I have been teaching the violin to adult beginners and improvers for about 15 years. I find teaching adults very fruitful: articulate, enthusiastic and self-motivated, they tend to take on board information more easily and quickly than children, and are generally more likely to go home and work on topics covered in the lesson. Learning an instrument can open up a wealth of new opportunities: music enables us to express ourselves in a new way, offers opportunities to meet new people, and provides an outlet for creativity. I have taught many adults who started with no prior musical experience, many adults who have come to their instrument later in life can be an extremely rewarding process, writes Ros Stephen. But the psychological complexities must also be handled with delicacy.

Teaching adult string students who have come to their instrument later in life can be an extremely rewarding process, writes Ros Stephen. But the psychological complexities must also be handled with delicacy.

I n the first lesson I like to give the student a chance to settle down, offer them a cup of tea and have a friendly chat before we begin. Unlike children, who are used to being in a learning environment, adults may not have been in a situation like this for many years. I find out a bit about their approach to learning, how much time they have to devote to practice, what their goals are and what they hope to get out of the lessons. Then, bearing all this in mind, I give them an idea of how I plan to structure their first few lessons. People are often shocked by how difficult it is to play a violin (try playing your violin left-handed to remind yourself!), so it’s important to give them a realistic expectation of what they can hope to achieve in a set time frame (without putting them off), otherwise they may become disillusioned. I tend to err slightly on the pessimistic side so that they’ll feel encouraged if they progress faster.

I start, of course, by showing the student how to hold their violin comfortably, making sure that they can support it on their shoulder without tension, and without it slipping. I strongly encourage them to work on their violin position every day until it feels natural and effortless, and I’m very fuzzy about them getting it right in lessons. I also show them how to position their left hand at the end of the neck (rather than placing it at the shoulder of the instrument, which often results in them supporting the instrument entirely with the left hand), and give them some simple left-hand relaxation exercises, so that they start getting used to the left-hand position before putting any fingers down on the strings.

Adults tend to have more tension problems than children, and often want to run before they can walk. The former may turn up to their first lesson having already worked out some tunes on their own, but without having stopped to think about technique. The challenge is, of course, to try to encourage and develop a student’s strengths while also focusing on and improving their weaknesses.

The first few weeks of teaching adult beginners is often a time for getting used to the instrument, and for focusing on and improving their weaknesses. The former may turn up to their first lesson having already worked out some tunes on their own, but without having stopped to think about technique. The challenge is, of course, to try to encourage and develop a student’s strengths while also focusing on and improving their weaknesses.

I explain the importance of a ‘good’ technique (one that enables you to express the music freely without tension, pain or discomfort), and explain that developing this boils down to repeating actions over a period of weeks or months, in a relaxed way, with correct position and posture, until new neural pathways have been built in the brain and the subconscious mind can begin to take over. If a student hurries over the basics of technique they are likely to reach a stage where technical problems slow down their progress.

At the risk of gross generalisation, I find that people tend to fall into one of two camps when learning the violin: the more intuitive and ‘right-brained’ type, or the more logical and analytical ‘left-brained’ type. The latter tend to enjoy working on finer details of technique, and are often good at reading music, but they may need more encouragement when it comes to listening, playing freely and musically, or learning by ear.

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Teaching adults can, however, be more complex than teaching children. Children generally have lower expectations, and are less set in their ways, and (hopefully) don't yet carry the baggage of ingrained insecurities, echoes of negative voices or regrets of missed opportunities. As an adult, voluntarily becoming a complete beginner on a technically challenging instrument, and investing time and money in lessons, requires a lot of courage. A new student may have spent years thinking about starting the violin before finally taking the plunge.

As teachers we need to be sensitive to people's anxieties, but it's also important not to allow your student's insecurities to dominate the lessons. I try to steer people away from excuses and rationalisations and try (with varying degrees of success) to get them to focus on effective practice, and slow and steady work on technique and musicianship.

Starting a new instrument is a bit like learning to drive: there are so many things to take on board at first, and it takes time and repetition for it all to become automatic. I try to take a fairly scientific and pragmatic approach to the initial stages. I explain the importance of a 'good' technique (one that enables you to express the music freely without tension, pain or discomfort), and explain that developing this boils down to repeating actions over a period of weeks or months, in a relaxed way, with correct position and posture, until new neural pathways have been built in the brain and the subconscious mind can begin to take over. If a student hurry over the basics problems slow down their progress.

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Adults tend to have more tension problems than children, and often want to run before they can walk. I have seen many adult beginner students with terribly awkward left-hand positions struggling to reach fourth-finger notes or to shift smoothly. It nearly always boils down to an uncomfortable violin position that has caused them to grip with their left hand.

With adults, it helps to explain exactly why the instrument is held as it is. I show them why the shoulder needs to be relaxed, why they need freedom of movement in the left hand (for instance, changing string, reaching fourth-finger notes, performing shifts and executing vibrato), and the kinds of problems that can occur if they don't eliminate tension.

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If a student is willing and patient, I like to spend the next few lessons working on bow hold and basic bowing, and only move on to the left hand when they can confidently use the full length of the bow, change string smoothly and make a reasonable sound. My first ViolinWorks book for older beginners (www.violin-works.com) includes a number of open-string pieces, with tuneful accompaniments and backing tracks, which make this stage more enjoyable. I work on upper half-bow strokes on a single string first, and gradually progress into the lower half. I then work on string-crossings and show them how to change string by rolling the bow across the strings, moving the whole arm as a unit from the shoulder (example 1).

I explain that most of the expression on a stringed instrument comes from the right hand (many students have never thought of this). I describe the right hand as being like a paintbrush, and the instrument a canvas, and I demonstrate how violinists control the colour and quality of the ‘brush strokes’ (dynamics and articulation). Obviously these techniques are too advanced at this stage, but most adults are capable of understanding the bigger picture, and it can help to convince people that working on right-hand technique is worthwhile.

Once the bowing arm is working reasonably well I introduce the left-hand fingers quite quickly. I find that the Paul Rolland method of starting with third-finger D on the A string often works well with adults. The main advantage of this approach is that it helps to keep the fingers positioned over the strings, and most people find the third finger easy to tune to the open string an octave below. This approach doesn’t work for everyone, however, so if a student is struggling I quickly change to first finger, and then introduce the third finger as soon as possible afterwards. I prefer to avoid string markers and instead encourage people to sing or whistle notes before they learn them (in whatever register is comfortable for them).

Smartphones should be out of bounds when teaching children, but I use them a lot when teaching adults. For example, I might use a student’s phone to take a photo of their bow hold from different angles, or to record a piece so that they can hear the tuning at home, or to make a video demonstration of a bowing technique.

My personal experience as a musician has been that playing by ear and improvising are very beneficial to all aspects of playing, so I like to incorporate elements of this into my teaching right from the start. Even naturally creative adults tend to intellectualise more than children, so it is all the more important to get them thinking instinctively, even if only occasionally – particularly on an instrument like the violin, which involves such a strong focus on technique from an early stage.

To help develop listening skills I make up simple call-and-response exercises, starting with open-string pizzicato rhythms in the first lessons and gradually building up note and rhythmic complexity. I also reverse this activity, and ask the student to make up short phrases for me to copy. As they gain confidence, I’ll move on to recording a short, simple folk tune on their smartphone at the end of the lesson, and ask them to learn it by ear at home, or perhaps ask them to make up their own variation of a folk song.

When teaching new finger positions, or introducing shifting, one of my favourite exercises is to play a simple, well-known melody by ear, and then to transpose it into different keys so that the student is finding new notes aurally. For example, I might ask them to play Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star starting on an open G, D or A, and then to repeat it a tone higher, starting on the first finger (this version requires a ‘high’ third finger). When they find this easy, it’s a fairly simple step to move the hand up the violin and play the same thing in third or second position, again starting on a first finger.

Improvisation exercises are also very useful for improving the ear and for developing a more intuitive, internal ‘map’ of the instrument. I start with improvised rhythms on a single note and gradually build up to modal, pentatonic or twelve-bar blues melodies, played along to a backing track. These exercises can be done with just a small selection of notes to start with, and gradually developed (example 2).

Rhythm is possibly the most overlooked area by more advanced adult learners. Poor bowing technique and left-hand–right-hand coordination usually result in sloppy rhythms, and a preoccupation with technical difficulties can stifle the development of an internal pulse. When my students learn a new piece I insist that they clap the rhythm at the same time as counting the pulse out loud. I’m often surprised by how difficult this can be, but with perseverance this simple exercise can make a big improvement to their playing. Open-string
**EXAMPLE 1** Roll and Rock exercise for free right-arm movement across the strings (from Violinworks book 1, page 33)
In bars 1–4, 9–10, and 11–12, stop the bow on the string after the minim (♩) and roll it silently over the strings during the rest. Keep the shoulder relaxed and feel the right elbow drop as the bow moves towards the E string, and lift as it moves to the G string. The bowing should feel light and almost as if it’s floating. Move the whole arm as a unit when changing strings in bars 5–8 and 13–17, keeping the elbow level with the bowing hand. Visit bit.ly/294EQYQ to download a backing track.

**Relaxed ♩=92**

- roll the bow to the E string
- roll the bow to the G string
- roll the bow to the E string
- leave the bow on the E string
- roll the bow to the E string
- leave the bow on the E string
- roll the bow to the G string
- leave the bow on the G string
- roll the bow to the G string
- leave the bow on the G string

**EXAMPLE 2** Make up your own Japanese melody (from Violinworks book 1, page 70)
Traditional Japanese music is based on groups of five notes called pentatonic scales. Try making up your own Japanese-style melody in 4/4 time, using the notes of the pentatonic scale below — they will sound good in any order. Start with just crotchets (♩) and minims, then try adding some quavers (♩♩). Visit bit.ly/2QDQXst to download a backing track.

bowing practice can also improve rhythm: I ask the student to play a phrase (ideally with a metronome), bowing the correct open strings for the notes but without the left-hand fingerings. This enables them to focus on string-crossings, articulation and bow distribution, and when the bowing action improves, their rhythm tends to improve with it.

The idea of reading music often causes anxiety, but most students find it fairly straightforward if it is introduced gradually. A bigger problem is that pupils tend not to know the names of the notes they’re playing — they think ‘third finger on A string’ rather than ‘D’, for example. I discourage them from writing in fingerings, and try to get them into the habit of saying the note names out loud a couple of times while playing a new piece or scale. I think it’s important to get them to do this from the outset, otherwise they get very lost as more and more notes are introduced.

Throughout my years of teaching I have discovered how varied the benefits of learning music can be. I once taught an eccentric artist who had taken up the violin in his late fifties. He had never played an instrument and struggled terribly with almost every aspect of playing. Even after three years he had great difficulty counting simple rhythms and couldn’t remember the fingerings for any keys apart from D and G major. He practised every evening for an hour without fail, so I didn’t have the heart to give up on him, but I couldn’t understand why he kept going. One weekend he invited me to an exhibition of his paintings, which were beautiful — a cross between abstract and architectural style; he talked about how music had completely changed his approach to his art, and how he now felt he was ‘painting music’.

I realised that the years of lessons had been worthwhile, and was so glad that we had both persevered!
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