



OPENING MEASURES PRACTICE COMPANION



A Cellist's Monthly Guide for Discovering
Mastery Between the Notes

**SETTING UP FOR SUCCESS
—POSTURE AND FORM FOR A DEEPER TONE
AND MORE EFFORTLESS PLAYING**

the PRACTICE ROOM



DR. SOPHIE'S CELLO LAB

WELCOME



HELLO, CELLIST AND WELCOME TO

the PRACTICE ROOM

Whether you're brand new to the Practice Room or returning for another topical training, I'm so glad you're here.

This practice companion is your musical sandbox for the month: a place to explore, stretch, refine, and occasionally laugh at the strange things our hands do when we aren't paying attention.

You'll find a mix of technical focus, real-world application, and gentle prompts to help you listen more closely as your practice — not just to your cello, but to the areas that help us in connecting more intuitively with our wonderful cellos.

Here, we care about tone and tension, yes — but we also care about joy, curiosity, and the kind of attention that leads to lasting growth and artistry.

This is not about checking boxes. It's about showing up with your whole self (awkward shifts and all) and making real progress between the notes.

Take your time.
Bring your experience.
Invite curiosity.
Leave room for lasting discovery.

Let's begin. *Sophie*

“Every note has meaning rather as a look or a touch does;
the resulting conversations she has with the music are endlessly absorbing
~LAURENCE VITTES | GRAMOPHONE ”

WELCOME

ABOUT SOPHIE AND THE CELLO LAB

SOPHIE WEBBER



Dr Sophie has performed across the States and in the UK, has received numerous awards and prizes for her playing, and has released three critically acclaimed albums.

With over 25 years of teaching experience, she is a sought-after pedagogue and is frequently invited to give masterclasses across the USA and beyond.

She is also the Founding Artistic Director of Fused Mused Ensemble, a music and mixed media non-profit organization with a mission to amplify voices too often left unheard.

THE CELLO LAB



Inside the Cello Lab, you'll find two distinct paths to grow your playing and artistry: one for deep, foundational focus (*the PRACTICE ROOM*), and one for expressive exploration with high-level support (*the INNER STUDIO*).

the PRACTICE ROOM: For cellist of all levels seeking fresh, focused and foundational exploration for their “practice room” with access to a community of other adult cellists.

Offers monthly themed practice companions, topical trainings, live Q&A interactions, a supportive community, as well as community cello chats.

the INNER STUDIO: For cellists ready to explore artistry, expressive themes, score analysis, interpretations along with foundational focuses.

Offers a creative growth space in a professional online studio environment that includes master classes, small group instruction, private lessons and performance opportunities.

PRE-WARM-UP:

Mindset and physical warm-up away from cello
(see "Opening Reflection" and "Warm Up Preparation")

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WARM-UP: Checking in with overview of body position and cello set up.....

NOTES & REFLECTIONS:

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TECHNIQUE FOCUS: Exercises for I) Good form for the bow hold and bow arm II) Left hand and arm III) More effortless playing and a deeper tone

NOTES & REFLECTIONS:

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EXPLORE/LOOK UP SOME RESOURCES: past notes, online videos, etude books, other. (also see "Additional Resources")

REPERTOIRE: Berceuse ~ Franz Schubert
(focus on your choice of posture, cello set up, bow hold and bow arm, left hand and arm, breathing, and/or counter pressure)

NOTES & REFLECTIONS:

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(optional) LISTENING INTEGRATION: 1 x YouTube performance (of your choice).....
(optional) NOTES/OBSERVATIONS: other observations/ any Aha moments:

TIP: Do keep in mind the immense value of taking breaks... standing up, a quick stretch, brisk walk or cup of tea can do wonders for recentering our focus and gaining a fresh perspective

OPENING REFLECTION

*Posture & Form, guided
by your Body & Sound*



The wonderful cello pedagogue Uri Vardi puts it so well, “Your body is your Strad.” Deep body-awareness (posture, form and movement) are fundamental to our success as expressive artists. The more we tune into our body, observe, experiment, and look for balance and order, the more fluidity and freedom we gain as cellists and musicians.

There are so many elements that go into a good set up, and quite a large degree of variability as to what may work best for each individual. Variability can be found in aspects including endpin length, how vertical or flat the cello lies, contact points between body and cello, the exact slant of the left hand to fingerboard, and the exact positioning of fingers and thumb on the bow.

For optimal outcome, we need to stay open to what feels “right,” and most comfortable, while also realizing that we may have habits which we have unconsciously ingrained in our playing over time that do not always serve us best. This guiding companion offers an opportunity to take a step back, to question and/or reaffirm our position and form choices, always with a keen awareness of how small changes (that may seem insignificant at first) can allow us to produce an evermore beautiful and effortless tone.

Let’s investigate... enjoy and I encourage you to make a note of your discoveries!



OPENING REFLECTION

Let's set your intention and mindset for the month.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR CURRENT RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR POSTURE, FORM, AND OVERALL SET UP?

IN WHAT AREAS DO YOU WANT TO IMPROVE YOUR SET UP?

NOTES AND REFLECTIONS:



CONTENTS:

05

OPENING
REFLECTION

08

INTRODUCTION
& OVERVIEW

09

WARM-UP

16

TECHNIQUE
EXERCISE

19

THE STRETCH
ZONE

24

REPERTOIRE
APPLICATION

27

LISTENING &
INSPIRATION

28

INTEGRATION
AND CLOSING

32

WHAT'S NEXT

33

ADDITIONAL
RESOURCES

SETTING UP FOR SUCCESS



DR. SOPHIE'S CELLO LAB

SETTING UP FOR SUCCESS: POSTURE & FORM FOR A DEEPEK TONE AND MORE EFFORTLESS PLAYING

Welcome to your journey into great posture and form!

Welcome to a new month of exploration—this time, we're returning to the very beginning: how you meet the cello.

Posture and form are often treated as basics, but in truth, they're the quiet architects behind ease, sound quality, and long-term comfort. When your body is balanced, movement feels lighter. When you're aligned, your tone deepens naturally.

Throughout the month, you'll gently refine how you sit, how you hold your cello, and how your body organizes itself around each gesture.

Small shifts can change everything:

a freer spine **opens the breath**,
settled feet **ground your sound**, and
unlocked shoulders **invite resonance**.

Think of this as building a relationship—not checking off corrections.

Be patient,
Stay receptive,

And notice how the cello responds with a more resonant tone when you give it a more supportive frame.

With time, these adjustments won't feel like techniques at all.

You'll find yourself playing with more **comfort, confidence, and connection**.

Incorporating This Companion Into Your Practice Routine

To get the most out of this companion, approach it with a sense of curiosity and patience.

Treat each section as a building block in your tool kit development.

Start by incorporating the warm-ups into your daily routine—they're designed to reinforce foundational skills in a way that's both focused and fluid. **Then, on to the technique exercises and STRETCH ZONE**, you'll expand as you challenge yourself as you apply these skills in varied contexts.

The **repertoire application** section will show you how it all fits into real music—

Remember, there's no rush! Consistency over perfection is key.

And, if you stumble along the way, embrace it!

Sometimes the best insights come from those moments —because that's when you pause to discover what you are actually doing you allow what you are focusing on to fall into place.



WARM-UP PREPARATION

Preparatory Tips for Body Awareness:

- ♪ Breathe (long, slow breaths out)
- ♪ “Soften” your body (relaxed stomach, arms, neck)
- ♪ Stretch (eg. windmill arms, wriggle fingers, rotate wrists and forearms back and forth, squats, light jogging on spot --get circulation going!)
- ♪ Shoulders should be low and passive throughout the full length of bow (TIP: be especially cognizant of this in the upper half!)
- ♪ Feet should be grounded (like the roots of a tree!)

Tips for Tone Connection:

- ♪ A firmer approach will generally give you a better tone. This tends to mean A LITTLE MORE WEIGHT and, often, A LITTLE LESS BOW
- ♪ Explore finding a NATURAL WEIGHT (vs “pressing down”) with passive heavy shoulders and arms. The bow should feel like it is sinking into the string.
- ♪ We are looking for an “ENGAGED” SOUND rather than a superficial/skating one where the bow is too fast/too light.
- ♪ Careful your bow direction is parallel to the bridge and not moving up and down.
 - On the A string, the point will move a little closer to you (while your arm moves a little further from your body).
 - On the C string, the point will move a little further away from you (while your arm moves a little closer to your body)



WARM-UP PREPARATION

GENERAL TIPS FOR SUCCESS WITH THE WARM UPS & TECHNIQUE PLANS

TIPS FOR BODY POSITION

- Balance and comfort are at the heart of all aspects of playing cello
- Sit tall, chest out with broad, low shoulders
- Allow the head to feel like it is floating upwards out of the spine
- Sit towards edge of chair with a slight forward inclination, as if you are about to stand up
- Feet should be flat and firmly grounded
- Full breathing (from the diaphragm), be present, pay attention to how your body feels
- The form of both hands should be akin to holding a ball/orange
- The neck of the cello shouldn't be too far from your neck

CHECKPOINTS FOR EXPLORING YOUR CELLO SET UP

Check the following (see warm up guidelines for specifics):

- Chair height
- Endpin length
- Cello angle (flatter or more vertical)
- Three points of contact

TIPS FOR BOW HOLD & BOW ARM

- Let the fingers fall naturally
- Middle finger on silver piece
- Thumb in crook of frog (see **PHOTO H**)
- Low, broad shoulders
- Alignment of shoulder to elbow to hand can be likened to a waterfall, or a puppet loosely suspended at the elbow and wrist
- Pay attention to small but essential bow direction changes on each string (in keeping with the curve of the bridge); the bow should move parallel to the bridge on each string

TIPS FOR LEFT HAND & ARM

- Angle of hand to fingerboard should stay as consistent as possible in all positions along the fingerboard (fairly square on, with a very slight backwards slant, especially for larger hands/longer fingers)
- Shoulder leads shifts
- Light touch

TIPS FOR A DEEPER TONE & MORE EFFORTLESS PLAYING

- Relax more deeply with easy breathing
- Experiment with your position to increase counter-pressure between the bow and string



WARM-UP (5–15 minutes)

YOUR BODY, YOUR CELLO: SETTING UP FOR SUCCESS

This “Warm Up” section is devoted to understanding the main set up variables for our body and cello, and to finding the best set up for YOU.

In addition to explaining the set up variables, a series of recommended experiments are given to help you find a good set up.

Disclaimer: There should always be a natural fluidity and fluctuation in our posture, just like the music we play.

BODY POSITION

- i) sit tall, long neck, with head “floating” at top of spine (vs dipping forwards)
- ii) shoulders are broad and low
- iii) sit towards edge of chair with a slight forward inclination, as if you are about to stand up
- iv) feet should be firmly planted like the roots of a tree
- v) Breathe, be present, pay attention to how your body feels

CELLO SET UP VARIABLES	FINDING THE RIGHT SET UP FOR YOU
<p>HEIGHT OF CHAIR</p> <p>Hips should be very slightly higher than knees (and never lower than the knees). Angle at knee is a little obtuse/at a right angle (PHOTO A)</p>	<p>Experiment with the chair height. A little higher can help a slight forwards inclination in the torso, but too high can result in “crowding” the cello</p>
<p>ENDPIN LENGTH</p> <p>Endpin length varies considerably between players. It should be determined based on two factors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i) being able to play comfortably with the bow in contact point lane 5 (near the bridge) --ie. a slightly longer endpin ii) being able to play with the left hand in 1st position, without needing to reach back so far that it becomes overly strenuous. PHOTO C shows a comfortable position, while PHOTO D shows a position with the LH and elbow reaching too far back (endpin is too long here). 	<p>Look for an endpin length that allows you to comfortably hold the bridge with both hands (PHOTO B)</p> <p>The scroll should be around a “fist” distance from shoulder. It can be a little more than this, but the neck should NOT touch the shoulder</p>



CELLO SET UP VARIABLES	FINDING THE RIGHT SET UP FOR YOU
<p style="text-align: center;">ENDPIN POSITION</p> <p>The endpin should be centered so the strings run somewhat parallel to the spine (nuances of this are discussed in the box below). Once you have established a position, Lynn Harrell suggests moving the endpin about 1" <i>further</i> away from you and using this extra space to "lean into" the cello, gaining more torso weight in the string (this is explored in Stretch Zone B and its accompanying Video)</p>	<p>Finding the exact right endpin position for you is a rather subjective topic. Always allow the sound to guide you, as well as what feels most comfortable (although try to stay open to trying setups that may feel unfamiliar at first)</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">CELLO ANGLE: FLATTER OR MORE VERTICAL?</p> <p>This is a rather personal choice depending on body type, and also inevitably affects the endpin length. A flatter angle allows more natural arm weight into the cello, while a little more vertical angle allows the player to "lean into" the cello with more back engagement. Cellists who played with a flat cello (and bent endpin) include Mstislav Rostropovich and Paul Tortelier. Cellists who play with a straighter cello include Nikolas Perenyi and Steven Isserlis</p>	<p>Often, taller and/or bigger cellists prefer a longer and/or bent endpin. However, there is no "one size fits all" and many great cellists have played with rather short endpins (including Casals, Leonard Rose, Lynn Harrell and Zara Nelson)</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">THREE POINTS OF CONTACT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chest (most important) • L knee • R knee (can be minimal contact with R knee...careful not to muffle/squeeze the cello with this knee which can in effect mute the sound (PHOTO A)) 	<p>Play an open string with the R knee barely/not at all touching the cello, and then with the R knee squeezing the cello. How does the sound change?</p>



PHOTO A: Hips a little above knees, 3 Points of Contact (note the R knee does not touch the cello here... when playing the A string, the A string side will be turned upwards a little and the R knee will touch the cello), Slight Forwards Inclination, Feet Firmly Grounded



PHOTO B: Checking endpin length for the bow arm by “hugging” the bridge



PHOTO C: Checking endpin length for left arm by comfortably reaching back to play 1st position



PHOTO D: (*bad position*) Checking endpin length for left arm. 1st position is uncomfortable because endpin is too long



WARM-UP

REFLECTION ...

WHAT DO YOU NOTICE ABOUT ANY SMALL POSTURAL SHIFTS YOU ARE TRYING/HOW YOU FEEL AS YOU GO THROUGH THESE WARM-UP EXERCISES?

WHERE DO YOU THINK YOUR FOCUS SHOULD BE GOING FORWARD?

NOTES AND REFLECTIONS:

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TECHNIQUE EXERCISE

DEVELOPING GOOD FORM IN THE BOW HOLD AND BOW ARM

The exercises in this section are designed to develop and/or reaffirm a great bow hold and bow arm positioning.

As well as nurturing a **firm but flexible bow hold**, and **awareness of good bow arm form**, this section also addresses some of the most common bow arm and bow hold mistakes.

COMMON BOW HOLD MISTAKES

- Thumb squeezing
- Thumb pushing forwards under the stick instead of sideways towards the nut of the bow
- Index finger too curled around stick
- Collapsed back of hand
- Hand overly pronated or supinated

COMMON BOW ARM MISTAKES

- Raised right shoulder
- Elbow too high or too low
- Wrist too high or too low
- Not changing bow direction for different strings
- Not sufficiently outstretching the arm/forearm in the upper half of the bow, especially on the A string



TECHNIQUE EXERCISE

EXERCISES FOR GOOD FORM IN THE BOW HOLD & BOW ARM

BOW HOLD

1. For a **good basic bow hold set up**, make repeated check ins with the following steps during your practice* (**PHOTOS F & H**):

~Middle finger on silver

~Bent thumb in crook

*Pay particular attention to not squeezing the thumb. Bow hold should be firm but flexible

2. For a **“tall” vs collapsed back of hand** (**PHOTOS F & G**)

This works really well for children, but can also work for adult learners! Imagine there is a precious tiny creature on top of the bow just below your little finger. Perhaps give your creature a name for more accountability? 😊
Don't squash Bob!

3. For a **flexible vs straight/rigid thumb** that doesn't squeeze!

Try placing the little finger behind the stick of the bow, and then taking the thumb completely off it. Play a few notes like this — you will likely be surprised at how much sound you can get without the thumb. This shows how squeezing the thumb only creates unwanted tension (and not more sound). (See **Video demonstration**)

4. For **bow hold familiarization and bow finger strengthening** exercises ((See **Video demonstration**)):

- i) “climbing up and down the stick”
- ii) “windscreen wipers”
- iii) “opening and closing the gate”

BOW ARM FORM

1. For awareness of a **low right shoulder**

Cross your arms over the cello, holding onto the fingerboard. Keeping hold of the fingerboard, flap your elbows repeatedly up and down, allowing the shoulders to drop fully (See **Video demonstration**)

2. For **correct alignment of shoulder to elbow to hand** (and to avoid a too high OR low elbow):

Fully outstretch both arms in front of you, then loosely drop the forearm at the elbow, as if the elbow is attached to a puppet string above. (The left forearm then bends at the elbow and raises to the fingerboard into playing position)

3. To find **good bow direction on the A string**, especially at the point:

It is very common to not outstretch the right arm sufficiently on the A string at the point. Try practising A string bow direction (bow parallel to bridge) with a mirror or phone camera slightly offset to the A string side (ie to your left). Disclaimer: it is also important to avoid over-extending the arm here. Many cellists find it helpful to find more weight at the point by very slightly hooking the bow direction at the point for the A string.

Disclaimer: everyone's hands and bodies are unique, so the exact positioning will be slightly different for everyone



PHOTO F: Middle finger on silver, “tall” back of hand



PHOTO G: *bad* position. Collapsed back of hand, squashing Bob!



PHOTO H: Bent thumb in crook, facing the screw of the bow, sideways

