pay attention to the bow's contact point, angle, weight, and speed.

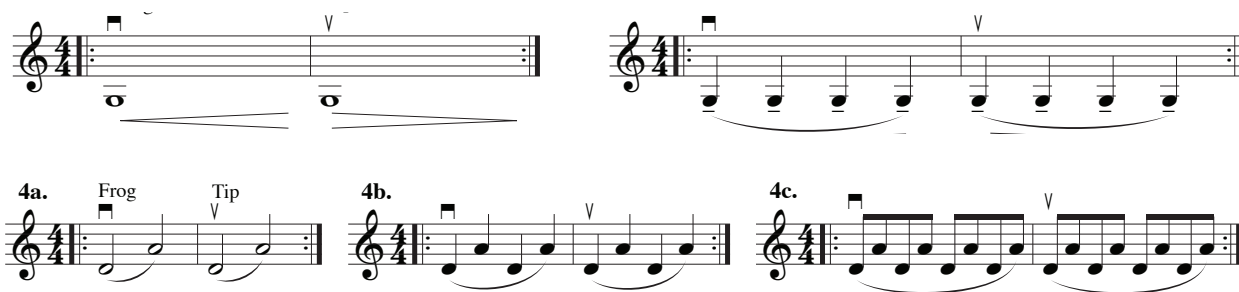
Teacher Tips:

The purpose of this exercise is to study the following basic bowing components without thinking about fingers or counting.

- **Bow Hold:** A “flawless” bow hold has no visible problems or unnecessary tension; finger placement is correct; thumb and pinky are curved; knuckles are fluid.
- **Contact Point:** The bow is correctly placed on the string between the bridge and fingerboard
- **Bow Angle:** The bow is perpendicular to the string and the stick is directly over the hair or rotated slightly toward the scroll of the instrument.
- **Bow Placement:** The correct part of the bow for producing the desired articulation —frog, balance point, middle, tip—is over the string.
- **Bow weight and bow speed** are balanced and produce an excellent tone that projects well.



STUDENT PAGE I



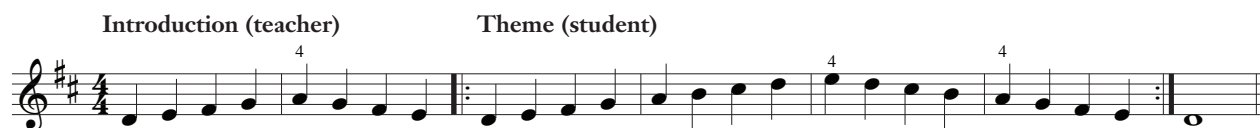
Teacher Tips

- Students are to practice using the entire bow with a constant bow speed. Bow angles should be perpendicular to the string.
- Dig in more at the tip and less at the frog to compensate for the bow's tendency to be light at the tip.
- Move the bow closer to the bridge when digging in more, and closer to the finger board when digging in less.

Bowing Variations

Here are a number of tools and strategies we use to efficiently and effectively teach tone, articulation, and rhythm combinations. We use the following sequence most often:

1. Select a rhythm or bowing that the students need to learn or review, possibly from the menu of options below, or make up your own.
2. Establish a tempo from a concert piece with the rhythms the students are playing.
3. Use the introduction to model the rhythms or articulations students are to learn.
4. Students play the Theme immediately after the teacher, demonstrating the rhythm or articulation just modeled by the teacher or student leader.
5. Practice with and without the classroom metronome.



Basic Bow Strokes



Examples of Sequenced Technical Exercises

From Habits of a Successful MIDDLE LEVEL String Musician

13. Spiccato Exercises

Perform the spiccato stroke at the balance point; keep the thumb and pinky curved and the knuckles soft and fluid. Set the bow on the string during the eighth rests.



14. Triplet Bowing Etude and Variations



15. Sixteenth Notes and Slurs



Velocity Etude for Bow Management

While we use the velocity etude primarily for developing left hand speed, it has also been a good tool for teaching students to manage their bow speed. Students must pay attention to contact point, bow weight and speed to produce a good tone from the first note to the last.

20. Velocity Etude

Perform as written first, and then perform with the different finger patterns (#2. F \sharp and #3. E \flat) shown below.



Give students exercises and opportunities to learn how to finely tune their fingers

Tuning Canons, Chords and **Chorales** teach students to listen, blend, and finely tune the notes and chords in each key. For overall balance, the lower instruments should be louder than the upper instruments, and no one should play so loudly that they cannot blend and finely tune their notes with the players around them. The tuning canon is a good way to begin class; as a warm up, students can focus on performing with good pitch and good tone

1. 2. 3. 4.

Vln.

Vla.

Vc.

Bass

1/2

x1

x1

216. Chorale #5: In the Bleak Midwinter

72

G. Holst

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

Bass

mf

mf

mf

mf

mf

What are the biggest challenges to teaching good tone?

- Cheap instruments affect tone (and pitch) and the student's enjoyment of the instrument.
- Modeling is the only teaching strategy.
- Strong tone is difficult to blend.
- Develop a strong soloistic tone with individuals
- Develop a blended ensemble tone with a group.
- Leaders should not "play for" the section.

Teaching Rhythmic Literacy and Sight Reading

The goal of teaching rhythm is to develop independent string musicians who can decipher, recall and perform written rhythms without the help of a teacher. We need to be careful how we respond to the most frequently asked question in music education: “How does this go?” If we are not careful, teachers can unintentionally create students that become rhythmically dependent upon the teacher or other players.

All rhythm has two components: the pulse and the rhythm that goes over the pulse. The teacher must develop both components for a student to properly understand and perform rhythms. Pulse should always be taught and established first; students need to learn that there can be a pulse without a rhythm, but there is no such thing as good rhythm without a pulse.

213a. and b.



For additional practice with ties, dotted quarter notes and eighth rest patterns, go to Part VIII Sight Reading Exercises 270–283.

221a. and b.



Additional Sight Reading Exercises

266.



286.



Getting Started

1. Establish and model the tempo and counting style students are to use during the rhythmic example. Students are to count the pulse (not the rhythm of the music) out loud. After they demonstrate their ability to keep a steady pulse counting, they can begin performing the rhythm of the music with their bow hand while continuing to count *out loud*. Count using the smallest denomination used in the music; for example:
 - a. If the example is mostly quarters and half notes, count quarter notes (1, 2, 3, 4.)
 - b. If the example has dotted quarters and eighth-notes, count the pulse and division (1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &)
 - c. Dotted eighths and sixteenth-notes: 1 e & a, 2 e & a, 3 e & a, 4 e & a
2. While counting out loud, students perform the rhythm exercises with their bow.
 - a. Air bow first. Students can get a preliminary *feel* of the rhythm as they count the pulse out loud. Longer notes should be bowed with a slow, sustained motion. The Teacher can check to make sure students are counting and watch the bows to assess who is struggling most.
 - b. After students demonstrate success with air bowing, have them count and bow the rhythm on an open string. Watch students closely to make sure they continue counting as they play; the students who don't count will not know when to come in after long notes and rests.
 - c. When they are ready, have students look at the line with the pitches. Remind them to look at the key signature, and have them mentally practice (silently air bowing and putting fingers on the string) before the class plays together. This important step gives the non-readers with good ears a chance to practice reading without having the opportunity to listen to the person next to them.
 - d. Instruct students to perform the notes and rhythms on the second line with their bows. If they seem to need it, students may take the intermediate step of counting and playing pizzicato before playing the notes arco.

Counting Out Loud

To genuinely understand a rhythm pattern, students must perform the rhythm while simultaneously keeping a *consistent pulse* somewhere else in their body. The biggest benefit to this strategy is that students are counting while they perform through long or dotted notes and rests, which is the most important time to count. Students will find it easier to “count in their head” (and they will beg their teachers to let them do this) because in truth, they temporarily stop counting during the toughest rhythms; instead, they should count out loud, especially when the rhythms are difficult.

Modeling is encouraged, but avoid teaching rhythm through repetition. Hammering a rhythm over and over may clean up rhythmic inaccuracies, but the students are only learning to copy the teacher, and not learning to count and independently perform the rhythm. Each time a rhythm or exercise is repeated, the students with good ears and poor reading ability have less need to read. So, avoid repetition, and remember that the best time to teach rhythmic literacy is every time students are learning new exercises or music.

Take Students Through a Series of Rhythm Exercises that are sequenced in increasing difficulty. Also, practice musical sight reading exercises that gradually challenge students to play harder rhythms, in more advanced keys, and in higher positions and alternate clefs.

- A. Quarter Notes and Rests; Eighth Notes
- B. Ties, Dotted Quarters, and Eighth Rests
- C. Syncopation
- D. Intermediate Triple Meter
- E. Triplets
- F. Simple Sixteenth Notes
- G. Dotted Eighth Notes and Sixteenth Rests
- H. Cut Time
- J. Advanced Triple Meter
- K. Irregular Meter

Final Thoughts

1. Make Time—fundamentals time—for teaching technique to your upper level students.
 - a. Fundamentals Time (50%)
 - b. Concert Music Rehearsal (50%)
2. Determine the skills that students at each level should have, and plan how you will go about teaching them these skills.
 - a. Determine the skills for each level of orchestra you teach.
 - b. Organize these skills into units.
 - i. Left Hand Unit: Finger Patterns, Shifting, Upper Positions
 - ii. Tone and Articulation: Bow hand, basic tone projection, spiccato, etc
 - iii. Scales and Arpeggios
 - iv. Theory and Creativity
 - v. Concert Music
3. Create a Long Range plan that identifies the skills that will be addressed in each quarter.

String Resources Available Through GIA Publications

Habits of a Successful Orchestra Director
Habits of a Successful MIDDLE LEVEL String Musician
Music Theory for a Successful String Musician

COMING SOON!

Habits of a Successful String Musician, 2nd Edition (2023)

Habits of a Successful Young String Musician, Books 1 & 2 (2024)

By Sarah Ball, Margaret Selby, Christopher Selby, and Scott Rush



Dr. Christopher Selby is the author of *Habits of a Successful Orchestra Director*, *Music Theory for the Successful String Musician*, and co-author of the *Habits of a Successful String Musician* series, a collection of string method books for middle and upper-level orchestras published by GIA. 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. Dr. Selby is the 2022 Teacher of the Year at the School of the Arts in Charleston, SC where currently teaches high school orchestra. His orchestras performed at the 2019 Midwest Clinic, and they won the 2016 ASTA National Orchestra Festival's top award of Grand Champion in the competitive public school division.

Dr. Selby earned a music education degree from the Hartt School of Music in Connecticut, and a Masters and Doctorate in Orchestral Conducting from the University of South Carolina. His teaching career began in Fairfax County, VA in 1992. From 2001 to 2012, Dr. Selby was the Orchestra Coordinator in Richland School District Two where he taught high school and supervised the district's orchestra curriculum and instruction. He then moved to Charleston, SC and returned to teaching full time in the classroom in his current position at the Charleston County School of the Arts.

Dr. Selby regularly guest conducts Regional and All-State Orchestras across the southeast. He has held national leadership positions in ASTA and NAFME. Dr. Selby was the President of the South Carolina Music Educators Association (SCMEA) from 2011-2013 and he served two separate terms as the President of the state's Orchestra Division. He is a contributing author for *Teaching Music Through Performance in Orchestra*, vol. 4 and has written articles for NAFME and in ASTA's American String Teacher.