

# TEACH YOURSELF CELLO IN 10 EASY STEPS!

By Mark Rudoff

A young colleague emailed me, “Is it possible for me to raise my standard of playing without a teacher?” I loved the question: my goal in teaching is to cultivate musical independence, so the question was a direct challenge to everything I think I am doing in the studio. My initial answer (“Yes.”) grew into the following how-to guide:

## 1. PICK ONE THING.

Say you decide you want to make your place nicer to live in. A worthy idea, but if you are vague in your thinking you will probably run around in circles. Reduce the idea of “nicer living space” to a set of projects, though, and you can get to work. The details might include: new carpet on the main floor, repaint some rooms, fix the weatherstripping on the back door. Each of these discrete projects is something easy to imagine, realize and complete, and if you put them together you do, in fact, have a nicer place.

You know where I am going with this. Having established that you want to raise your standard of playing, isolate a project. Pick *one* thing. Listen for something that wants to sound more polished or complete. Or make your body more aware of – let your body TELL YOU would be a more accurate way to put it – something that is often awkward. Come clean with yourself about something you never do well, have never fully understood. Then, master the issue: find satisfying solutions to the problem and have fun with the fresh paths down which those solutions take you.

The first point in this is that you are going to be more effective working on one thing at a time. (In fact, it may be that a musician is only capable of working on one thing at a time.) Second, an attentive musician finds that the first project leads to fresh discoveries -- much as replacing that carpet is going to point up that shabby kitchen lino – and takes you to your next projects.

Be careful to pick a manageable, truly discrete project. It is admirable to decide, “I am going to improve my intonation.” In truth, that could be a dozen or more projects. Smarter to decide, “I am going to refine the accuracy of my finger spacings going from 1<sup>st</sup> through 4<sup>th</sup> positions,” or “I am going to nail down my shifting technique, or “I am going to work the first tune in the slow movement of the Brahms C minor piano quartet until I can play it through, with beautiful tone and expression and exquisite intonation, 11 times out of 10.”

## 2. MEASURE YOUR IMPROVEMENT

Set goals. Observe what feels more comfortable, sounds more convincing, makes more sense. Remember to keep doing what works. Notice, in particular, improvements that stick: work a new idea or skill until it is fully integrated into your playing. That Brahms quartet solo is not done until you no longer have to think about the adjustments in your finger placement on the extensions. When the adjustments are instinctive, automatic and 100% reliable, you own new technique for the next time the situation presents itself.

### 3. LEARN TO LISTEN

To paraphrase Yogi Berra, you can hear a lot just by listening. Can you hear crunchy bow changes? goop between notes? dotted rhythms not quite matched through a phrase? notes that are missing vibrato? phrases that go nowhere? The starting point in raising your standard of playing is not your fingers but your ears. There is much we get used to not hearing in our playing. Teach yourself to hear everything: the different qualities of resonance in your instrument; the ways a room responds to your sound; the sounds the bow makes against the strings in different registers; and (my personal favorite) the sounds you make between bows.

And work your ears when you are away from the cello. Listen to other performers. Be as omnivorous as possible. Figure out what you admire. Don't copy, or at least don't imitate the superficial stuff. Do investigate the art and craft behind music-making that thrills you. Listen critically, honestly, and with your heart as well as your mind.

### 4. USE TOOLS

Own a good metronome. A tuner with a pitch generator. A tape recorder. A mirror. Use them intelligently. Don't be afraid of the information they provide, but don't let them replace your own ears and judgment.

### 5. STRENGTHEN YOUR MIND

The sport of playing the cello requires a clear head and a joyful heart. Learn to filter out distractions. Competition, jealousy, and fear have no place in your practice room. Do not allow ghostly presences to sit with you while you practice; if your practicing is accompanied by a voice that nags, "...but shouldn't you really ...," make it leave the room.

### 6. DO MORE THAN NECESSARY

The single work habit every student can adopt that will yield lasting, noticeable results is to repeat things more times. Drilled a passage 10 times and it feels more comfortable? Do 30 more. Nailed that shift 3 times in a row? Go for 10. Played through a movement cleanly, with focused concentration, from memory? Do it a couple more times.

### 7. ALWAYS ASK "WHY?"

It is possible to get something to sound better merely by playing it over and over. (Think monkeys, typewriters, Shakespeare.) You have better things to do with your time. Notice a string of notes not in tune? Great! (See #3, above.) Now, figure out what's causing the problem. Are you not hearing the intervals, or have you lost your pitch center? Is it your hand position? Finger spacing? Is your shoulder collapsed? Too often we go straight from hearing a problem to mindless repetition. That middle "why" step is where you get to improve your playing.

## 8. CHANGE SOMETHING

Asking “why?” can get interesting and dangerous. Practicing only moves you forward if you use the work to change something you are doing. Mostly you will discover small, logical adjustments, the comfortable “ah-hah” of applying something you already knew. However, every professional musician I know tells a story about an experience of frustration that pushed them to reinvent their playing. If you have reached a point where you are not satisfied with your playing, it may be you need to change something in your mechanics or musicianship. Which is hard: after all, what you have now (your bow hold, or a theory of expression in Bach) is something in which you have invested considerable work and thought. But if it is not working, you have to consider the possibility that you need to make a change. Question your assumptions. Challenge conventional wisdom. Play with new ideas.

## 9. GET IN SHAPE

Physical conditioning can improve attitude and performance. Relaxed, efficient setup makes many solutions easier, and makes it easier to play with better comfort and concentration. Besides, exercise teaches you how your joints and muscles work, knowledge you can apply directly to your playing. At least this is what I am told by people who exercise.

## 10. MAINTAIN BALANCE

In particular, avoid the trap of treating improvement as a one-dimensional pursuit of technical mastery. Raise your standard for everything about being a musician. Expand your imagination. Engage your emotions. Make it a goal to play more expressively, and always to play expressively. Have fun. Play games. Compete with yourself. Try outrageous things: can you sing, or whistle, and play at the same time? Compose, improvise, transpose, transcribe, play tunes by ear.

I once complained to my mentor and friend, Joel Krosnick, that I felt like I was reinventing the wheel – that a teacher could quickly show me solutions to some of the problems I was wrestling with. Joel answered that becoming a mature musician demands we reinvent the wheel, and through that process we take what we learned from others and invent playing that is truly our own. So in the end, you have no choice but to teach *yourself* cello. I look forward to hearing how it turns out.

*Mark Rudoff ©2009*

*This essay appeared in OPUS, the newsletter of the Ohio String Teachers Association. Mark Rudoff is professor of cello and chamber music at The Ohio State University. He is also a faculty member and Dean of The Quartet Program in residence at SUNY Fredonia.*