

# Perfecting the Art of the Beginning Orchestra Class

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## Outline:

- Starting the year right!
- Instrument Placement and Set Up
- Left and Right Hand Position
- Classroom management
- Tuning
- Tone
- Intonation
- Note Reading
- Developing A Culture of Success

## Starting the Year Right!

### Goals of the First Days/Week:

- Help kids decide which instrument to play if they don't already know—demonstrate
- Give out info about getting instruments, measure—write the size on a materials list to take to the music store. Have suggested local and online shops on the materials list.
- Get to know the students:
  - Ice breakers/bonding games—Try having the group sort into categories (Harry Potter houses, cats vs. dogs, cake vs. ice cream, morning person vs. night owl), Two Truths and a Lie
  - Make nametags to hang on the music stand: Name, instrument, class period on BOTH sides of the paper
  - Take pictures of the students with their nametags (flashcards for the teacher!)
- What can you do while waiting for everyone to have their instrument?
  - Teach procedures: Hand signals, “A Day in the Life of a String Student,” and how to set up and put away the music stands and chairs.
  - Learn about instrument care and parts (sing it!)
  - Create their first success=bring back handbook contract/calendar signed=pencil prizes Have a ceremony to give out the prized pencils to everyone. I “knight” them.
  - Start Bow Hand exercises on those special pencils
  - Secret Chicken! (Anne Marie Patterson: Youtube-Miss Steiger’s Music Room)
  - Karate Kid lessons: watch the “lessons” clips from the movie and talk about how it relates to our class.

### Instrument Placement and Set Up:

- Assign school instruments: Name the instruments! They will take care of them if they do.
- Mark endpin height with a sharpie (use different colors for each student sharing instrument)
- Create class steps (1-2-3-4-5) for instrument placement with each number representing an action or checkpoint for each instrument.

Examples of steps for instrument placement include:

- Upper Strings
  - 1- Feet shoulder width apart, step left foot forward, Statue of Liberty
  - 2-Touch the end button
  - 3-Rotate instrument
  - 4-Come from above, waaay up on the shoulder \*\*this is super important
  - 5-Jaw in the “jaw” rest, “Look Ma, no hands!”
- Cello
  - 1-Feet flat on the floor
  - 2-Points at or above your knees
  - 3-Resting on your “Heart”
  - 4-Neck near your neck
  - 5-Ear tickle (C-peg)
- Bass
  - 1-Feet: Right foot on floor (if sitting) or both feet on floor shoulder width apart. Soft knees! (if standing)
  - 2-Bridge pointed slightly to the right
  - 3-Bass touching left leg and torso
  - 4-Neck near your head
  - 5-Instrument balanced
- Teaching Pizzicato
  - (shoulder position)—RH, make a backwards L, “Listening Horn”, park your thumb on the side of the fingerboard, pluck with your first finger “pad” or “print”, not the nail. This is a great time to start talking about what good ringing tone sounds like.
- Teaching Open Strings
  - Ant Song (Each, Ants, Dirt, Ground, Countries that start with “C”)
  - Open String Compositions, Red Carpet Solos
- Use videos to review unpacking or instrument care, the parts of the instrument, playing position, left and right hand position. \*\*I use this time to put on finger dots/tapes or instruct separate instrument groups.
  - Essential Elements Interactive
  - Rebecca MacLeod (Teaching Strings in Today’s Classroom)
  - For teachers—Michael Hopkins Youtube videos

### **Sitting/Posture Mantras:**

- Live on the edge! Defy gravity!
- Feet flat on the floor! (Stomp, stomp, stomp-stomp-stomp)
- Tall tummy, abs of steel (not marshmallows)
- Tripod of support (2 feet and the tush)

### **Violin and Viola Left Hand Position Reminders:**

- Waaay up on the shoulder. To the left!
- Salute or Stop Sign

- Bumpy on the ridge (base joint of 1<sup>st</sup> finger on side of fingerboard, not under)
- Whoosh! (elbow under your nose)
- 4 fingers, 3 fingers, 2 fingers....(start with all fingers down and then lift fingers to create a good hand shape)
- Boxy, boxy, boxy! (describing the finger knuckles--in a British accent—Brian Cole)
- Tips of the fingers or “corners” of the fingers
- Don’t squeeze Squeaky (or Billy Bob Jr)...create a mouse club with cat toys from Walmart

### **Cello and Bass Position and Left Hand Position Reminders:**

- Feet, knees, heart, ear tickle
- Put all fingers at the base of the fingerboard and slide up the D string. (creates good 4<sup>th</sup> finger weight in the left hand)
- “C” is for cello or “cool” bass (left hand shape)
- Take the grapefruit off your head and put it on the D string. (creates an open hand)
- Curly fingers or knuckles
- Check your wing, “Be Average”
- Use “sly fox” eyes—when looking at the left hand. This prevents kids from moving the cello too far away or bending the left wrist.
- Thumb behind the 2<sup>nd</sup> finger, behind the D string
- Bass LH height: Wipe the chocolate icing off your face!

### **Teaching the Bow Hand:**

- Create characters
  - Mama Llama
  - Llama food
  - String gang signs in the hallway
- Steps to creating a bow hand position:
  1. Hang from the ankle creases, feel stuck like glue
  2. Tip of the bumpy thumb on the nose of the frog AND the wood of the bow
  3. Lean on Captain Hook
  4. Pinky on top or slightly over for cello/bass
  5. Tip straight up! Check the pinky and the thumb--Boing-boing-boing (thumb)
- OR
  1. Flop (fingers on bow)
  2. Drop (lean on 1<sup>st</sup> finger)
  3. Tuck (thumb)
  4. Tap (pinky)
- 500 times! (before we can put hand on the bow)
- Practice during math class

### **Bow Hand Reminders:**

- “Curve your pinky, don’t be stinky. Curve your thumb, don’t be glum.” Lenny Schranze
- Up Like A Rocket, The Wheels On the Bus
- Bow reminder “Count off” before playing: “Park (or rest) the bow, curve the thumb, pinky tap, ready go!” OR try “Set, Curve, Flex, Breath”

- Rest the bow, squishy fingers or dancing fingers, finger prints on the bow, “good ferrule, nice ferrule” or “Long John on the Silver”
- Name the fingers: 1<sup>st</sup>-Captain Hook, 2<sup>nd</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup>-Larry and Carl, 4<sup>th</sup>-pinky
- “Roll the bow toward the scroll”—helps correct bow angle

#### Other Bow Hand Tools:

- Pencil bow hands
- Straws
- Milk shake straws on wooden dowels
- Dead or baby frogs (old bows that have been cut off near the frog)
- Seat belts (rubberbands)
- Thumb or Ferrule spot (soft Velcro side)
- License to bow
- Bow parades

#### Calisthenics:

- We can create a perfect “statue” position, but we must move to actually make music.
- Let’s Get Ready to Rumble! Eye of the Tiger (Llama), Another One Bites the Dust, We Will Rock You, Sandstorm...
- Energize your class, get them to move with perfect position:
  - Finger taps, windshield wipers, write name on the ceiling, stir the tea cup (using just your fingers/thumb), air bow rhythms, etc.
- Showcase all genres of music
- Ear-training and improvisation
- Find pop tunes by key: <https://getsongkey.com/music>

#### Classroom management:

- Procedures for everything
  - Practice coming in the room, unpacking, \*what to do when you are finished and/or waiting (**silent practice**: the room gets quieter, I know when they are all ready, they are reviewing their assignment from the last class, they are getting focused for today)... time it!
  - Teach the “What to do if’s”....need to go to the nurse, go to the bathroom, etc.
  - How to pass out music or materials
- Be well-planned
- Pacing—fast and keep everyone busy
- Rotate seating (weekly, by partners), makes me see and hear everyone, COVID=each with own stand=more independent, couldn’t rely on partner...maybe we should keep doing this.
  - Scattered seating (anywhere in the room, but not next to someone else who plays the same part) on days close to concert time

#### Tuning:

- Beginning of the year: I tune while they play with the accompaniment tracks. They are usually in the key of D (except “Let’s read F#). This allows me to give individual

attention to every student, check positions, take care of other business, all while they play. Valuable REVIEW time.

- I tune them until our winter concert (you can teach tuning earlier if needed). The students are introduced to matching pitch (singing and left hand) beforehand.
- Teach them how to make a tuning tone.
- What does too high or sharp mean? Too low? Which way do you turn? We “fake” tune.
- “If the pitch is too high, push your thumb to the sky. If it’s too low, pull your thumb to the flo.”
- Righty tight-y, lefty loose-y. Turn toward the higher or lower string.
- Steps to tuning: 1. Silence 2. Listen for 5 seconds 3. Hum 4. Tip of the bow, tuning tone 5. Compare/Adjust (quickly/10 seconds) 5. Stop/Share the air
- On the day we start, I “tune” (insert evil laugh) one of their strings (only about two turns either up or down with the fine tuners).
- We start by tuning one string per day. Once the routine is learned, they tune each string by ear (arco) and then check each string with a tuner (shar metrotune) pizzicato. Time it once they have the routine down. Make sure they tune by ear first and then use the tuner to check. No cheating.
- Time bank: We time our beginning of class procedures, including tuning. Students earn time by completing all procedures faster than the time I give them (we start with 7 minutes and get down to 4 in the first year). They can “bank” the extra time until they reach 30 minutes which earns them a rewards day. They can choose their musical activity for a full class period. They love it!

### **Tone:**

- Tone is the heart of the music, each musician’s individual voice. Tone is the most important thing!
- Model: remember, you are probably the only string player that students ever hear and see.
- Have the students listen or watch recordings with professionals playing with beautiful tone.
- Teach what good tone sounds like (and other types) and how to make it.

Teach the mechanics of good tone:

- Bow Weight, Speed, and Contact Point
- Bow Lanes: from the fingerboard to the bridge
  - Lane 1: Fast/light motorcycles
  - Lane 2: Medium sized sedans
  - Lane 3: SUVs
  - Lane 5: Heavy/slow/loud! Mack Trucks

\*\*Tip: Kids get mixed up on the numbers. Try labeling with dynamics instead (Sound Innovations)
- Bow Factors=“PAWS”
  - P: Placement (contact point, AKA bow lanes)
  - A: Area (Part of the bow)
  - W: Weight
  - S: Speed

\*Credit to Charles Laux ([www.orchestrateacher.net](http://www.orchestrateacher.net)), inspired by Meredith Tashkandi.

### **Intonation:**

- Start with in tune strings!

- Tetrachord etudes, finger patterns, tuning canon/chords
- “Say” it (sing it)
- Ringing tones, checking 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> fingers with open strings, drones
- Tone/bow speed
- Give them no other option! Teach them the tendencies.
- Don’t get stuck in the middle school out-of-tune bubble.
- “We must all face the choice between what is right and what is easy.” Albus Dumbledore
- **Teach Finger Patterns:**  
The Tetrachord Etude from the *String Warm Ups* by C. Selby (<https://www.stringeducation.org/lessons/string-warm-ups> and in the *Habits for the Successful Middle Level String Musician*)

### Note Reading:

- BEFORE READING: Learn the note/finger relationship
- “Hands in the air like you just don’t care” to show finger/note relationships while saying note names
- Videos: How to Read Music Part 1 and 2, Violin, Viola, Cello, and Bass (YouTube—Rachel Depriest)
- Practice using worksheets or have them draw the notes
- Flashcards (individual and group) on [www.orchestrateacher.net](http://www.orchestrateacher.net) (Charles Laux)
- Customizable online flashcards on [www.musictheory.net](http://www.musictheory.net)
- Smartboard/promethean group exercises (all three clefs at the same time) on [www.stringeducation.org](http://www.stringeducation.org)
- Read, read, read...sight-read something every day
- Tip: Have kids know all the layers: name of note, finger/string, fingerboard map
- No technology? No problem! Have them read their music upside-down or backwards.

### Review and Repetition:

- Review is when the deep learning happens!
- The first 5-15 minutes of class is review time.
- Suzuki: “Knowledge is not skill. Knowledge plus 10,000 times is skill.”
- Have a million creative ways (Opera style, country style..., only arco if you have a cat, eye color is..., birth month, if you like cheese, if you sleep with socks on, etc.)....and you’ll learn things about your students!

The Drill (adapted from Deborah Perkins): Teach your students a process to learn new skills/ music!

1. Point and “say” the note names or rhythm counting (touch page with finger or bow)
  2. Left Hand in the air like you just don’t care (and say it)
  3. Pizzicato and say it
  4. Air bow and say the bow direction, rhythm counting, or bow speed
  5. Elbow and say it
  6. Arco and say it
  7. Celebrate!
- For class or home practice. Can be done with or without the metronome.
  - “Tap, tap, tap, tap” with toe or metronome before and after each step. Continue without stopping if possible.

**Culture/Team/Ensemble Building:**

- Positive Culture/Success—Name the groups positively from the first day!
  - 6A=6 Awesome, 6B=6 Best
- Use positive words—I like how tall the violas are sitting today....be funny about corrections if you can---gravity is strong over here....
- Shuffle-- early team building--orchestra stomp for each other after performances or any success
- Teach them to bow (my shoes are tied)
- The Orchestra Cheer
- Wear your t-shirts together every Friday!
- Use a prize drawer/box and catch students doing something great (See me after class for a prize!)

**Motivation:**

- Think like a 5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> grader...what motivates them?
- Everything is exciting at the beginning. “The bow!” Not much needed for the first 8 weeks, then the newness starts to wear off. Plan something exciting for week 9-11 to prevent dropping (especially if that is when they change other classes). We have our fall concert right after the first nine weeks period.
- The little things: stickers, candy, check your neighbor’s position, etc.
- Should you do practice records/journals? Kids and parents lie, but they set the expectation of practice and routine. I do them for extra credit.
- Performance slips—idea based on suzuki’s parent/teacher/student triangle. Student have to perform something from their assignment for their parent/guardian once per week.
- Practice challenges—30 day, 100 day, over break (prizes—conduct a piece, flarp on your stand for a week, etc.)
- Reward them with music! You will play for them if they do xyz, you will teach them a fun tune or youtube video performance.
- Star students: Put pictures on the wall for perfect bow hands, left hand position (“Cover of Strings Magazine”)



Margaret Selby is the orchestra director and 2020-21 Teacher of the Year at Laing Middle School in Charleston, SC where she grew the program from 42 to over 200 students in five years. She was the 2022 Featured Clinician for the Orchestra Division of the Texas Music Educators Association (TMEA) and is a contributing author of *Rehearsing the Middle School Orchestra*, published by Meredith Music and distributed by GIA. She has conducted the West Virginia Junior All-State Orchestra and multiple regional orchestras across the southeast, and has adjudicated orchestras in Las Vegas and South Carolina. Mrs. Selby has presented sessions for the Texas Orchestra Directors Association (TODA), the South Carolina Music Educators Association (SCMEA), co-presented at the ASTA National Conference (2012, 2020, 2021) and was a panelist at the 2019 Midwest Band and Orchestra Clinic in Chicago. She served as the President for the SCMEA Orchestra Division and is currently the SCMEA Orchestra Division Region 4 Representative. Mrs. Selby is the 2017-18 String Educator of the Year awarded by Southern String Supply. She earned degrees in Music Education and Cello Performance from the University of South Carolina, studying under Dr. Robert Jesselson. She has performed with the South Carolina Philharmonic, the Charleston Symphony, and regularly as a freelance cellist. She is also a registered Suzuki cello teacher. Mrs. Selby lives in Mt. Pleasant, SC with her husband and their two crazy teenagers. She enjoys running and sampling Charleston's many amazing restaurants.