

## JEFFREY SOLOW TEACHES TECHNIQUE BY ASKING STUDENTS TO LEARN TO PLAY BY FEELING



Jeffrey Solow has taught at UCLA, the Peabody Institute and the University of Michigan. He currently teaches at Temple University and is president of the American String Teachers Association and New York's Violoncello Society, Inc.

### What do you do when you see a student for the first time?

I ask them about themselves, who they have studied with, and general background. Then they play something for me and I ask them about their playing: what they identify as their strengths and what needs improving. Sometimes they have an idea of their problems and sometimes they're clueless. After they've given me their analysis, I tell them what my perceptions are and talk about how we should address them.

### How do you teach technique?

Many people teach by saying, 'Do this,' 'Put your fingers and arms like this,' and there's a lot of focus on the instrument. That is fine, but masterful performers control their playing by hearing and, even more, by feeling. By the time you have heard a sound, everyone else can hear it, too. You need to control what is about to come out of the instrument. Students have to learn what it's supposed to feel like to play, so I use experiential exercises. I think things up, both with and without the instrument, that are foolproof in allowing students to feel the sensation that I'm trying to get them to understand.

For example, if I want to demonstrate the feeling of holding the arm weight up with the left-hand fingers rather than pushing the strings down, I might have someone walk their arm along a table top with their arm stacked over their fingers, which gives the sensation of holding up with the fingers, rather than pushing down. Or I might have someone walk around and think about what their legs are doing – they're holding up the body, rather than pushing against the floor.

I come up with a concept that someone can understand in a basic way, and then bring it to the cello.

The students I work with may be far advanced in repertoire but still have basic issues with control. There's not much time to focus on etudes because they have so much repertoire to learn, so I have to get at the issues right there, rather than going through didactic repertoire. But it's hard to concentrate on difficult music and basic playing issues, so I might start someone out with a slow, melodic piece so that they can focus on the basics, and then move as quickly as possible into repertoire.

### How do you approach bowings and fingerings?

I don't want to have lessons where I say, 'Play this bowing,' or 'Do these fingerings.' I want students to learn all the possibilities: how they can interpret what the composer has written, the different bowings and fingerings, and the musical consequences of the choices they make. Only then do I give my observations about whether I think it sounds convincing and fits the music. When I was a student, teachers would write down the bowings and fingerings or get you to copy them from another student. Piatigorsky was the first teacher I had who insisted that you make your own choices. There are many teachers who teach this way now, but when I was a student it was unusual. It makes students progress through a piece much more slowly, because they have to try everything out, but ultimately it's the fastest way for them to progress as musicians. It only works when they're old enough, though. When someone is really young you have to give them more guidance.

### Do you have a phrase you use often in lessons?

There are a couple: one is that because learning to play is learning what it is supposed to feel like, in reality, no one can teach you to play the instrument – you have to teach yourself. Another is that if you feel right, you'll look right.

### How do you encourage students to listen to music?

There are many wonderful performances on YouTube of great players, both current and past. It also has innumerable examples of terrible playing – it's amazing what people will display in public! But that can be a good teaching tool because the student can 'play teacher' and identify what's wrong and why it doesn't sound good. Another great thing about YouTube is that there are many performances of the same piece, so you can get a good range of how a work can be performed. One of the dangerous things about technology is that students buy one recording and then think that's the way the piece goes.

### What's the most common problem you see with your students?

I find cello students don't use their deltoid muscles enough – these are the muscles that go over your shoulders and lift your arms. Often, when they are told to relax, they relax these deltoids and their elbows droop. If your elbows droop too much, you can't let a smooth flow of weight come down to your fingers and the weight drags your hand off the instrument.

Interview by Ariane Todes