Left Hand Technique for Beginning Violin and Viola – Quick Start

Author: Ian Wright, Lincoln Public Schools, Lincoln, NE

Lesson Summary: This short lesson helps guide a strings teacher through the basics of teaching left hand technique for beginning violin and viola students and learning how to play Mary Had a Little Lamb.

Time frame: One lesson (20-30 minutes) with extensions for future practice.

Outcome: Students will play varied exercises with proper left hand technique to build skills necessary to play Mary Had a Little Lamb

Learning Objectives:
Students will be able to find the notes of first position on the violin or viola.
Students will be able to press the string firmly to the fingerboard and produce a ringing tone when playing fingered notes.

Essential Question:
What is the proper left-hand technique for beginning violin and viola students?

Lesson Materials:

- Guide to violin/viola fingerings for non-string teachers
  See BalancingBow.png & **EarlyBowHold.png**
- "Let's Learn Mary" worksheet
- Fingering Diagrams
  See FingeringDiagrams.png

Before you begin:

Before beginning left hand technique, be sure students are comfortable with their posture as well as familiar with the notes they will be reading on the staff. Alternatively, this lesson can be taught with non-traditional notation or by wrote to suit the needs of different students. Lessons can be taught with or without the bow, though some beginners might have more difficulty when playing with the bow.

You may want to take some time before beginning these lessons to put tapes or stickers on the fingerboards of your student's instruments. Take care to mark specific locations of each pitch you would like to mark after the instrument has been tuned.

Learning Activity:

1. Practice putting fingers on the string.
   - Help students find the proper position for F# on the string.
   - Sitting or standing with good posture, have students extend their left arm out to the side and pretend they are holding a can of pop.

    - Bending at the elbow, have students bring their fingers to the fingerboard and place fingers on the string covering the tapes on their instrument in first position.
2. Students can practice pressing down and releasing the string using all three or four fingers simultaneously
    - Tip: Don't let fingers get too far off the string during release. Have students hover a centimeter above the string and stay in line with the tapes.
    - When pressing the string down, emphasize that students should press the string firmly against the fingerboard
3. When ready, have students pluck the string while pressing down.
    - If you hear a clear ringing, the student is pressing hard enough. If you hear a thumping sound or if you hear the string rattling against the fingerboard, they will need to press harder.
4. Repeat this process for E or 1st finger.
5. Work through the first three exercises on the "Let's Learn Mary" worksheet.
    - Exercise 1 – changing notes slowly. Give students plenty of time to move their fingers between notes at first, then try to play it at a slow, steady tempo
    - Exercise 2 – this is all about speeding up the fingers. You may need to do many repetitions of this exercise for your students to get more comfortable before speeding up.
    - Exercise 3 – learning the melodic content from Mary. These are the finger patterns used in Mary Had a Little Lamb. Practicing each pattern alone and then in order will help students get more comfortable with the kinds of patterns they will use playing Mary. The last pattern is the most difficult.
        - Notice that the note reading helpers are going away. You may need to help students start to remember where the notes are located before moving on

Culminating Activity:
Have students play Mary Had a Little Lamb from the "Let's Learn Mary" worksheet.

Extension Activity:
The next note for violin, viola, and violin to learn would be G. Some teachers find it easier to teach G first, so you may want to do that before starting or after this lesson.