

Kathy and David Blackwell: How to use the *Starters* and *Joggers* Books

Are you teaching beginner string players? These notes will help you get the most out of using the *Starters* and *Joggers* books for violin, viola, and cello.

Begin with the *Starters* book – here you'll find much material that can be taught by rote or by ear. Teaching the pieces aurally is good, and also our recommended approach with beginners; they can establish a good basic bow-stroke and begin to develop a nice left-hand shape before reading notation. Each book comes with a CD with performances of every piece which supports learning between lessons. Move onto the *Joggers* book when pupils are comfortable with their instrument, can play some tunes using all the left-hand fingers, and are ready to develop their reading skills.

Getting started: Use the activities on pages 5 and 11 of *Starters* to help set up a good instrument- and bow-hold; these activities are designed to be revisited often, and make useful warm ups at the start of a lesson or practice session. Doing the actions and chanting or singing along with the CD backing reminds young players about technique, and helps develop a sense of pulse. The suggestions on page 66 of the *Starters Teacher's Handbook* give further ideas to help encourage relaxed posture and bow-holds, and provide a variety of activities that can be used in beginner lessons. Checking and revisiting posture and bow-hold often will help establish good habits.

Open-string work: There is ample material for open-string work in the *Starters* books, and the earliest pieces also use a heartbeat symbol to represent the steady pulse of the music and letter names to identify the strings (pp. 6-8). Teaching pieces by rote is highly recommended: pupils can then focus on establishing a good basic tone and bow-stroke without the distraction of looking at the page. After learning a piece by rote, the simplified notation acts as an aide-memoire and allows non-musical parents to become involved in practice at home.

Bowing skills: These can be developed using the pieces on pages 16 and 17 of the *Starters* books – these pieces can be played using small bow-strokes in the middle of the bow, e.g. *Rhythm train* (p. 17). All these pieces can be taught by rote. *Mini Mozart* (p. 16) introduces 3/4 time and allows for some extension activities or differentiation in group lessons. The rhythm variations in many of the pieces in the *Starters* books give opportunities to further progress bowing skills.

Setting up the left hand: Playing tunes on one string from simplified notation, such as the tunes on page 24, is designed to help establish a good left-hand position. Focus can then be on listening for good intonation, with attention given to a well-focused tone. These tunes are grouped together so that they can be introduced at any time at the teacher's discretion. Singing these songs (using sol-fa or words) before playing them will help develop the inner ear. Left-hand pizzicato, octave harmonics, and creating a tunnel over an open string are techniques that are all used in the *Starters* books to help encourage a good left-hand position.

Teaching notation: Beginner string players generally have a better outcome if they are given time to feel comfortable with their instrument, have developed a basic bow-stroke, and can play some tunes using the left-hand fingers before they are introduced to reading notation. However, it is possible to work with rhythm flash-cards away from the instrument right from the first lessons – this allows for a change of activity during lessons and begins to introduce pupils to reading activities. The teacher’s experience and discretion will dictate when would be the best time to introduce reading activities. Young players’ technical skills should always run a little way ahead of what they can read. The *Starters* book allows the teacher to have a flexible approach to introducing notation to suit individual or group needs.

Reading rhythm and reading pitch: Separate out the teaching of rhythm from the teaching of pitch, and teach rhythm notation before pitch. Using rhythm flash-cards in a call and response manner is an effective and musical way for children to learn to read rhythms. Vocalising rhythms away from the instrument and using rhythm syllables, e.g. ‘walk’ or ‘ta’ for a crotchet and ‘jogging’ or ‘ti-ti’ for quavers, helps children to understand the concept of rhythm and to perform them accurately. Once reading from rhythm flash-cards is confident, then the reading of open strings from the staff may be introduced. Doing one thing at a time builds confidence and success.

Technical development: Many of the pieces in *Starters* are designed to develop a particular aspect of string technique. *Popcorn* (p. 22) uses left-hand pizzicato and encourages a good left-hand position while strengthening the 4th finger. *Swing band* (p. 21) makes players aware of the movement of the right arm when string crossing, and *Happy Haydn* (p. 19) is a reminder of the different levels for the bow arm on different strings. *Starlight* (p. 27), holds the lower finger on the string and creates a tunnel over the upper string, helping to establish a good left-hand position. The *Starters* books cover the notes of the D major scale and all three books (violin, viola, and cello) can be used together, making it ideal for use in group lessons.

Singing and general musicianship: Singing the tunes in *Starters* before playing them is central to the thinking behind the books: it will develop the inner ear and help intonation. The appealing lyrics both encourage singing and remind players of technical points. The songs can be sung using either the words or sol-fa. For example, *Jelly on a plate* (p. 8): using either words or sol-fa, teach pupils to sing this tune by having them echo you a bar at a time in a call and response way. Then instruct pupils to be ‘musical detectives’ and ‘find’ the tune on their instrument (the starting note can be given as a clue). This approach develops listening skills and builds confidence. This tune can then be played beginning on any of the three lowest strings. Use a similar approach with *Fingers and feet* (p. 24).

Listening skills: there are a number of ‘Super listener’ activities throughout the *Starters* books. These are activities that help focus and develop aural skills, e.g. *Echo calypso* (p. 13). There are also suggestions and ideas to transpose tunes to other keys. ‘Listen and copy’ is a phrase widely used by teachers. Many of the tunes in the *Starters* books use this approach: pupils hear a phrase played by the teacher or on their CD and then copy it back, e.g. *Copycat blues* (p. 16) and *Scale builder* (p. 36). This approach helps develop aural skills and allows pupils to focus on technique without the distraction of notation.

Creativity: Children understand concepts more deeply if they use the elements that they are learning about in a creative way. There are composing ideas at each stage of the *Starters* books (e.g. p. 28) that are designed to help understanding of theory and notation. There are also additional photocopiable worksheets in the *Starters Teacher's Handbook*.

Extension and differentiation: Many of the pieces can be extended by transposing to another key or by playing rhythm variations. *Fit as a Fiddle* (p. 29) can be useful in a group lesson where differentiation is needed. Teach everyone to sing the chorus before playing it by rote; more able players can play the verses with everyone joining in for the chorus. Similarly, a simple ensemble piece with differentiated parts can be made by combining the two versions of *Clear blue sky* (pp. 34 and 35) with the additional part in the *Teacher's Handbook* (p. 53).

Using the *Joggers* books: The *Joggers* books can be introduced and used alongside the *Starters* books once players are comfortable with their instrument and the basics have been established. They provide ample reading practice using all the fingers across all the strings. Simple slurs are introduced and pieces move incrementally from a few open-string pieces at the start to pieces using all fingers in finger pattern 1 (i.e. the tetrachord from an open string) by the end. There are pieces in a wide range of styles, many of which focus on a particular technical point, e.g. the bow speed and division of *Travellin' slow* and practising a tunnel shape over an open string in *Chinese garden*. There are also a number of duets allowing for differentiation in group lessons. The *Joggers* CD provides performances of each piece and the violin backing tracks can be downloaded free from the OUP *Fiddle Time Joggers* page at <http://global.oup.com/booksites/content/9780193386778/audio/> The companion Scale books offer technical exercises, theory and composition games.

In summary:

1. Use the *Starters* books before the *Joggers* books.
2. Use the *Joggers* books when the basics of playing the instrument have been established.
3. Encourage pupils to listen to the CD for the piece they are learning: sing along, clap the rhythm, point to the music, and play along with the CD.
4. Play tunes by ear in a range of keys and focus on tuning, tone quality, good bow-holds and left-hand positions.
5. Develop the all-round musician.

Other resources:

Visit www.kathyanddavidblackwell.co.uk for information on all our books and news and free downloads to support pupils' learning.

- Free downloads include:
- D major scale game (violin): a simple note-recognition board game
- Scale and arpeggio accompaniments for string instruments or piano
- Written out versions of the rhythm variations to the following pieces in *Starters*: *Mini Mozart*, *Rhythm train*, *Classical sounds*, *Fit as a fiddle*, *Get aboard*, *More Mini Mozart*