

Georg Mertens - Cello Method: Contents of Volume 1

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TIPS for using this Cello-Method



- 1) *Play every piece - or number - at least once through*
- 2) *Once a piece has no mistake, it can be crossed out (through the number) and doesn't need to be played again.*

Of course any piece can be kept to play for ever, but it doesn't need to be played.

That means no time is wasted, the progress is faster.



- 3) *If after playing a piece through you really dislike it, you can cross it out (and never play it again).*

Each section in the method has several pieces addressing the same musical or technical issues.

Not every single piece need to be practiced.

We learn more and faster by playing what we like and cutting to a minimum, what we don't like.

- 4) *At least **one piece in each section** should be completed, but best two.*

The sections are (the grouping is visible):

Vol. 1: 0-3 , 4-9, 10-15, 16-21, 22-27, 28-35, 36-40, 41-48

Vol. 2: 51-56, 57-60, 61-64, 65-68, 69-74, 75-80, 81-88, 89-100

- 5) *Here are a few numbers **not to miss**:*

In Volume 1: 4, 6, 18, 22, 43, 48

In Volume 2: 51, 57, 87, 91, 94, 100



- 6) *Mark favourite pieces (with a heart or sticker); the best suggestion is having a **separate book with all the favourites**.*

- 7) *I recommend to start every practice during a term with a "warm up piece" of your choice and keep it for the term.*

This should be one of the favourite pieces.

I learned musically and technically most on pieces I play anyway without mistake and by memory.

Once we know a piece very well, we can focus on tiny details, which we discover only after we can take for granted playing the notes correctly.

How to Practice ? - general good ideas

1) **Returning home** after the lesson, I recommend strongly to **unpack the cello** straight away, ready to play on a stand, in a corner or on the ground, bow ready next to it.

Also the music on a stand or accessible, open on the page to start.

2) If possible I recommend playing after the lesson everything once through at home what is new or includes new information.

We have **two mind sets**: the one is the home mind set, the old way of playing.

The other is the teachers or lesson place set.

The way to introduce the new way of playing at home is playing everything new at home on the same day, writing information down after the lesson or record the lesson.
- **One day later 50% is lost** and the old way creeps in.

3) **Starting every practice with a slow scale** (any), 3 or 4 beats per note.

This scale warms us up, including sitting correctly, spike length ideal, tuned well, bow hold, bow control well, bow level and direction good, sound and intonation good.

This one scale saves us from being shocked by our first piece, which after not warming up may sound dreadful.

4) Following should a **warm up piece** of choice, a favourite we keep for about a term. This piece we play until everything is predictably good, no mistake, good sound, good intonation - best also by memory.

5) Now starts our variable practice program.

6) I find it important that **every practice has some little goal**: after this practice I want to play this bar / this section safely or much better.

This daily practice goal setting is great if we have very little time (because of maybe children or work pressure).

In 5 minutes we have achieved something.

7) It is better to **slow** down the beat of a piece drastically, play **strictly in rhythm** than skipping through irregularly from one hard passage to the other.

By slowing down the whole piece our mind learns to prepare accordingly to the flow of music. Also we can express already in a slower speed but we can't without any rhythm.

8) If it just doesn't sound right on a day, we might put the cello on the ground, walk a circle through the room and sit down again to play: it will sound differently!

9) If anything hurts - stop and take a break, mention it to the teacher.

A - The "BOW on SOFA" exercise!

We walk with the bow in the hand to a sofa or bed - needs to be soft.

We rest the tip on the sofa and hold the bow with our normal hold lighter and lighter.

It will come to the point, that the bow falls - and that is what it should.

We do this a few times and keep in mind the feeling of how light we hold the bow just before it drops.

Then we go to the cello and start playing with the bow holding that light.

(It is so important to let go of the fear of dropping the bow and holding on to the bow like for dear life! I therefore recommend not to practice sitting on a tiled floor, but best on a carpet)

B - The "Pressure Test"

1) At the nut we push the bow down pretty strong.

Then we attempt to lift the bow up with the left hand - just next to the right hand - keeping up the down pressure with the right hand.

We will notice that probably we can't lift the bow.

2) We push the bow down pretty strong, but this time at the tip.

We attempt to lift the bow up at the tip - to our surprise that will be very easy!

3) That means that due to the pivot we need to play light at the nut (we may have encountered crushing noises in the up bow towards the nut?), but even in piano we have to add some pressure towards the tip or the bow will slide or doesn't produce a good sound (whistling).

C - Bow & Sound Exercise

1) Considering to hold the bow light, but coordinating the pressure difference between nut and tip (applied with the index finger only, not by holding the bow tighter): we play a dotted minim (3 beat note, 3/4 note) and listen that the sound is absolutely even. We watch and try to feel how we have to regulate the pressure in order to achieve that.

I recommend not to look at the bow, but into the room or out of the window and just to listen to the sound.

2) We play 3/4 notes in crescendo from piano to forte in up and down bow.

In between the changes from up and down bow we put one beat rest with bow resting on the string.

3) Then we play 3/4 notes with a "belly accent" (soft not crush) at the start and diminuendo declining to pianissimo to the end of the bow, both in up and down bow.

D - Testing Bow, string and Cello

Two elements of bow technique need always to be the same:

- The bow is slightly tilted towards us*
- the bow needs to play exactly parallel to the bridge.*

This sounds easy, but naturally we play rather parallel to the floor, which is wrong.

(To understand what is parallel I took a large board and cut out where the bridge fits; someone else needs to hold this board. Then when I play a string, the whole bow from nut to tip should have the same distance to the board - the distance it has from the bridge. Try the same for all strings. The truth what is "straight" is surprising, but the sound very good).

The best exercise to learn this is No. 22b

Testing the other 3 elements: pressure (weight), bow speed and contact point!

1) On each string we play a series of 4 notes (like the fingers 0-1-3-4) very close to the bridge, then 2cm further, another 2cm further etc.

We try out where each string sounds best (different on each string?).

We try the same with faster and slower bow.

We try the same with heavier and lighter bow.

We will find out: The C string likes not much bow, slow, heavier, not close to the bridge

- the other extreme, the A string likes it closer to the bridge, lighter and more bow use.

2) We play a scale - like C major 2 octaves in crotchets (1/4 notes) up and down.

If we use even bow, pressure and speed it will sound uneven!

If we use less and heavier bow on the C string, lighter and more bow on A, it will sound more even. Try to play the scale with absolutely even sound!

V - Sound Quality & Vibrato

I start every practice with a slow scale (3/4 notes) often just in C major focussing on sound. This includes intonation, vibrato and starting every note from nothing with a controlled start and a controlled and well sounding finish.

It is good to play the scales to as high as we can (3 or 4 octaves) to get used to play relaxed in higher positions.

For beginners in vibrato I recommend to start vibrating on the second beat of each note - after we found the correct intonation and feel secure about it.

Never try hard to vibrate, just do it a bit.

When the vibrato seems to stop after a beat, just let it happen. Anything forced in vibrato doesn't help its development.

*In difference to the violin the cello **vibrato** does not include any activity from the fingers or the wrist, but only from the elbow.*

It feels similar to shaking a baby bottle or a can of paint.

The elbow joint is the fastest in our body, the wrist is slow and clumsy (when we see a cat or a rabbit scratching, it is also the fast elbow joint).

Tuning with Harmonics

For a beginner tuning seems often difficult.

I recommend to prepare learning to tune by ear first by tuning via a phone or digital tuner (tuning pipes are not recommended; they don't produce a stable intonation but go up and down according to how strong we blow).

Once the cello is in tune, we practice playing the harmonics clearly.



TRAINING TO PLAY HARMONICS:

(photo 1: a harmonic on A string)

*The higher string is always the "octave harmonic" (**exactly the middle of the string, here on the A string**) the a, one octave higher than the open string will sound.*

Harmonics are tolerant spaces and appear over quite a distance of the string.

*If we move extremely lightly our 2nd (3rd) finger up and down the A string, in the middle between bridge and nut (see photo 1 "**a on A string**") we find a spot where the sound is very clear (harmonic a on A string).*

The clarity of sound shows us where the correct spot is. The best finger is 2 or 3.

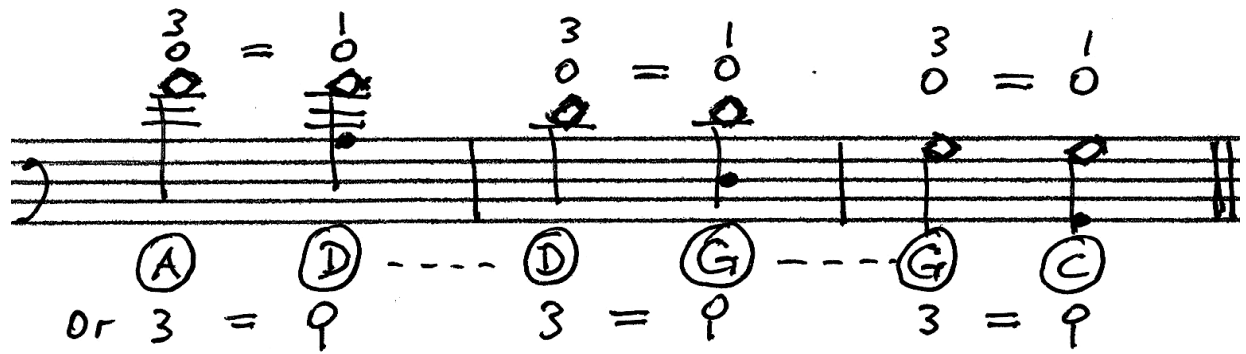


(photo 2: a harmonic on D string)

This note we compare to a harmonic of the same note on the D string:

*On the D string we put the **thumb into the curb where the neck starts**. Exactly opposite the thumb we lightly touch the D string with the 1st finger, best by not bending the finger but stretching it across, just lightly touching the string. If the note doesn't sound clear we move the finger a bit up and down the D string (see photo 2 "**a on D string**").*

*If the strings are in tune, **both harmonics - on the A and on the D** should produce **exactly the same note**.*



D & G: If the D is correct, we take it to compare it the G string:

We play the 1/2 harmonic on the D string (photo 1) and compare it to the 1/3 harmonic on the G string; they should be equal (photo 2).

G & C: Now if the G is correct, we take it to compare it the C string:

We play the 1/2 harmonic on the G string (photo 1) and compare it to the 1/3 harmonic on the C string: they should be equal (photo 2) - the C string needs a quite heavy and fast bow.

Now the whole cello is in tune.

FINE TUNING PRACTICE STEP:

*How do we keep in mind, **which way we have to turn the fine tuners?***

The best way is we start form a ready tuned cello.

Then we compare the harmonics of A and D, that they are perfect.

- Now we go to the fine tuner of D and turn it really out of tune, and keep the direction in mind we did it.

Then we turn the fine tuner the opposite way until the D is again in tune.

It needs to be really in tune, not close to it. We might rather go a bit over and then back again instead of stopping early.

This way we get to know how to tune by ear.

Biologically our ear is much finer than our eyes.

And I might tell you I have to finetune every cello, which is correct according to all the digital tuners. A trained ear is simply much finer.

We should not be afraid of tuning wrong.

All what happens if we go the wrong way is, that it gets wronger and wronger until we notice it very clearly and then we go back again.

It first takes time, maybe too long and I suggest trying the day before the lesson so that the teacher can fix it faster.