TEACHING BASIC MUSICAL CONCEPTS
IN A BEGINNING STRING CLASS

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Musical concepts and basic elements of music can and should be introduced during the earliest stages of instrumental training. It takes time to establish the basics of left and right hand technique on a stringed instrument, but while this technique is being developed, the students' listening skills, their understanding of music, and their aesthetic sensitivity should also be developed. Students without a knowledge of notation can still be introduced to basic elements of music. String players should concentrate on SOUND and on the INSTRUMENT before being faced with the additional complexities of the system of symbols used in musical notation.

Described below are some sample activities which can be used with a beginning string class to introduce basic elements and concepts of music, and to develop aural sensitivity and a working musical vocabulary. None of these activities requires a knowledge of notation.

I. PITCH

Concept 1
Thicker strings produce lower sounds, thinner strings produce higher sounds.

Activities
Students explore each of the four stringed instruments, noticing the different thickness of strings. They play the open string cycle on each instrument, moving from the thickest string to the thinnest on each instrument. They should notice that the Bass string cycle moves in fourths, not fifths. They should also notice that the Bass ascending string cycle is E A D G, the reverse of the Violin where G is the LOWEST string, not the highest.

Concept 2
Increased string tension produces a higher sound, decreased string tension a lower sound.

Activities
Students explore each of the string instruments. Using fine tuners and pegs, they practise tuning the A string to an electronic A. They learn to recognize when the pitch of the string is too high and too low, and they learn how to adjust the string to bring it into tune.

Concept 3
Shortening the length of a vibrating string raises the pitch.

Activities
Students explore glissando effects, shortening the length of the vibrating string as they slide a finger toward the bridge, and lengthening the length of the vibrating string as they slide the finger back toward the scroll. Players should notice that on Cello and Bass ASCENDING pitch actually requires a DESCENDING movement of the hand DOWN toward the bridge in order to shorten the length of the vibrating string.

II. TIMBRE

Concept 1
Violin, Viola, Cello, and Bass differ from one another in tone quality.

Activities
The teacher plays a simple rhythm

\[ \text{(e.g., } \dagger \dagger \dagger \dagger \dagger \dagger) \]

Students imitate it on the A string of each of the four string instruments in turn. Students should notice and try to describe the differences in tone
quality, and should notice the differences in length and thickness of the A strings on the four instruments.

**Concept 2**

A single instrument can produce different types of sounds.

**Activities**

Students explore their own instrument, experimenting with arco, pizzicato, and col legno on the open strings. They describe and compare the sounds produced. Small groups of students create simple pieces, exploiting different timbres.

**III. DYNAMICS**

**Concept 1**

Sounds can vary in intensity, becoming louder or softer.

**Activities**

Students experiment with dynamics on the open strings. They should discover how to produce dynamic changes by varying bow speed, pressure, and sounding point. The teacher plays a simple 44 bar e.g., \(\text{\textbf{♩♩♩♩♩}}\) and students imitate it at the same dynamic level, or at a contrasting dynamic level. Then the teacher plays crescendos and diminuendos, and students reproduce these dynamic changes. Students can also respond to graphic notation written on the board, where a rising line indicates increased dynamic intensity and a descending line indicates a decrease in the dynamic level. Small groups of students can create short pieces exploiting dynamic contrasts.

**IV. DURATION**

**Concept 1**

Notes can vary in length. Some are short, some are longer.

**Activities**

Students experiment playing short and long notes. They discuss and experiment with how to make notes even longer, even shorter.

**V. RHYTHM**

**Concept 1**

Long and short notes can be arranged into rhythmic patterns.

**Activities**

Students imitate speech rhythms and clapped rhythms on open strings, and repeat rhythms played by the teacher. Small groups of students create their own rhythmic patterns.

**Concept 2**

Silence is often used in rhythmic patterns.

**Activities**

The teacher claps or plays rhythmic patterns in which rests occur. Students repeat these patterns. Individual students create their own rhythmic patterns which they demonstrate for the class.

**VI. TEXTURE**

**Concept 1**

Ensemble sounds can vary in density, becoming thicker or thinner.

**Activities**

The teacher plays a rhythmic pattern (e.g., \(\text{\textbf{♩♩♩♩♩}}\)). The First Violins repeat it, then each section in turn enters till the full ensemble is playing. Then sections drop out one by one, beginning with the First Violins, till only Basses are left to play the rhythm the last time. This exercise can be related also to dynamics, since the resulting effect is of a crescendo-decrescendo due to the increase and decrease in the number of players.

**FURTHER ACTIVITIES**

Once students have been introduced to musical notation, they tend to focus their attention on the visual symbols rather than on the sounds which the symbols represent. The teacher should therefore continue to include in the music lessons some activities of this type which do not require reading but which provide opportunities for the students to explore string sounds and to develop aural sensitivity within a string ensemble.