



Irene Sharp Pedagogy

By Garth Cummings

An outline of what I've learned during 15 years of lessons with Irene Sharp and attending her Teacher's Seminars in 2013-16.

- Introduction
 - "You have to be lazy to play the cello!" - Irene Sharp
 - Least effort possible
 - Influenced by Margaret Rowell and 30+ years of Alexander Technique
- Left hand technique
 - Left hand fingers shorten and lengthen the string
 - No need to press string to the fingerboard
 - Fingerboard isn't even necessary
 - Instead, cling to the inside of the string with the finger pad and pull left
 - Coat hook demo
 - Look for robe hooks at the hardware store, if you want to experiment with this yourself
 - How does this work with the left hand?
 - Make a hook
 - Not too tight a hook, want to see fingernails
 - Put fleshy part of finger pad on inside of the string
 - Pull to the left and check for "sticky," "suction," or "magnetic" sensation

- No other muscles are engaged between the first joint and the shoulder blade
- Knuckles flat at base of fingers
- First introduced using octave D harmonic followed by 4th finger D on A string
- No pushing!
 - Usually resolves buckling of hyperflexible joints
- If someone insists on pushing, ask them to avoid touching the fingerboard as much as possible
- Good cling = good resonance
 - If sound is unclear, check cling before tweaking the bow
 - Practice pizzicato and listen for the ring
 - Left hand never plays softly
- My discovery: easier to feel cling on thicker C string or edge of fingerboard
- All fingers down
- Much less effort than pushing, so we can take advantage of economizing finger motion
- Thumb can cling too!
- Hook by the nail and pull left
- Same “suction/magnetic” sensation
- Changing strings
- Slide fingers to next string, don’t lift
- Extensions in upper positions
- Bring base of the fingers toward the fingerboard
- Flatten knuckles further
- Playing fifths
- 1st, 2nd, and 3rd finger:

- Cling lower note as normal
- Collapse distal finger joint
- Cling with pad and skin just above joint
- 4th finger: “karate chop” at an angle to the fingerboard
- Shifting
- “The arm is for transportation”
- “The arm knows what to do”
- Map of motor cortex from Margaret
- Shift initiated from forearm above wrist
- Higher in pitch is lower in space: gravity
- Fingers stay “on the track” on the inside of the string
 - Introduced using ski jumps, knuckle knocks, sirens, and slap bass
 - “Don’t drop my expensive Kleenex” exercise to avoid lifting 1st finger during shift
- Descending shift back to 1st or half position: elbow comes forward, never behind
- Renie introduces 3 octave scales early on to get students used to the whole fingerboard
- When ready to study shifting in more detail introducing 4th position “The Case of the Disappearing Note” : Feuillard method No. 21 and 22
- Shifting to thumb
- Pass thumb under similar to piano technique
- Double stops
- No more effort than single notes
- Practice starting with all fingers on one string, then keep the same cling and level of effort when moving the fingers to more strings

- Trills
- Bat the string
- Vibrato
- Good cling and balanced hand makes vibrato almost happen by itself
- Initiated from wrist
- Right hand technique
 - Start beginners at the balance point
 - Emphasizes lightness of bow arm
 - Right thumb a shelf for the bow
 - Parallel to the floor
 - Other fingers drape over the stick
 - 2nd finger and thumb like each other
 - Base knuckles free
 - Touch the hair to the string
 - “Velcro” feeling: hair sticks to string with no effort
 - Holding the bow at the balance point keeps you honest
 - Velcro vs. fingers pressing the bow to the string
 - Does the bow have enough rosin?
 - Can wiggle the string
 - Constant regardless of dynamic unless special effect is wanted (flautando)
 - Right arm is light
 - Bird wings
 - “Give your elbow to the floor”
 - “Ask the cello nicely, not ‘you will do this!’”

- “The bow weighs only 3 ounces: if bowing were about weight, why not a log for a bow?”
- Exercise: “begging dog” to get bow to the string without raising elbow or shoulder
- Scoop
 - “Drawing” with the bow
 - How we speak using the cello
 - Describes the path of the right hand
 - As with the left, the arm is for transportation
 - Most motions while playing are curved
 - Hodgson 1958: Motion Study and Violin Bowing
 - Circles
 - One-finger scales
 - Each bow stroke starts from underneath the previous stroke
 - Renie’s chalkboard drawing
 - Encourages arm to return to side without lifting or tightening shoulder
 - Alexander: free upper arm swing, “pendulum”
 - Hair retraces its path
 - More expressive than straight stroke of unrelenting volume
 - “Always from underneath, never from above”
 - Focus on (watch) the point where the hair touches the string
 - That’s where the sound is initiated
 - Keep hair attached to the string
 - Don’t watch the hand or the arm
 - Keep bow parallel to the bridge

- “Make a T, not an X”
- Wrap hair in Kleenex and practice bowing holding onto the hair to feel the hair at work
 - As opposed to feeling the stick
- Depth of scoop is one way to play louder
 - If hair is Velcroed to the string, you can scoop as deeply as you want
 - Scooping small vs. large amount of ice cream
 - Playing closer to the bridge is another way to play louder
- Play on one hair
 - “M.V.H. - the Most Valuable Hair”
 - Less resistance allows string to speak freely
 - From player’s vantage point should see stick, not hair
- Maintaining even sound from frog to tip
 - Can Velcro the hair to the string anywhere along the bow
 - “Horsehair is horsehair”
 - Exercise: zigzag bow
 - Teacher can assist moving student’s arm at the elbow
 - Gentle pressure on shoulder to encourage upper arm swing
- String crossings
 - “Long/short” fingers
 - Thumb is like a jack
 - Transfer Velcro from one string to the next
 - A string is lower in space than D string
 - Let tip fall over to the A string
 - Practice changing with hair on bridge

- Hand moving nearer and away
- “Bicycle fingers”
 - Much more efficient for small strokes
 - Initiated from 1st finger; others go along for the ride
 - Spin wheel of toy bicycle back and forth
 - Down and up pizz.
 - Strokes still curved! “Draw the world’s smallest ‘U’s”
 - Ševčík op. 3, var. 1
 - Use less bow as tempo increases
 - When practicing slowly, use same amount of bow as you’d use in tempo
- Staccato strokes
 - Stop the bow but don’t lift
 - Still curved
- Slurred staccato
 - Multiple staccato strokes in same direction
 - Think of keeping the bow in one place
- Expression
 - Must be able to hear musical thoughts, not see them
 - “Good performance; I wish I could hear more dynamics”
 - Balanced, efficient use of the body
 - No extraneous motions
 - Head bobs
 - Rest hand on student’s head
 - Left elbow waving
- Use of video

- All lessons recorded
- Teacher records pieces live so student becomes used to idea of live performance
- Listen, play, listen, play, play
- Other tools
 - Adhesive dots on fingerboard instead of tapes
 - Makes it possible to get fingers and shifts right the first time
 - “What you learn first is what sticks”
 - Dots fall off eventually—replace if student still needs them
 - Pencil mark also works
 - Recommended for players of all levels
 - “Watchdog” to build awareness of shoulder hiking
 - Mirror behind student to watch shoulders and back