

A Sequential Approach to Cello Learning and Teaching:

A New Series of Livestream Sessions

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Several years ago, I heard an audition by a cellist who had studied with the principal cellist of a major orchestra. I expected a polished performance of the first movement of the Haydn C major Concerto, but unfortunately it was a disaster. When I asked about his technical background – scales, études, exercises – he admitted he had only worked on repertoire. It was clear he lacked a foundational understanding of technique and relied solely on copying his teacher's interpretations. His teacher appeared to believe that technique could be learned solely through repertoire – an approach that, in this case, had clearly failed. This is an example of what I call 'Random' as opposed to 'Sequential' teaching. As I wrote in an article in the November 2024 issue of the *Strad*:

Often teachers like this have had good training themselves (and hence are playing on a high level), but have forgotten how they themselves were taught when they were young. They want to work on an advanced level of artistry, but don't remember that they went through the process of learning technique by studying scales, doing etudes, and working on pieces that were appropriate for their level. Rather than having some sort of organized syllabus, they will often assign pieces that they themselves are working on, or just react to whatever the student brings in to the lesson. And often they are just teaching as a side-line to their main performing job, with minimal focus on the real needs of the student.

Many fine players are just not effective as teachers for intermediate students. And many young players who have completed their conservatory studies as performance majors are not really competent as teachers because they don't have the pedagogy experience, communicative ability, or knowledge of the literature to provide their students with the proper training they need. This series, *A Sequential Approach to Cello Learning and Teaching*, sponsored by the British Cello Society, will address some of these issues, and will provide a pedagogical framework for cello teaching.

Learning an instrument, like any skill, follows a natural progression. Just as we master basics before advanced concepts (crawling before walking, arithmetic before calculus), musicians must build foundational skills. String students need solid two-octave scales and arpeggios from memory before tackling advanced systems. Cellists should master Dotzauer, Lee, and Duport études before Popper Op. 73, and ideally, Popper Op. 76 before Op. 73. Similarly, playing the Goltermann G major Concerto, as well as pieces such as the Klengel *Concertino #1* and the Boëllmann *Symphonic Variations*, would be crucial steps before attempting the Haydn C major.

We expect our students to be disciplined and practise efficiently and effectively, but, similarly, we have to be disciplined in how we best use our time with the student in the lesson.

My recent book, *The Cellist's Guide to Scales and Arpeggios*, (co-authored with Theodore Buchholz) was inspired by this pedagogical philosophy of sequential learning. We start with basic one-octave scales and build slowly through various two-octave and three-octave scale systems, as well as the universal fingering system, chromatic scales, octatonic scales, whole-tone scales, and modal scales, and finally double-stop scales in sixths, thirds, and octaves. There is no other scale book that takes a cellist from the earliest stages to the most advanced levels of scale work (www.thecellistsguide.com).

The renowned English philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947) proposed that education unfolds in three distinct stages: romance, precision, and generalisation. This framework mirrors the journey of many successful musicians, who have benefitted from a series of teachers embodying each phase:

1. The **initial teacher** sparks the student's **romance** with the instrument and the inherent joy of music. This foundational stage is about nurturing passion and a love for learning.
2. The **second teacher** is an educator who instils discipline and helps the student build a strong technical foundation, ensuring they develop the necessary skills to play proficiently.
3. Finally, the **artist-teacher** inspires artistic excellence, acting less as a strict pedagogue and more as a coach who elevates the advanced student to new creative heights.

There are many excellent teachers for the first and third stages of a cellist's development. There are wonderful teachers who are trained for teaching in beginning string and orchestra programmes in the schools, and those who have benefitted from the Suzuki method of teaching young cellists. And the world is blessed with many wonderful artist-teachers and performers who can inspire advanced cellists, give masterclasses and teach high-level musicians. What is missing in the 'cello universe' are competent, well-trained teachers for the intermediate level of teaching.

This series of livestream sessions, *A Sequential Approach to Cello Learning and Teaching*, will explore the benefits of teaching cello technique and repertoire to intermediate and advanced students in a logical and organised manner. We will take a deep dive into a sequential pedagogical approach to exercises, scales, études, and repertoire. I hope that this series will provide a forum for experienced (and new!) cello teachers to think about their own teaching styles and methods, and challenge us all to consider ways to improve our own teaching.