Stringed Instrument Instruction in the Waldorf School

BY MONIKA SUTHERLAND, MA

In my work as a Waldorf music teacher, there are few things as exciting as the enthusiasm of the fourth graders beginning to learn to play a stringed instrument. At our school, this is a fourth-grade rite of passage, but the preparation begins as early as first grade.

In a Waldorf school, students are hearing and participating in music every day, beginning in the early childhood classroom. Circle time has the students singing and moving to music. Gentle lyre or flute playing accompanies stories and rest time. Early childhood teachers sing to greet the children each morning and during transitions from one activity to another throughout the day.

In first and second grade, while music continues to be woven into the fabric of the day, exposure also becomes more formalized. Students learn to play and reverently care for various instruments, including wooden flutes, lyres, and tone bars. They also sing together daily. General musical concepts—fast and slow (rhythm), high and low (pitch), and soft and loud (dynamics)—are taught in age-appropriate ways. Musical games and listening activities begin developing the "musical ear." The intention is to establish listening as the basis of our shared musical experience. Most importantly, the children experience the joy of making music together.

By third grade, the students generally have considerable skill in singing and in playing the flute. It is usually in this grade that they will "air play" a stringed instrument or hold a flute under the chin to pretend it's a violin. Often they talk to each about which stringed instrument they want to play. Little by little the excitement builds.

The four principal members of the stringed instrument family—violin, viola, cello, and bass

"I want to play violin!" a third grader will announce to me out of the blue. Others will stop me in the hall to secretly tell me what stringed instrument they want to play. "When will we get to choose our instruments?" they ask.

A fourth-grade novice cellist learns, with the help of his teacher and tape strips on the fingerboard, where to place his fingers to get the correct note.

The string family has four main instruments. They are, in tonal range, in order from highest to lowest, the violin, viola, cello, and bass. At our school, we begin by offering a choice between violin or cello, one higher-pitched and one lower-pitched instrument. Viola and bass come in fifth grade or later. The viola is a cousin to the violin, pitched slightly lower and with a darker sound but using the same basic position of holding the instrument and bow. The stringed bass, or upright bass, is played while standing, and is easier to manage when the student is a little older. Fifth graders who have played one of the other stringed instruments for a year usually can make the transition to the upright bass without too much difficulty, regardless of their height.

In some Waldorf schools, the class teacher or music teacher may decide out of pedagogical reasons which instrument a particular student should play. At our school, we let the children exercise their own intuition in choosing their instrument and support them in their choice.

At the end of third grade, the students visit one of the upper-grade orchestra classes. They are given a demonstration during which they are able to hear each instrument played individually and then hear them played in

ensemble. After the demonstration, the third graders are invited to go up to one of the older students to see the instruments up close. This is when one gets a first glimpse of what I call the "inner knowing" of the child in relation to their being drawn to a particular instrument. Without hesitation, each third grader makes a beeline for one of the instruments, and I notice from the sidelines that they stay with that first chosen instrument. No one appears to be "shopping around." They are interested in seeing the instrument they feel most drawn to.

A seventh-grade violinist.

I have long wondered what attracts a person to a particular instrument. When I was a college student in a music conservatory setting, surrounded by music students, I observed that musicians and their instruments seemed to go together. It isn't a temperament or personality match but something else. Over the years of watching fourth graders choose their stringed instrument, I haven't been able to discern a consistent parallel between a particular type of child and the instrument chosen. At the same time, it's clear that what the children choose feels "right" for them. I've seen both very grounded students and very animated students choose cello, and the same applies to the violin.

The students may be responding to a particular instrument perhaps because that instrument's tonal quality resonates with their own inner quality of soul. Perhaps they need that particular quality. I am there to support them in their choice and make sure they are listening closely to their inner voice. In my years of teaching, the students, almost without exception, have stayed with their originally chosen instrument for the duration of their experience at school.

In a Waldorf school, with our concern for the developing child, we choose activities and experiences that support the students in their development. As teachers, our goal is not necessarily to develop future professional musicians or artists or actors, but rather to help develop healthy and whole human beings.

How playing a stringed instrument supports child development

The introduction of Waldorf students to stringed instruments generally coincides with the time of their nine-year change. As children approach their tenth year of life, they undergo a transition in which they begin to let go of their dreamier selves and begin to experience the world more objectively, more as something "out there." This is often the first time they experience themselves as completely separate from others, particularly their parents. They begin to recognize that human beings, including parents and teachers, are fallible and mortal. They begin to have their own rich emotional lives with a deeper and wider range of feelings.

The sound of a stringed instrument has a strong connection to the heart and the emotional realm. Music played on any instrument can be experienced emotionally, but often it is the strings' sound that pulls at one's heartstrings, so to speak. The soaring sound of the violins in a Brahms symphony can take one's breath away. The plaintive sound of the cello is often to be heard in the most emotional moments in a movie. The sound made by the bow pulled across strings resonates in the core of one's being. When played well, a stringed instrument can closely resemble the human voice, which in turn most closely reflects the soul of the human being.

Rudolf Steiner said of the experience of playing a stringed instrument:

> The human being feels how [his] whole organism is being enlarged; processes which are otherwise only within the organism are carried over into the outside world. . . When the child learns the violin, the actual process, the music that is within him, is directly carried over and he feels how the music in him passes over into the strings through his bow.[1]

Playing the cello well involves good posture, proper arm and hand position, and total concentration.

Steiner spoke of the threefold nature of the human being, the fact that we are comprised of head, heart, and hands, that we have a capacity for thinking, for feeling, and for doing (willing). One can say that each family of musical instruments has a special relationship with one of these aspects of our humanness: the winds and brass relate to thinking, the percussion to willing, and the strings to feeling. From Steiner's perspective, the

stringed instruments, with their bowed sound and deep connection to the life of feeling, are a good match for the changing nine-year-old student, whose feeling realm is expanding and who is seeking emotional expression.

Two violins and a cello are just a viola short of the standard string quartet.

Another aspect of string playing is the repeated crossing of the body's vertical and horizontal midlines. The right hand and arm move back and forth and also in and out with the bow. Meanwhile, the left arm moves up and down on the fingerboard, but also toward and away from the body in a similar gesture. The activity of crossing the midlines is healthy for children in their development. As with archetypal movements such as sweeping, digging, and shoveling, these movements with stringed instruments help children develop strength, will, and coordination and imprint these capacities in their bodies.

When a person plays a stringed instrument, the two hands are engaged in very different activities at the same time. The left arm and hand are concerned with finding the points on the strings for the correct pitches. They must go with ease, speed, and accuracy into different positions up and down the fingerboard. Meanwhile, the right arm and hand are engaged in tone production, moving the bow across the strings. They are creating the tone, just as in singing or playing a wind instrument the exhaled breath creates the tone.

Sometimes the left hand moves very quickly while the right arm is moving slowly; at other times, the reverse is true. Sometimes right and left move fast or slow together. Even a beginning string player must learn "to pat the head while rubbing the tummy," and the necessary coordinated movements get far more complex as the players progress. This has a profound, positive effect on the development of the brain. According to Brenda Brenner, professor of music at Indiana University,

> Neurological research suggests that the early study of music, and particularly string study beginning at a young age, changes the development of the brain. . . String players have greater neuronal activity and a larger right motor cortex than non-string players.[2]

Another challenging aspect to string playing, and one that draws most heavily on the child's own striving, is that the pitches are not set by simply plucking or stroking a string, as on a lyre, or by covering a particular hole, as on a flute, but must be found through listening and placing fingers in the correct spot. Even though beginning string players generally use strips of tape to mark the correct spots, the children, as they play, listen with discerning ears and move their fingers accordingly. String playing calls for careful listening, and the students develop this skill. Many become acutely aware of the accuracy of a note and will work to make sure they are playing in tune with correct pitch. "No family of instruments is more demanding in its requirements for pitch discrimination and auditory perception."[3]

Playing any instrument, and stringed instruments especially, is largely an activity in muscle memory. The large and small motor skills need to be developed over time and can only develop well if there is consistent practice and attention to the fine points of playing. There is no instant gratification in learning a stringed instrument! Daily sessions of disciplined practice, even short sessions, will yield results over time. Improvement toward mastery comes in small incremental steps. The main ingredient of success on a musical instrument may appear to be talent, but, in reality, discipline and consistent practice give the best results.

A practical consideration in favor of stringed instruments for children is that the strings are the only instruments, other than percussion instruments, that are available in fractional sizes that will suit the size of the child. Cellos, for example, are available in one-quarter, half, and three-quarter, as well as full size. "Because playing a stringed instrument involves large bodily movement, it is imperative that each child, regardless of size, has an

A full-size cello and a fractional cello suitable for children

instrument that correctly fits the current stage of his or her physical development."[4]

In a Waldorf setting, daily practice on their stringed instrument is often the first "homework" the students have. At first, they are so excited to have their new instruments that they can't wait to get home and practice. This enthusiasm usually wanes after a few weeks or months. Practicing an instrument is, on some level, a chore for all musicians. It may be a beloved chore, but it is more comparable to an exercise regimen than to a leisure activity. It is work, and it requires focus and concentration and, above all, will. When the students are supported in creating a daily practice routine, they are developing good work habits and engaging in a healthy will activity.

Playing music together can be one of the most enjoyable and satisfying of human experiences. Here the students are rehearsing the Finale of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony.

> Study of a string instrument requires highly complex motor skills and concentration, and the development of these skills from an early age allows for the achievement of excellence when practiced over a significant period of time. These qualities of thought and action may also spill over in children's attitudes toward education more generally, as they begin to apply the selfsame skills in other settings beyond string study."[5]

As a cellist, I know the challenges of learning and playing a stringed instrument. It takes a perseverance and much effort. Even with daily practice, progress can be slow. Accurate intonation (getting the correct pitch) and good tone don't come easily, and the instruments require constant tuning;. They are expensive and fragile and must be treated very carefully. The cello and bass are large and difficult to carry and transport.

So why do it when it requires so much work and so much overhead? While I may ask myself this question as a teacher—namely, why bring this activity to the children, knowing all of its inherent difficulties—I have never asked this question of myself as a cellist. Like my students, I began playing cello in fourth grade and fell in love with the instrument despite all the complexities it brought to my life. I remember, as I improved, feeling proud that I could do something that was difficult and that not everyone could do. I remember loving the magic of playing in an orchestra when all our collective aspiration and effort brought forth something transcendent. Although playing the cello has presented me with some of my most difficult challenges, it has also filled my heart and soul with something I would not trade for anything.

While one of the most exciting times for me as a music teacher is when the students choose and begin their study of a stringed instrument, the most rewarding is the day of our annual school concert. There I witness firsthand the students' pride in what they have accomplished, both as individuals and as a group. During the concert, I see their earnest attentiveness, their uprightness and goodness, and their strong desire to do well and create something beautiful. I see the students as we Waldorf teachers always seek to see them, at their best and most noble. Playing music together, they are creating an experience of beauty, not only for themselves, but also for their parents and their community.

The journey to that point has not been easy, but at the end of that evening, I hear no mention of the difficulties. What I do hear, besides the congratulations and the joyful laughter, is the third graders whispering to one another, "Which instrument are you going to choose?" ☺

Notes

1. Karl Stockmeyer, *Rudolf Steiner's Curriculum for Waldorf Schools* (Steiner Schools Fellowship Publications, 1991), 123.
2. Brenda Brenner, "Reflecting on the Rationales for String Study in Schools," *Philosophy of Music Education Review*, 18, 1: 54.
3. Ibid., 45.
4. Robert Klotman, "Why Strings?" *Music Educators Journal* 87 (2000): 45.
5. Brenner, 55.

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