

How do you help students switch from violin to viola?

I only moved to the viola from the violin in my mid-twenties, so I have a lot of sympathy for late starters on the viola. It's all too easy for violinists to feel over-confident when playing the viola for the first time, but there is an awful lot to learn. Yesterday I was working with a student who only switched to the viola last year. I had already given him a lot of guidance on viola technique, but yesterday he seemed to have forgotten it all and was playing the Brahms E flat major Sonata out of tune and with a poor tone. I asked him to do some 'equal-opportunity note practice', playing every note slowly with a separate bow, without rhythm, concentrating on making a beautiful sound on each note. As he did this I could hear him fixing his intonation, creating a better tone, addressing vibrato issues and matching the sound across the strings. I then asked him to play the piece normally and it sounded completely different.

How do you make sure that students feel comfortable with their violas?

One of the challenges for violists is to find an instrument that is not just a comfortable length, but also a comfortable shape. Brescian model violas have boxy shoulders, while others have more sloping shoulders that are easier to get around. I also have a bag of chin and shoulder rests that I experiment with. Small players can benefit from a centre-style chin rest, as this allows them to get the instrument well up on to their shoulders, giving them the space to get to the tip of their bows. Small players also tend to hold their violas too much out to the side, so I encourage them to bring the instrument round towards the front of their body so that they have more bowing room. I'll also teach small players to use contraction rather than extension fingerings, for example playing an augmented 2nd enharmonically using minor 3rd fingerings, and also shifting more often.

How do you help your students to avoid injury?

I always encourage students to reduce effort in playing as this is the best way to avoid stress and injury. For example, string-crossings: if you're only going over to a string for one note, why not just use the wrist and fingers to make this string change, not the whole arm? I also talk a lot about buoyancy, especially in the bow arm; in a recent masterclass a student was very stiff in the right arm and I asked him to imagine floating

on his back in a pool and feeling the complex undulations his arm would go through in the water, then allowing similar motions to take place in his bow arm as he played. Often tension is mirrored from the right arm to the left arm so if I'm trying to get someone to free up their bow arm I might ask them to play the left hand while I bow for them, showing how little weight is needed; equally, I might finger for them while they bow, demonstrating how effortlessly each finger can drop into place.

How do you help students to focus on their practice?

I encourage students to practise some form of meditation for a few minutes before playing, because it's a good way to get rid of all those 'to-do' lists in your mind and to help the body to relax. First you can do some deep breathing and then think through each part of the body from the feet to the head, relaxing each part as you go. Another form of meditation is to sit and feel the movement of the air on your face, encouraging invading thoughts to leave as soon as they appear.

I also teach my students to do mental practice, without the instrument. The idea is to follow – or visualise – the sheet music, trying to experience each note as if you were physically playing it, travelling so slowly that you can see and hear everything happening in detail and so that the performance is exactly as you want it. This is a very good way of unlearning mistakes; sometimes you can keep working so long at a difficult passage that a form of sabotage takes place because you are practising making the mistakes, not the music. Just a few minutes of mental practice can ensure that you are more mentally engaged when you pick up your instrument.

How do you stay inspired as a teacher?

I am a voracious reader and I particularly enjoy books that give me a new perspective on my work as a teacher, either by confirming what I'm already doing or taking me to a deeper level of understanding. An exciting recent discovery has been *The Talent Code* by Daniel Coyle. I've also been inspired by *The Tipping Point* by Malcolm Gladwell, as well as a website by the psychologist Don Greene.

INTERVIEW BY SARAH MNATZAGANIAN

Juliet White-Smith is professor of viola and coordinator of string chamber music at the University of Northern Colorado. She is also president of the American Viola Society.

JULIET WHITE-SMITH

The Colorado-based teacher explains the importance of meditation and mental preparation to her methods



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