Setting up your string students for success!

Diagnose and correct common technical problems to allow your students play their very best.

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D’Addario Orchestral Strings
Eastman Stringed Instruments
Where I’m coming from...

- Middle School Orchestra *(Nevada)*
- Community College Applied Lessons *(Nevada)*
- High School Orchestra *(Florida, Ohio, Georgia)*
- University String Techniques *(Ohio State, Kennesaw State)*
- Elementary Strings (Itinerant) *(Ohio)*
- Youth Orchestra *(Georgia)*
String Pedagogy Sequence

Aural Skills

Body & Instrument Posture

Left Hand Skills

Right Hand Skills

Rhythm, Music Reading & Theory Skills

Self-Assessment Skills

* adapted from Michael Allen
Laux’s “Priority” List

1. Set-Up (Essential Technique)
2. Tone Production
3. Intonation
4. Rhythm & Ensemble
5. Music Literacy
6. Musicianship Skills
7. Musical Understanding
Diagnose Common Problems

- Body
- Instrument Position / Set-Up
- Left Hand
- Right Hand
- Combination of two or more of the above
Set-Up is Key!

- Good set up is a prerequisite to be able to play accurately and without pain
  - Body Posture
  - Left Hand Position and Shape
  - Right Hand Shape
Body Posture

Goal/Purpose: Comfort, Injury prevention, Allows for proper LH technique

Key Principles

- Lengthened and relaxed
- Tall spine, head slightly forward
- Players should always listen to their body! If something is uncomfortable or painful something needs to be adjusted.
Problem:
Feet not flat on floor
Body Posture Strategies (Sitting)

- Gillespie - “Grow an Inch”
- Shoulder Shrug
- Stand Up, Sit Down without moving your feet
- Foot Shuffle
- “Sumo Stomp” - cello
Setting Up Instrument Position (Violin/Viola)

- Instrument is parallel to the ground
- Instrument/Shoulder rest fully covers shoulder
- Instrument is positioned at 10 o’clock
Guideline for use of a Shoulder Rest

“If you have a NECK, you must use a shoulder rest”
Double Bass Sitting Position

- Rule #1: Every bass player has their own philosophy
- I prefer to have basses sit in stools
- Stools should be adjustable and fit to each student
- Name the stools or assign numbers based on height
- Right foot flat on the floor, left foot on stool’s step ring
Problem:
Chair too low & sitting back
Strategies:
Chair too low & sitting back

☐ If possible find appropriate height chair
☐ Have students sit on stools
☐ Put something uncomfortable on the back of the chair
☐ Remove instrument and revisit body posture strategies
Problem:
Instrument Not Parallel to Floor
Strategies:
Instrument Not Parallel to Floor

- “Scrolls up!”
- Have students balance something on instrument so it doesn’t fall off
- Raise music stands
- Have students stand during rehearsal
- Peer evaluation
- Self evaluation with video
Problem:
Instrument not under jaw bone
Strategies:

Instrument not under jaw bone

- Have student put fingers on end button and move instrument toward their neck
- Explain that the instrument should be an extension of the body
- "Lock it in"
- Try a cloth or pad on chinrest (may be a comfort issue)
Problem: Instrument not on shoulder
Strategies:
Instrument not on shoulder

☐ Have students lift instruments in the air with two hands and down into the correct position

☐ Physically move the instrument to the right position

☐ "No violin beards"

☐ “10 O’clock sharp”

☐ Cause may be the student trying to face the music stand. Remind them to reposition their body/chair!
Set-up assessments

- “Selfie” Self-Assessment
- Have students take photos of each other, then complete a self-assessment rubric
- Beauty pageant
Goals/Purpose:

- Intonation, Facility when changing notes, Rhythmic accuracy, Shifting, Injury Prevention

- Wrist should be straight, as to avoid injury and allow fingers to move freely

- Demonstrate crooked wrist and finger action vs. straight wrist
Left Hand Set-Up Checkpoints

- First finger square (“Don’t spill the spaghetti)
- All fingers are curved
- Fingertips hover over strings and fingernails align with fingerboard
- Palm faces shoulder, not the face
- Wrist straight and relaxed
- Elbow moves to change strings
Fingernails!

- Long fingernails do not allow finger tip to touch string
- Besides a “community nail clipper” (GROSS!), what are some of your solutions?
- Compare to athletics
Problem:
Pancake hand
Strategies: Pancake hand

☐ Students use right hand to check left wrist

☐ Hold a straight object up to the students wrist

☐ Keywords “Oven”, etc.

☐ Pedagogical aids on instrument
Problem: Hand grips the neck
Strategy: Hand grips the neck

☐ Have students tap thumb. (Students can’t squeeze while tapping thumb). Ask students to do this often!

☐ Check thumb height. Only the top of the thumb should touch.

☐ Check opening below thumb

☐ Double check that instrument is correctly on shoulder and weight of instrument is not in the left hand
Problem:
Fingers not aligned with fingerboard
Strategy:
Fingers not aligned with fingerboard

□ Without instrument, pretend to screw in a lightbulb into the ceiling

□ Be sure that the palm faces the student’s shoulder and not the head
Problem:
Left elbow does not move when crossing strings

☐ Practice swinging elbow to change strings

☐ Pretend there is a person sitting on the elbow and swing them back and forth.

☐ “Elbow toward your tummy”

☐ Be sure wrist does not flex or twist
Violin/Viola Left Hand Set-Up Strategy

- No instrument
- LH up as if you are playing
- Thumb out
- Make 1st finger square
- Twist wrist, align fingernails
Strategy:
Cello Left Hand Position

- Students move to 4th position, interlace RH fingers into left hand, then slide back.
- Reach out for a giant drink
Problem:
Cello/bass elbow too low

- Tap bridge
- Phyllis Young Exercises
- Ski Slopes
Right Hand Skills

- Bow arm, elbow, wrist, fingers
- Goals/Purpose: Tone Production, Rhythm, RH/LH coordination
Setting up your students’ EARS

- Aural skill training is just as important and physical set up
- Aural training from the very first day
- Listening, pitch matching, singing should be a part of your routine
Echoes

☐ Start each day with melodic and/or rhythmic echoes

☐ Have students sing, then pluck, or play

☐ Can be as simple as D, D, D, D (echo) A, A, A, A (echo)
Open string tuning

☐ 1. Listen
☐ 2. Internalize
☐ 3. Tune
Special Thanks...
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Slides and more available at:

www.OrchestraTeacher.net