

OMG Strings!!

Tips, Tricks and Tools for the Non-String Playing String Teacher.

NAfME Webinar

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Kate McFadden - cmcfadden@bcps.org

I am a bassoon player, and was a band director, when twenty years ago my supervisor moved me from my elementary band position to 2 middle schools teaching orchestra. I said, "I'm not a string player!" He said, "If you want a full time position, this is it." So, I became an orchestra teacher and have been doing it for 20 years at the elementary and middle school level all over my county in all types of schools.

The best advice I ever got was. "Strings are great because you can see everything!" It is so true.

Here are some tips that have helped me as a non-string player to teach strings. None of these tips are unique to me, but I wish I had them when I started out.

I. Getting started

- a. Know some brands of instruments
 - Knilling, Lewis, Sherl and Roth, Eastman, Glaesel
 - Online stores
 - Shar Music (<http://www.sharmusic.com/>)
 - Southwest Strings (<http://www.swstrings.com/>)
- b. Remind parents to look for instruments with brand names and serial numbers. Also remind them that price does matter with strings and bows.

II. Instrument set-up

- a. What size instrument?

Have kids move to a full size before their rental contract runs out. The hardest thing is to get a student who has purchased a smaller instrument to move to a full size. Stress that their tone will improve, physically they can injure themselves playing on a too small instrument.

Violins - Hand should wrap around the scroll comfortably. Measure from the neck to the palm of hand. 23" and up - 4/4

22-23 - 3/4

Violas - Viola sizes refer to the actual length of the instrument's body, in inches. It is important that the student is comfortable holding and playing the viola or physical problems may develop. Measure from the neck to the palm.

27" and up - 16.5 viola

26" -27" - 16" viola

25" -26" - 15.5 viola

24" - 25" - 15 viola

23" -24" - 14 viola (also called intermediate viola)

21" -23" - 12-13 viola (also called junior viola)

Cellos - Measure from shoulder socket to tip of middle finger (left arm) or size by height.

24" and up is 4/4, Height - 5 ft and up

22" -23" is 3/4, Height - 4 ½ ft-5 ft.

20" -21" is 1/2. Height - 4 ft to 4 ½ ft.

Even smaller sizes are available.

You can also measure the distance between the tip of the index finger to the tip of the pinky (left hand) 6" and up 4/4, 5" -6" - ¾.

Bass - Generally elementary students and 6th graders are on ½ basses, middle school students can handle a 3/4 bass, high school students larger. (Really it is what your school has)

b. Is the instrument in good working order?

Pegs - Make sure the pegs can move freely and stay in place. Use peg compound (not chalk) to keep pegs from slipping.

Bridge - Check that the bridge isn't bent, and is lined up with the notches of the sound holes. Many times the bridge might not be fitted to the instrument properly and then the strings sit too high above the fingerboard. Bridges are not attached to the body. Don't glue them on no matter how much you want to.

Body - Watch where the neck goes into the body for cello and bass. They can come apart. Also watch for cracks.

Sound Posts - There is a sound post inside the instruments and they do fall. If not comfortable resetting it, get it repaired.

Strings - Even if the string isn't broken, they may need to be replaced. Look for wear or unraveling. E strings need to be replaced the most. Good idea to replace E strings a couple weeks before a concert.

c. Things string players should have or do.

Shoulder Rests!! - Violins and viola must have a shoulder rest! No exceptions, do not accept any excuses. So many choices. Look in any catalog. Kun, Zaret, Everest, etc...

Rock Stops - Cellos and basses need rock stops. Xeros strap stops are the best. Stoppin or Slip-Stop are good for basses

Rosin - All rosin is not the same. Get appropriate rosin for the different instruments. Wipe off extra.

III. Tuning:

- a. Use electronic chromatic tuners and pick-ups. Korg, Intelli, Snark etc... Any age can learn to use them and tune with fine tuners. (Teacher tune with pegs until students are older)
- b. Make sure violin, viola, and cellos all have fine tuners or built in fine tuners. They are cheap and easy to put on. Watch them and unscrew them when they are all the way down. Then tune with the pegs.
- c. When a student says they hear a rattling sound, check the fine tuners first. Usually they are loose.
- d. When tuning with pegs. "Little bitty turns always pushing in when making small turns".

IV. Holding the instrument

Always stress posture. Sit up straight, both feet on the floor, shoulders relaxed, and head up.

Violin/Viola: Must have a shoulder rest!

- Left hand, left shoulder (of instrument), turn over, put finger on the button, bring button into neck putting your finger between your neck and the instrument. Lift jaw; pull finger away put jaw on chin rest. Draw a line from the center of the eye to the place the button shoulder touch the neck.
- Hold instrument over your head with the scroll in your left hand, lower the instrument onto your left shoulder, place the chin rest under your jaw left of the center of your chin, keep instrument level with the floor.

Cello

Adjust the endpin 2 ways:

1. Gently stand on scroll and bring endpin out to your eyes. Gently turn over.
2. Hold the cello in your lap; pull endpin out the width of your fully stretched hand span plus one inch. The scroll should be about chin height when standing.

- Sit on edge of chair, place left hand on the left shoulder of the cello, arms length away. Lean cello back so it rests against the body, mid chest high. The inside of the knees should touch the side of the cello. Fit the cello to the body not the other way around.
- The right foot should be slightly in front of the left foot.

Bass

Endpin height:

Bridge even with knuckles when arm is at your side. The nut should be at the middle of the forehead.

- Holding the bass: Feet shoulder width apart, using left hand hold bass an arm's length away, bring the bass toward you and turn it to a 45-degree angle to your body. The corner of the bass should rest on the left thigh.

V. Bow Hold

Bow holds should be natural, and relaxed. Always begin bow hold on a pencil before the bow. Every method has great pictures of bow holds. There are also many aides you can buy to help form bow holds. You can also make them.

Violin/viola/cello/bass French bow

- Elephant Bow story: *"Three elephants came to a river with a log across it. They put their trunks into the river to drink. They put their trunks in just enough to get to the water and not under the log. There was a little bird that perched on the log next to the elephants (for cellos this is a baby elephant too small to reach the water). Swimming below the log in the river was an alligator. He wants to eat the bird (or baby elephant), but knows if he touches the elephants they will stomp on him. So he bends himself and hides under the log. Then the elephant lean toward the left to relax. Remember elephants are large and wouldn't be touching each other."*

- Bunny ears
- Llama bad, bunny good. (llamas spit)
- Connect the dots. Mark a dot for the five spots the hand should touch the bow and put the bow on the dots.
- Dead hand

Bass German bow.

- Make an "eyeglass" with your right hand thumb and first finger with your palm facing up. Place the screw through the eyeglass, place tip of 2nd and 4th fingers under the bow and let the 3rd finger float in air.

VI. Producing sound/Problems and solutions

All of this should be done on open strings first.

- Begin with Pizzicato!** (plucking) This is so important, bad pizzicato is really bad.
 - Violin/violas – Right thumb on the corner of the fingerboard, index finger up, other fingers closed (like they're hold the bow). Pluck with the fleshy part of finger not the nail.
 - Cello/bass – Right thumb on side of fingerboard, point index finger toward bridge, close fingers, pluck with side of finger.
- Getting started with the bow:**
 - Finger in elbow (violins and violas bow over right shoulder, cellos/bass over right wrist extend in front like strings) pull bow to tip feeling joint move, pull until arm is straight. Open and close elbow joint like a gate. Make sure shoulder is not moving. Elbow and wrist should be bending.
 - Imagine pulling the bow in both directions. Paint with hand before using bow.
 - Say PULL, PUSH instead of UP, DOWN in the beginning.

- iv. Shadow bow, using paper tubes or turn bow on shoulder or on top of hand.
- c. **First time on the string:** Place bow on string and push down on string. When ready pull and there should be an explosion of sound. Go until arm is straight. But shoulder hasn't moved. Push back to frog.
- d. **Beginning Bow hold:** For younger (elementary students) Find the balance point on the bow and form bow hold there. Do all the other steps above. Gradually move to frog, but go back if bow starts to "skate or curve".
- e. **Bowing lanes:** Bow should be in the middle between the fingerboard and bridge. Think highway lanes.

- f. **Problems:** Bow flopping over fingerboard, bow curving around head, bow not staying straight.
 - i. Stand with bow arm against a wall making sure the shoulder is touching the wall. Then bow. They will only be able to move their elbow.
 - ii. Make sure wrist is bending. For violins and violas the wrist should point to their nose when at the frog and bend the other direction when at the tip. With cello and bass the wrist should point to the fingerboard when at the frog. Think "mountains and valleys"
 - iii. Imagine painting with fingers or running fingers through the water to get wrists to move.
 - iv. Straws in the F holes.

Use straws that bend at the top so they can be joined together (for cello and basses use the thick type pixy sticks (empty), a thin circular plastic tubing, or wooden dowel that will fit in the F hole of the instrument), place the straws in the holes and put bow on string between the straws and the bridge. Analyze how it feels. What do they have to do to keep the bow straight?
 - v. Double stop hooked bows

Play 2 strings at once time (flattening the hair of bow and pressing down to hit 2 string) Pull and stop the bow in small increments until get to the tip. Have a contest to see who can get the most stops. Do it down and up. Then get to the tip in a set number of stops; eventually they use the whole bow.

VII. Left Hand

Violin/viola: The most important thing is that the wrist stays flat and does not bend backward.

- The left hand touches the instrument with the pad of the left thumb and at the base of the first finger. The thumb should be relaxed. Knuckles of the left hand parallel with the fingerboard and fingers form boxes over the strings
- Left hand on left shoulder of instrument and imagine the instrument pushing hand and arm to the scroll.
- Draw eyes on the tip of the left thumb and a mouth on the pad of the thumb. Make sure the thumb is looking at the ceiling not the pegs and the mouth is closed against the instrument.
- Stress natural position (no one walks around with their hand bent backwards)

- Spoon technique: Place a spoon on the inside of their left wrist where the large part of the spoon is resting in the bottom of their palm, Secure around the wrist with a rubber band or hair tie.
- “Worm Hole” When the left hand is placed correctly and all fingers are curved and making contact with the string, a small opening should be seen between the webbed fleshy part of the hand between the thumb and first finger. The opening should be large enough to place a pencil (or worm) through it. Perhaps use a gummy worm?
- Don’t squash the bird egg.

Cello: Arm and wrist is flat and straight.

- Place hand 3-4” from the nut, thumb on the back of the neck opposite the 2nd finger (hidden from view). Left arm at a 45-degree angle. (hand is natural, like holding a soda can)
- Pat the belly with open hand, bounce up to fingerboard.
- Thumb is opposite second finger. Put a sticker or reinforcement circle or even a band-aid where the thumb should go.

Bass: Elbow out, not resting on instrument.

- Place hand 4-5” from nut, thumb hidden from view opposite the 2nd finger.
- Fingers never touch.
- Bass face: Thumb in ear, first finger on eyebrow, 2nd on nose, 4th on mouth.
- Come from above: Hand on head, hand on top of scroll hand into position. (helps keep the elbow up)

VIII. Intonation:

a. Tapes or not: I say yes!

- For beginners and on cellos use *Don’t Frets*.
- Use auto pinstripes (auto stores).
 - Violins and Violas: I only put first finger, 3rd finger and 4th finger. They need learn early on that the 2nd finger moves.
 - Cellos: I use *Don’t Frets* or put on 1st, 3rd and 4th tapes.
 - Basses: get 1st 4th, and then shift down on the G string C natural and D (C# is 2nd finger). If you can use different colors for the bass. (One for 1st position and another for the shift.)

b. Terms you should learn

- High and low fingers.

High means further away from the scroll and low is closer to the scroll. High is sometimes marked with an arrow pointing up, and low the opposite. High 2 means 2nd finger touching the 3rd finger, and low 2 means 2nd finger next to the first. High 3 and low 4 are the same note.

 - Have violins and violas practice moving finger back and forth.
 - Learn the different finger patterns.

c. If you can get a band in tune, you can get an orchestra in tune.

- Can’t play in tune if you are not holding the instrument correctly and pulling the bow straight. Fix those problems and your intonation issue will be easier to fix.
- Use electronic tuners.
- Watch their fingers, and move them if they are not in the correct place. They are not glued down.
- Have them play with a drone in the key of tune.
- Listen for “crunching” sounds. Teach them to listen for crunching sounds.
- SING!
- Listen to recordings.
- Get inside each other’s tone. Teach them to listen.

1. Play in and out of tune. Hands together means in tune, pull hands apart and students should go further out of tune, as hands move closer then get they get closer in tune until hands together and everyone back in tune.

IX. Method Books

SO many out there, look at a bunch find the one you can play and has a good teacher edition.

My Favorites:

- *Sound Innovations* (customizable!, DVD lessons for all instrument in the student book, comes with smart music.)
- *Strictly Strings* (nice pacing, not too fast or slow)
- *New Directions for Strings* (Stays in D for a long time)
- *Essential Elements 2000* (nice pacing)
- *A Rhythm A Week*
- *Sight-Read it For Strings*

X. Literature selection and rehearsal techniques

- a. Order keys are learned: D, G, C, (then 2nd octave G for violins and 2nd octave C for viola and cello), F, A (or switch), Bb, etc...
- b. Selecting music
 - Younger orchestras do best in D and G. Tackle C once they have mastered the idea of low 2 (2nd fingers). F involves low 1 and low 2's so be careful. Older orchestras can handle other keys as long as they have learned the scale and arpeggio and have played unison tunes in that key.
 - Know your orchestra, make sure you have the players to cover the different parts, (if you don't have violas or strong don't pick a piece the highlights violas.)
 - Go through each part, mark bowings and specific fingerings.
- c. Seating
 - Don't put all your strongest players on first violin. Second violin is a very important part and needs strong players. Use the 3rd violin music, but again it needs strong players because it is the viola part and jumps around to accommodate the missing C string. Don't be afraid to create a simpler violin part for the weaker players, however insist they play it in tune with a good tone.
 - Violinists should experience all the violin parts. Mix them up either song to song or by concert.
- d. Rehearsing
 - Always begin with scales and arpeggios in half notes using large, full bows or play each note twice. Use scales to practice different bowings. Also practice rhythms.
 - Use some book of unison tunes or rhythms.
 - Match warm-up scales with keys in music for the rehearsal. It is important for them to get the key in their ear and the finger patterns under their fingers.
 - Pizzicato while fingering and singing (or saying note names). One group bow others pizz.
 - Air bowing while fingering and singing
 - Air bowing styles
 - i. Violins/violas – turn bow over and put stick in the crook of left elbow, Hold instrument normally and bow normal.
Cello/bass – turn bow over and place against body of instrument above bridge and under strings.
 - ii. Hold bow above strings and bow normally.
 - iii. Hold bow vertically. Great for getting fingers and wrist to move.

XI. Things you can do personally:

- a. Get an instrument of your own and take it home.

- Either one of your school's instruments or go out and buy something. So important that you begin to play a string instrument.
 - Get a book one and play through the entire book, reading everything in the teacher edition.
 - Learn some fiddle tunes.
- b. Take classes, workshops, webinars etc...
- There are so many summer classes available such as
 - Villanova Summer Music Program: *Eastern String Educators Present: Building a Superior School String program* In July
 - Ohio State String Teacher Workshop in July
 - NAFME conferences, MMEA conference
 - Don't forget lessons through community colleges, or a music store, or private teachers
- c. Check out the web.
- Mark Hopkins String Pedagogy - <http://stringtechnique.com>
 - The Cello Professor - <http://www.celloprofessor.com>
 - The Violin Site - <http://www.theviolinsite.com>
 - The Lesson Room - <http://thelessonroom.com>
 - Music Showcase - <http://www.musicshowcaseonline.com/resources.asp>
- d. Join MMEA (MODA) and ASTA and read the journals.
- e. Network with other string teachers in your county or around the state.