# Teaching Strings for the New-to-Strings Teacher

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Abstract

When teaching strings, there are many aspects to be considered. Music Educators' National Conference (MENC) suggests tone, intonation, technique, balance, interpretation, musical affect, and still other elements are all to be considered in any music teaching situation (Allen, 2001). Successfully achieving these elements in the string realm involves calling on some different or additional knowledge for the new-to-strings teacher than that with which they may already be familiar. This paper is meant to serve as a starting point for such teachers, collecting and reviewing trusted writings on a variety of applicable topics by trusted string pedagogues in the past fifteen years. Topics surveyed include teaching string technique, tips for purchasing school instruments, specific knowledge of the double bass, string orchestra repertoire, and expectations of a string teacher as described by the American String Teachers' Association (ASTA) and string teaching expert Robert Gillespie.

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## Teaching String Technique

Strings teaching is a process-driven endeavor (Allen, 2003). Michael Allen developed a model for breaking down string playing technique into three categories: right-hand, left-hand, and music-reading. At the base level, each of these elements should be developed separately. Systematic combination of any two, and eventually of all three, of these elements should only occur once the instructional objectives for each independent skill has been met. Lack of a systematic approach will likely result in compromised technique, if not entirely poor playing position. As proper playing position is arguably the most important concern while building foundation in beginning string players (Allen, 2003; Gillespie, 2008), mindfulness of a systematic teaching process is imperative.

Some teachers may be tempted to teach music and technique simultaneously. However, the idea is not the time-saver one would imagine. Challenging students with too many new concepts while preparing music will result in lesser quality of sound. Kjelland (2001) insists string teachers teach technique separate from music, so that all aspects of performance are able to

be developed with the necessary care and attention to detail that produce quality musicians. To this end, Kjelland also recommends programming at or one level below the technical abilities of the ensemble as a whole. If the top students in the ensemble are not challenged by the lower level music, they should be given latitude and input for alternative fingerings, bowing, and enhanced musical interpretation (Kjelland, 2001).

After posture and technique have been introduced and while they are being reinforced, the teacher must be adamant that students play in tune. Intonation training must start from the beginning, and must be expected from every student—even beginner groups (Dillon, 2003). If pitch is allowed to slide, it will slide. Students will not play in tune unless they are made to, and the only one in the classroom who will make them play in tune is the teacher.

All three core elements of posture, technique, and intonation are intertwined and form the foundation for skill development at higher levels. In the face of an issue, they will be the first items to troubleshoot and the most helpful to improve. A cellist can make it through most days without a good spiccato, but poor intonation is unforgivable (Allen, 2001).

## Know Your Instruments

Parents are eager to save money on their child's first instrument, and understandably so. They have no idea how long their child will be interested in the class, or if they will treat an expensive instrument properly, or if a pricey investment can be trusted in the hands of a 9-to-15-year-old. Kasia Bugaj (2014) quotes John Rihani of Encore Orchestral Strings, who uses a mathematical approach to explaining the investment. Rihani adds up the individual accessories to a violin that make it more than a piece of wood: the pegs, an ebony fingerboard, a non-toxic chinrest, a properly crafted bridge, a tailpiece with necessary built-in fine tuners, and a reliable set of strings. All of these pieces come to $145 before even considering the wood and

craftsmanship for the bow or the violin itself. “So…” Rihani says, “should a new violin cost $99?” (Bugaj, 2014). Sure, instruments may be found for a bargain online, but without a doubt these instruments lack the quality components that make an instrument function properly. A young musician needs to be encouraged. When the musician makes progress, a good instrument rewards them with improved sounds and response to nuanced technique adjustments. A bad instrument does not provide such encouragement, causing frustration for the student when they are told to achieve certain things that their instrument simply will not let them do (Bugaj, 2014).

Finding a good instrument involves working with a trustworthy dealer or luthier. A luthier is someone who builds or repairs string instruments and would know, for example, that there are three variations of bass construction (Brownell, 2011), that the standard bass size is ¾ even for adults (Straub, 2008), and that string instruments—especially basses—are delicately sensitive to humidity and even more easily damaged than a violin (Brownell, 2011). If a luthier is not available, or if a school district abides by a three-bid vendor system or something similar, Straub (2008) and Harris Lee & Morrow (2013) have resources which provide purchase specifications to ensure vendors may only fulfill bids with quality instruments.

## Repertoire

The resources regarding repertoire are expansive, full of advice, cautions, and suggestions. The *Teaching Music Through Performance in Orchestra* series (Littrell, Racin, & Allen, 2001; Littrell, 2003; Littrell & Allen, 2008) is particularly recommended for its inclusion of teaching articles and essays, in depth descriptions and analyses of repertoire, and index of string orchestra titles (Hamann & Gillespie, 2004).

Over-programming is repeatedly and emphatically warned against (Hamann & Gillespie, 2004; Kjelland, 2001; Allen, 2001; Gillespie, 2001). Hamann and Gillespie provide a technical

guideline for choosing music, including analysis of items such as shifting, range, articulations, dynamics, rhythms, line independence, length of work, and required sensitivity and maturity (2004). This list seems to be a summary of the lengthier template published one year earlier intended to guide repertoire-based warm-ups. The more detailed template includes items such as finger patterns, special skills, extensions, position work, bow technique, and so on (Gillespie, 2003).

When programming, Gillespie suggests starting with the big picture (2001). Consider how many concerts are scheduled for the year, what the interests of the audience are, and whether or not the orchestra is going to festival. Then, spread the well-rounded programs of music throughout the year, keeping in mind students' playing skills, the demands of each piece of music, and the purpose of each given performance (Gillespie, 2001). As music is a large part of the curriculum, the music selection should be strategic and fulfill the needs for each orchestra as the students' abilities develop.

## Expectations

If ever the strings teacher is unclear about what is expected of them, the American String Teacher Association (ASTA) has published national standards to answer that question. Expectations of string educators are sorted into three categories: 1) as a musician, 2) as an educator, and 3) as a professional (Gillespie, 2015). The entire three-page document is available online through the ASTA website, but a few noteworthy items will be mentioned here. The most important updates in 2015 as compared to the earlier edition from 1997 are the expectations that, as educators, teachers keep up with current trends, use applicable technology in their teaching, and utilize the ASTA string curriculum and National Association for Music Education (NAfME)

national core standards. As a professional, string teachers are expected to participate in ongoing professional development, advocate for school orchestra, and also maintain a work-life balance.

In 2008, Gillespie suggested checkpoints for self-evaluation that may well serve as a rubric for comparing oneself to the national standards for string teachers. Gillespie's self-evaluation checklist includes evaluation of student relations, vision, modeling, classroom management, teaching strategies, leadership, humor, pacing, routine, recognizing the positive, and more. Educators can use audiotapes, videotapes, and teaching timelines to evaluate their progress. Once a self-evaluation is completed, string teachers should reflect and make a plan for how they will improve areas needing improvement, and celebrate those areas in which they demonstrate strength (Gillespie, 2008).

## Conclusion

New-to strings teachers are tasked with learning as much about the world of string playing as possible to become the most effective string teacher they can be. Perhaps the most important resource these teachers can acquire is a veteran string teacher mentor. Native string players gain immense knowledge about the craft through their years of study and development, just as a band member is more easily conditioned to become a band director or a vocalist to become a choral director. The main ideas presented in this review will serve string teachers well, but are by no means all-encompassing. This paper is meant to be a starting point. The task now for the new-to-strings teacher and their support system is to learn more about these topics presented and search for further information depending on their own needs, obstacles, and inspirations.

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