

GET A GRIP!

INTRODUCING A PROPER BOW GRIP TO YOUNG STRING PLAYERS*

By

Herbert S. Gardner

The following illustrated pages offer some suggestions on the first lessons with the bow. The main point is that the bow grip for violins and violas is different from the grip for cellos and basses (French bow).

Teachers must decide when to introduce the bow taking into account age-grade, frequency of classes and other school based considerations.

Hint: “Up bow, down bow” is conceptually appropriate for violins and violas but not for cellos and basses.

How about “out bow – in bow” for cellos and basses? Think about it!

*Excerpted from “The Beginning String Class” by Herbert S. Gardner. It is available free for download from www.ismlp.org.

MOVING ON

You have already established listening as the primary element in making music. That will never change.

Rule 1: ALL NEW LEARNINGS MUST COME THROUGH THE EAR, NOT THE EYE!

Therefore, you will not place any tapes, markers or other mechanical aids on the fingerboards of the instruments. The violin family of instruments is not fretted. They are tuned differently than their plucked cousins and cannot have frets. When you begin teaching fingered tones you will be surprised how easy it will be for your pupils to play IN TUNE immediately.

What did Giuseppe Tartini (1692-1770) teach us?

“To play well, you must sing well!”

And that, dear teachers, is your guide to incredible success with your pupils.

Rule 2: REFER TO RULE 1.

MOVING FURTHER ON

So, where are we now? Your pupils, at this point, can:

1. Come into the room in an orderly and respectful manner, get their instruments and take their seats.
2. Know the names of and recognize the pitches of their strings.
3. Play rhythmically on all strings *pizzicato*. (Hereinafter called pizz!).

What's next? It's your choice. You can:

A. Put out the method book you have selected that starts with pizz open strings in quarter notes, or

B. Introduce the bow to play the open strings, or

C. Begin fingered tones pizz so as to build, over a short time, a D major scale,

CAUTION!

I have found no published method books that address mixed string class instruction that do not provide FALSE and MISLEADING information. So, you and your pupils must use these books ONLY for the music and not for the “directions.”

What is the goal?

To enable your pupils to play with total freedom and independence of the fingers of the left hand.

Doing so promotes a condition that goes across the body and will yield an unfettered bow stroke and a smooth bowed tone.

That is the Holy Grail. It is the secret of good playing at any level. What follows is the way to get there with your pupils.

Hang on to your hats!

Let's start with option A.

Using a Method Book

This will involve using music stands that must be set at the proper heights, especially for bass players!

Whatever method you select should come with rudimentary piano accompaniments. Whereas the pupils will be playing unison open strings, the piano will provide a harmonic context so that the tones are not played in a musical “vacuum.”

If your selected method does not provide a piano accompaniment
IMPROVISE!

Option B.

Introducing the bow.

Reminder: When the bows are in playing position on the strings all bow grips are alike in that **THE STICK TILTS TOWARDS THE TUNING PEGS** (away from the bridge). Therefore, the introduction of the bow for violin and viola differs from that for the cello and bass.

For this lesson you will not need the instruments. Instead, have the music stands in place with a bow and a new, unsharpened #2 pencil on each stand.

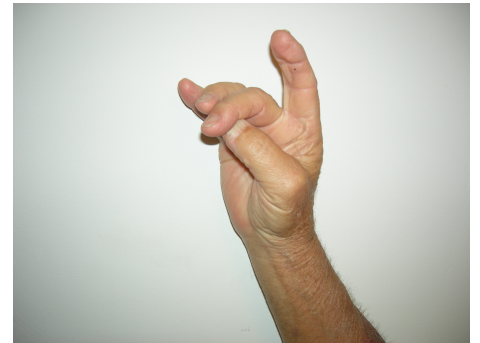
EXCEPTION: If you plan to teach the German, or Butler model of bass bow, the pencil is not necessary. The French type, however, is recommended for the younger pupils. This reduces the number of grip variations to be taught.

WARNING:

This lesson requires an active, agile and enthusiastic teacher! Here is a way to get good bow-grips from the start.

Violin and viola.

Step 1. Teacher places the tip of his thumb into the first joint of his middle finger.



Pupils imitate.

Step 2. Teacher places a #2 unsharpened pencil between tip of thumb and first joint of the middle finger.



Pupils imitate.

Step 3. Teacher allows remaining fingers to “fall” onto the pencil. Differing finger lengths will have more or less finger wrap around pencil. This is OK. Most little fingers (“pinky”) will just reach the pencil.

Pupils imitate. When all have done this, put the pencils back onto the music stands

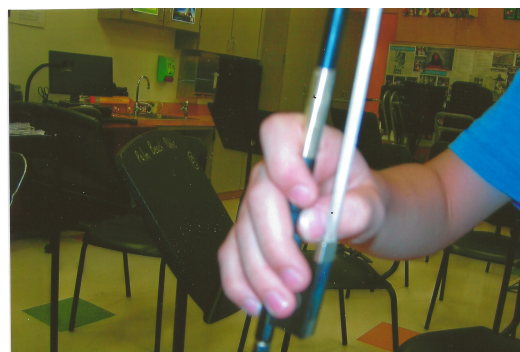


Step 4. Pupils are directed to pick up their bows with their left hands in the middle of the stick with the frog (!) to their right.

Have the pupils grasp the bow as they did with the pencils. Make sure that the tip of the thumb is put into the little space between the frog and the end of the wrapping.

It's OK if the hair of the bow touches the first joint of the thumb. Be sure that the thumb is bent and the bow is crossing the first joint of the index finger.

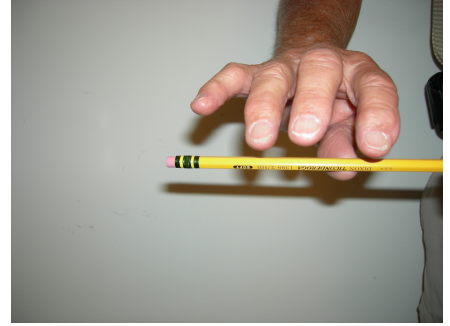
Sounds complicated but you will know when it's right!



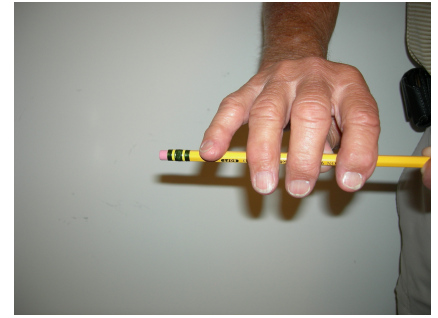


Cello and bass.

Step 1. Pupils position their hands with the palms toward the floor. Hold (right hand) the pencils parallel to the floor under the first joints of the index, middle and ring fingers of the left hand. Place the pad of the thumb against the pencil.



Step 2. Allow the fingers to “drop” onto the pencil so that the pencil is across the first joints of the index, middle and ring fingers. “Four birds sitting on a rail.”



Step 3. Allow the wrist to flex so that the fingertips are pointing down. There will be some variation between different pupils.

Hint: Long fingers are a plus for cellists!

Put the pencils onto the music stands.

Step 4. Pupils are directed to pick up their bows with their left hands in the middle of the stick with the frog (!) to their right.



Step 5. Pupils grasp the bow stick just as they did the pencil. The thumb is against the center of the wrapping and the fingers drape over the stick. Make sure that the thumb is NOT touching the frog!

Variations in hand physiology will have the thumb either behind the index finger, or behind the middle finger. This, too, may change over time.



“How tightly shall I hold the bow,” a pupil asks.

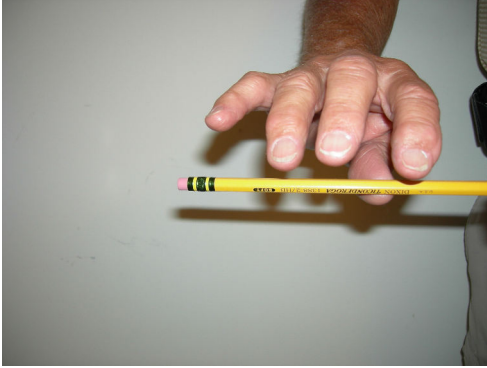
“Hold the bow as if it were a little bird; too tightly and you will crush it, too lightly and it will fly away,” the teacher responds.

When the bows are placed on the string they should be placed at the middle of the bow. For the beginning stages, **USE ONLY THE MIDDLE THIRD OF THE BOW.** Playing full bows is for later.

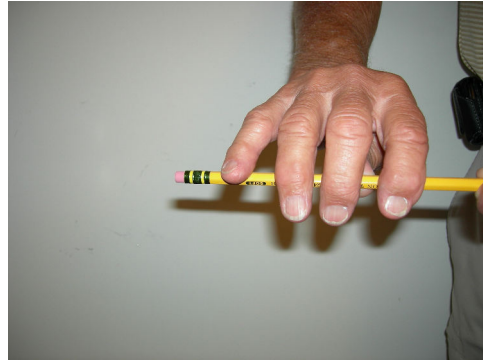
HERB GARDNER'S CELLO BOW GRIP REMINDERS!

FOUR BIRDS SITTING ON A RAIL!

This



plus this



equals



THIS!

On the other hand (no pun intended!);

If you lived in the 16th century and played the *viola da gamba*



Your bow grip would have looked like this because you needed to change the tension of the bow-hairs with your fingers while playing across several strings at once!

