A Grand Tour of Cello Technique

A practice guide for the modern cellist

Fred Sherry

EDITION PETERS

LEIPZIG · LONDON · NEW YORK

Contents

Introduction

Everybody knows you can't learn to play from a book. With that out of the way, I believe that playing from this book reveals a world of practicing which can lead to the discovery of your own style. Players at all levels of experience and skill can try the exercises, many of which are updates of older material, and some that are new. These exercises are based on a broader treatment of pitch and rhythm than that found in the standard technique books. They are meant to improve your playing while promoting an understanding of our musical art.

25 years ago I started inventing the exercises, and I taught myself most of Chapters I–V mentally before writing anything down. The "Skull and Crossbones" sections came later and are meant to attract your attention. They contain valuable ideas about music that are often thought of as music theory. But what good is theory if you can't play it?

I recommend an immersion course in each of the Chapters I–V. If you are young or inexperienced you should concentrate on the beginnings of each section. When you finish a chapter you should have internalized the underlying ideas and be able to play exercises of your own invention without reading. It is also helpful to return to these chapters when you are feeling rusty.

There is both art and science in the choices of fingerings and bowings. Some of your practice time should be spent comparing what happens when you make one choice or another. It is often not clear which choice is best; you might gain ease of playing while losing color, legato, dynamics, or other important elements. In fingering one needs to know when to cross, shift, slide or stretch. Bowing is about when to change smoothly, lift the bow, taper the note, swell, or retake. Is this expression? No, expression is you. You can't hide from the listener.

The number of words used in scores to describe what cannot be indicated on the staff is quite large. The four main languages used by composers are Italian, German, French, and English. It can be gratifying to mix some of these words into your rehearsal vocabulary. If you see a word you don't know, look it up! Note: I used the old style abbreviations for chords in this book. If you want to learn lead-sheet chord symbols, you can find them in a jazz book.

I often feel the need to vary my practice routine. Some days I start playing for real from note one, most days I warm up carefully. Often I put the metronome on for the first time at the end of my practice session; I improvise on material from this book at speeds ranging from M.M. = 56 to M.M. = 320 (the real 320, this is not a typo).

Feeling stuck? Put down your instrument and conduct yourself through the piece you are working on. When you play again, the music feels fresh. It is good to isolate elusive technical problems in order to tackle them; sometimes this means making up your own exercise based on the problem. It is not a good idea, even in the practice room, to break apart musical elements like pitch and rhythm when trying to improve them, but it can be done if you put them back together again right away. And remember: practicing both slower and faster than *tempo giusto* is valuable.

When I have time I enjoy taking out my Haydn, Mozart, or Beethoven string quartet scores and playing selected passages from all four parts. Composers are idealists; they can imagine an endless bow, fast tempos, or elegant shifts of tone color which we cannot reproduce. Try to be the idealist and practice being the pragmatist. Devise practice room bowings and concert bowings so that when one bowing goes wrong there is always another possibility.

The classical player is often confronted with the task of bringing to life a masterpiece by a composer of great value. This music is adaptable to many interpretations and will affect each listener differently. Your job is to let the audience enjoy and appreciate the music. I like to think of performance as a three-part structure:

You/the Music

A u d i e n c e

Using this book should help you to connect your understanding of earlier music with the harmonic and rhythmic practices of the 20th and 21st centuries.

While writing this book I was often haunted by the words of Ambrose Bierce, “The covers of this book are too far apart.”

— Fred Sherry

Letter to Teachers

Dear Teacher,

I invite you to try this book. In it are many new twists on old ideas. The opening exercises of each chapter were designed for young or inexperienced players; they are followed by exercises suitable for the advanced student and professional player.

A great deal of thought went into the progression of the chapters. Part of the plan was to start with simple intervals, then move to triads, seventh chords, five-, six-, seven-, and finally eight-note scales. I didn't include the traditional fingerings for the major and minor scales as they can be found in many other books.

The ideas in the book were inspired by musicians I have worked with (quite a long list) and the teaching music of Bach, Chopin, Brahms, Schoenberg, Paganini and many others such as Popper, Piatti, Schradieck, Dounis, Cossmann. I practiced hard to master the techniques presented here and have tried out the exercises and explanations on my students. There were many surprises in my teaching studio, and I changed aspects of the book based on the responses of both students and colleagues.

I tried to imagine what it would be like to play from the book without my own guidance. With your help the student can take a number of approaches to the material: start from the beginning and play the exercises, or skip around in order to address elements of rhythm, pitch, posture, right- and left-hand technique. Curious students can study the "Skull and Crossbones" sections which explain the ideas that inspired the exercises.

Some of my students benefit when we play together at the beginning of the lesson. Chapter IX outlines suggestions for practicing with another cellist.

This book was written to bring the pleasure of improvement to students of all ages. Enjoy!

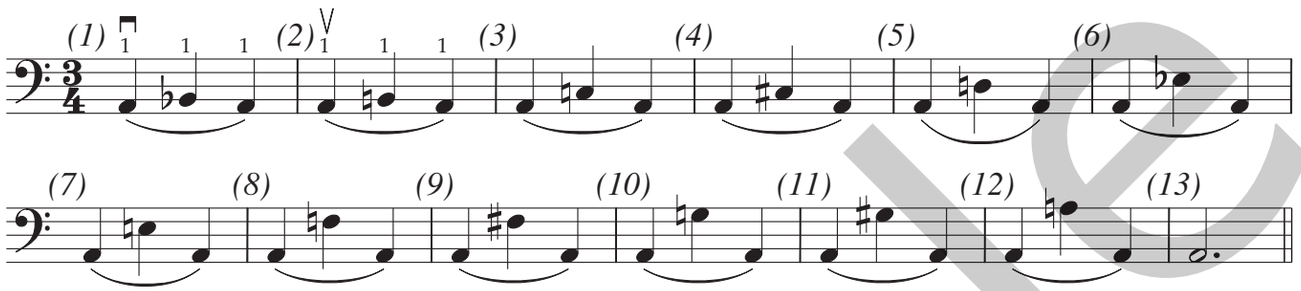
Your colleague,

Fred Sherry

Chapter I
Introducing Twelve Tones

PART A Flesch–Schoenberg–Sherry

Carl Flesch devised one of the greatest warm-ups:



Memorize the number of half-steps (also called semitones or minor seconds) inside each interval.

	Interval	Number of half-steps
Bar 1	minor 2nd	1
Bar 2	major 2nd	2
Bar 3	minor 3rd	3
Bar 4	major 3rd	4
Bar 5	perfect 4th	5
Bar 6	aug 4th/dim 5th (tritone)	6

	Interval	Number of half-steps
Bar 7	perfect 5th	7
Bar 8	minor 6th	8
Bar 9	major 6th	9
Bar 10	minor 7th	10
Bar 11	major 7th	11
Bar 12	octave	12

Abbreviations: M=major, m=minor, aug=augmented, dim=diminished, P=perfect

Flesch's warm-up can be expanded upon by reorganizing the steps of the chromatic scale to create even more effective workouts. Inspiration: Arnold Schoenberg.

Take Igor Stravinsky's advice: "Treasure intervals the way you treasure dollar bills." (With inflation, $20 bills.)

Try the tours of the octave which follow. Eventually you will be able to make up your own tours.

Hints:

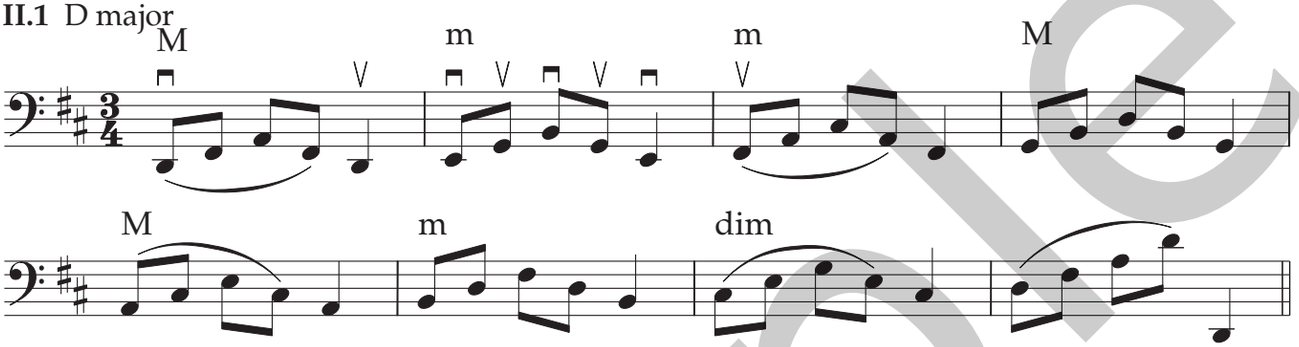
- *Use the rhythmic left hand for a clean, graceful, not jerky slide. Perhaps you need to lighten the pressure of the left hand during the slide.*
- *Let your right hand count for you. It helps to group the intervals: 1–3/4–6/7–9/10–12 or 1–4/5–8/9–12.*
- *Read ahead and memorize while you are playing.*
- *Different durations suggest shifts of different speeds.*

Chapter II
Triads and Seventh Chords

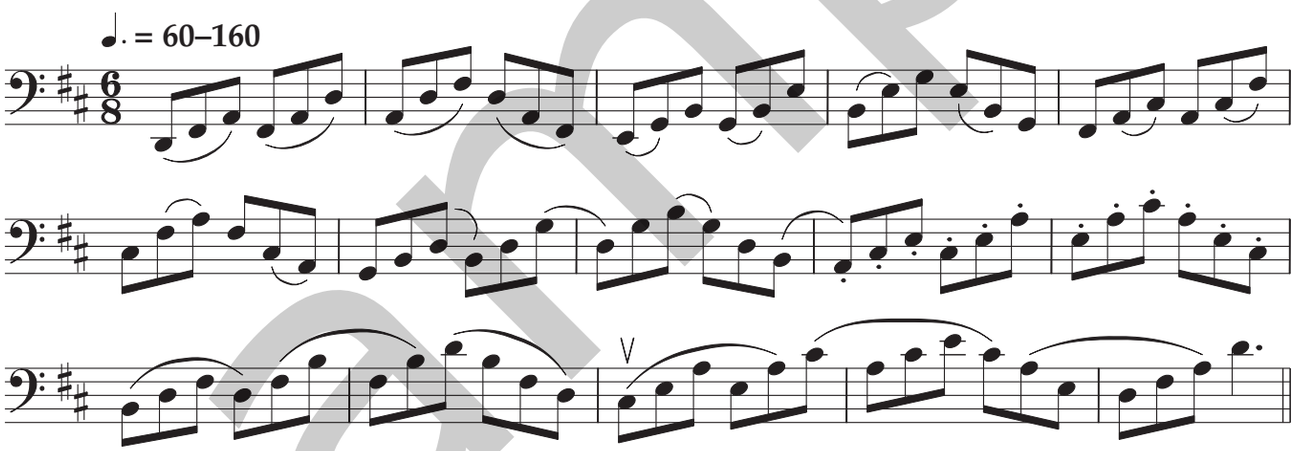
> As Mozart suggested: Before the pupil can go any further he must learn by heart the intervals and qualities of each triad and seventh chord; on this subject, the teacher should often examine him or her.

Building triads from the steps of the major and harmonic minor scales.

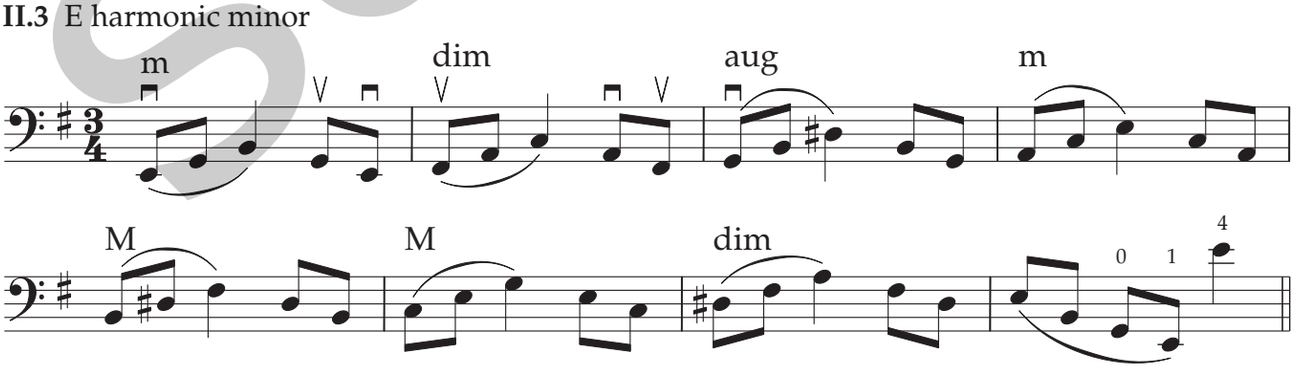
II.1 D major



II.2 Triad inversions



II.3 E harmonic minor



Get to Know the Fingerboard... "Hello Fingerboard!"

Make your ear predict the sound

This page is meant to be used as a chart. The material is transposable to the C, G and D strings and to any position. It shows triple stops with different combinations of fingers and it also shows what pitches are underneath your fingers on various strings.