

## Teaching Tips: Developing a Proper Bowing Technique

by Sherry Ellis

My teacher told me that the bow is like a paintbrush; as string players, we use it to bring color and beauty to the music that we play. It takes many years to learn how to create the subtle shadings and nuances of a great artist, but with a good foundation and a lot of practice, students can learn to master the art of the bow.

Here are some of the things I do to teach beginning students how to hold and use their bows. I start by demonstrating with a pencil. I show them, using the pencil, how to correctly position their fingers. I emphasize that the thumb should be slightly bent and that the pencil should be resting on the tip of the thumb. I also show them how the little finger is curved and resting on top of the pencil. I allow them to practice this with the pencil. Then we transfer these concepts to the bow. I find it works best to place the bow in the students' hands myself; I ask them to bend their right elbows and allow their hands to fall loosely from their wrists. As I place the bows in their hands, I point out exactly where I am placing the thumb and where the fingers rest on the bow. Finally, I guide their arms as they begin to bow across the strings. I point out that the bow should be placed over the f holes and that the bow should remain parallel to the bridge as it is drawn.

A common problem is that as a student bows on an up bow, the tip of the bow travels over the left shoulder, thereby not allowing the bow to remain parallel to the bridge. A simple remedy is to tell the student to direct the tip of the bow away from his body by bending the wrist slightly. I explain that the path of the bow is really a slight curve, coming in towards the body and then away.

I also employ a couple of fun exercises to develop flexibility in the right hand fingers. The first is called the "teeter totter." Holding a pencil horizontally like a bow, I will ask students to allow the left tip to drop towards the ground. The students are not allowed to move their arms or wrists - it must be done with the fingers only. Then, using the little finger, I ask the students to return the pencil to its starting position. The second exercise which is a bit more challenging is called the "monkey." I ask students if they are able to do the Vulcan greeting from Star Trek. (Place all fingers together and raise your hand as if saying "hi" then split the middle and ring fingers apart.) Once students can do this, I ask them to hold a pencil vertically with the same placement of fingers as if they were bowing. I then ask them to split their top two fingers, leaving their thumbs in place. Then I ask them to slide only their thumb up to meet the top two fingers. I then ask them to bring the remaining fingers up. They repeat the process until they reach the top of the pencil. Both of these exercises, once mastered, can be transferred to the bow.

Of course, as any teacher knows, helping a student learn to bow correctly requires a watchful eye and numerous gentle reminders. Eventually though, the bow will become like an extension of the arm and the student will learn to "paint" like an artist.