

TEEN STRINGS

IDEAS, NEWS & FUN FOR STUDENTS OF VIOLIN, VIOLA, CELLO, BASS & FIDDLE

TIP SHEET No 12

3 TIPS ON HOW TO PREPARE FOR AN OUTDOOR PERFORMANCE

1. WATCH THE WIND

Wind whipping your pages around is a challenge for many string players. Take lots and lots of clothespins. Cellist **Jonathan Davis** offers a clothespin technique that requires advanced preparation—though much less handling of the sheet music while performing. “Clip each page with a new clothespin, and just barely enough grip to hold the sheet,” he says. “Then a page can be pulled from the pin and turned, while the rest of pages remain clipped. Much less manipulation is required for each turn; less chance of mishap.”

It’s not just sheet music that can end up gone with the wind. Violist **Melinda Ballou** often considers what type of music stand she brings to a performance. “Make sure to have music stands that don’t blow over, and be prepared to hold them down with your feet.” You don’t want a heavy stand blowing over and damaging your instrument. “And, a word to the wise,” says Ballou, “if your instrument is in the case, make sure it is lying down.”

2. BE READY FOR THE (MIXED) JOYS OF NATURE

Sun and humidity can be a danger to your instruments, and many players suggest having a “beater”—a second instrument to spare wear and tear on your regular one.

“Having a second instrument is better in the longterm than repairing your nicer instrument or

having it go out of adjustment due to humidity,” cellist **Oliver Weston** says. “You can’t appreciate the qualities of your nicer instrument without an acoustic environment to project into anyway, so why not have a beater? Geared pegs also have been a life saver.” Cellists point out that you may be playing in soft ground, so have a rock stop at the ready. And if you are performing in the evening, have some battery-operated stand lights—and fresh batteries, of course.

Also remember that temperature can drop to an uncomfortable level—and not just in the evening. It’s smart to have a sweater or jacket, and some fingerless gloves on hand. Critters are another outdoor hazard, and bug spray is a great idea.

3. FIGHT TO BE HEARD

Since you will be out in the elements, most likely without much reverberation, you may want to look into sound amplification. Cellist **John Lutterman**, who teaches at the University of Alaska, Anchorage, admits to “not playing outside much anymore, but when I do, I make

sure that my instrument is safe from the elements (including the sun), and do my best to tweak the acoustic environment.”

Lutterman suggests an enclosed courtyard to test your acoustic environment. “Otherwise, I’ll use a high-quality hypercardioid condenser mic with a Fishman Loudbox Mini—not for the amplification, per se, but because it enables me to use digital reverb to simulate a more appropriate acoustic environment,” he says. If amplification isn’t an option, violinist **Jesse Irons** suggests something quite simple: Play louder. “There is no acoustic outside and nobody can hear you,” he says.

Hopefully these suggestions will have you prepared for any outdoor performance. And remember, as Irons puts it, “Have fun—sometimes it’s actually nice outside.”

—Sarah Freiberg

TELL YOUR STORY THROUGH IMPROVISATION

With improvisation, it’s your own story, so you can’t be wrong, and in jazz, you’re always a half-step away from where you want to be, so make that wrong note really convincing.

—Violinist Regina Carter,
FEBRUARY/MARCH
2002





HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR SHIFTING SKILLS IN 3 STEPS

1. NOTE YOUR PLACE IN SPACE

Rather than succumb to the drudgery of “pushing” the finger up the fingerboard, imagine the distance, or spread, between the “end points” of the shifting cycle. One of our lesser-known senses (it doesn't even make the top five) is the ability to know where something is in space. At its most elementary level, you experience it every time you reach for a door knob. At its most sophisticated, quarterbacks are able to connect with the receiver, all the while trying to avoid being sacked while throwing against the wind.

This sense (it even has a name: proprioception) is quite handy when you simply want to connect two notes while shifting. Measure carefully with whole steps and half steps. Practice slowly only a couple of times, so that you don't feel rushed. However, you'll be more accurate if your shift fits precisely within the pulse.

You'll arrive exactly on the pitch, and there won't be any time for wavering or fudging.

2. DIG INTO THE STRINGS

How you move your bow can either help or hinder your shifting. The much feared “bump in the road” (when the bow jumps up at the moment of shifting) can be smoothed over by “burrowing” into the string. Let the bow move a little faster than usual and apply just enough pressure to compensate for the bow's

unwanted reaction to what the left hand is doing. To develop the bow-shifting relationship, practice music by Fritz Kreisler. His phrases give lots of opportunities for glissandos, and the bow is more likely to move smoothly during these types of shifts.

3. FIND YOUR TARGET

Shifting down is a little more complicated than shifting up, but a slight “shift” in mental gears will make the process easier (walking backward feels quite different than walking forward). To achieve the same security that shifting up gives you, try this thought exercise: before shifting down, create a visual sense of where the new note is by setting up a “ladder” from the first finger up to the note. For example, if you're shifting down to third position, create the ladder from first position. Once you can pinpoint where the shifting target is, channel the childhood game of hopscotch. Jump from one position to another. The distance is now streamlined and defined, and the music's rhythm sets the parameters.

Shifting opens up the world of proprioception, and you soon realize that bow distribution, phrasing, vibrato, and music in general, are artfully connected to one of our least-known senses. Now, if someone could just come up with a better name for this phenomenon!

— PS

4 TIPS ON HOW TO DEVELOP A WARM, PURE VIBRATO

1. START STRONG

A good beginning vibrato exercise is to learn to identify the moment that vibrato starts. Move the bow confidently with no vibrato and then, after a count of two beats, vibrate quickly and simply. The mind is better at controlling small movements if all the moving parts are synchronized.

2. ANALYZE YOUR MOVEMENTS

Each player has a personal preference as to whether the vibrato should be an arm or hand-wrist vibrato. Sometimes, however, the actions can fight against each other. Keep the movements distinct and pure. While powerful vibrato can be developed while integrating both hand and arm, all that's really necessary is that the joints, knuckles, and so on remain neutral and flexible.

3. CHART YOUR COURSE

The geography of vibrato includes the physical direction of the fingerboard; the offset, oblique angle of the hand (think scaffolding); the four different planes of the string; and the direction of the bow (which has a way of influencing everything else). Imagine the complications that arise from all of these competing angles! Now, just respect the differences and keep all motions independent yet interdependent.

4. OVERCOME THE WOBBLE

The wobbly vibrato is sometimes caused by a lack of firmness as the fingertip oscillates between two close pitches. An exercise for a more firm vibrato motion is to move the bow smoothly, generating a perfectly smooth vibrating string, with the fingertip firmly on the pitch. Then rock the finger to a pitch slightly below the original pitch, and then rock it back to the original. The firmness is achieved by thinking of the ratchet mechanism in a socket wrench. That will make the pitch difference firm enough to overcome the wobble, and the smooth bow will blend it all together.

—Paul Stein

FESTIVALS, FRIENDSHIP & MORE

There are undeniable musical benefits to being involved with various [festivals and] organizations. I owe the success of my career to lifelong friendships that began at festivals. I have forged bonds in communities with incredible supporters and with outstanding musical artists, who are so generous with their time and their talents. Everything I do, including recording, is about loyalty and friendship. We get to know each other through artistic collaborations, and become stronger and more vibrant musicians as a result . . . It is my wish that the music shared at all of these festivals will make a difference, exposing young people to the glory of this art form, creating a new generation that will appreciate the joys and beauty of classical music.

—Cellist Zuill Bailey on friendships forged at music festivals