

# Instrumental Music Pedagogy in Primary and Middle School Levels: Taking Bach's Prelude in "Cello Suite No. 1 in G Major" as an Example

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## Abstract:

For students aged 11 to 13 learning musical instruments, maintaining their interest in music while improving practice efficiency and classroom effectiveness remains a challenge for instrumental music teachers. How can teachers address problems that arise during practice sessions? How can they help students develop good practice habits and methods? This paper seeks to explore common strategies for instrumental music pedagogy by examining three different types of instruments. Using the Prelude in J.S. Bach's "Cello Suite No. 1 in G Major", BWV 1007 as an example, it discusses string-changing techniques on the violin, intonation on the saxophone, musical fluency, and the light and steady technique required for interpreting Bach's works on the piano.

**Keywords:** instrumental music pedagogy; instrument practice; beginner musicians.

## 1. Introduction

With the rapid development of music education in China, the demand for instrumental music instruction among teenagers is increasing. Professional colleges have established systems for instrumental music pedagogy, regularly offering teacher training and seminars where in-service teachers can share their experiences. However, many teachers working in non-professional institutions, such as primary and middle schools, are not part of this structured system. These teachers often rely on their personal learning experiences to guide their instruction, resulting in a lack of communication between peers and leading to a "closed-door" approach to teaching, similar to the

ancient oral tradition.

This situation leads to significant variation in the proficiency of students learning musical instruments. Additionally, there is no standardized method or practice sequence, which indirectly hinders the progress of music education in China.

Another challenge is that students aged 11 to 13 often have shorter attention spans and may struggle with understanding musical concepts. As a result, they frequently encounter difficulties when learning an instrument. Given the limited time available in class and the incomplete nature of what is taught, students are often left unsure about how to correct their mistakes when practicing on their own.

In light of these challenges, effective practice habits and methods become crucial. Teachers often emphasize the importance of knowing “how to practice” and “practicing with a purpose.” This paper aims to explore the commonalities in instrumental music pedagogy by examining three different instruments: violin, saxophone, and piano. Using the Prelude in J.S. Bach’s „Cello Suite No. 1 in G Major“, BWV 1007 as an example, the paper will discuss violin string-changing techniques, saxophone intonation, and the fluency and light, steady technique required for interpreting Bach’s piano works.

## 2. General Methods in Instrumental Music Teaching

How can students practice their instruments effectively? This paper presents teaching methods and strategies by examining three different musical instruments. Using the Prelude in Bach’s „Cello Suite No.1 in G Major“ as an example, we have developed a general approach suitable for teaching 11-to-13-year-old students across various instruments:

1. Review musical terms, identify key signatures, and determine accidentals (sharps and flats).
2. Identify wide intervals and technical challenges.
3. Practice with a metronome, starting slow and gradually increasing speed (playing only notes, without expression).
4. Repeatedly practice with a tuner to stabilize intonation.
5. After mastering tempo, listen to recordings and imitate musical phrasing.
6. Fine-tune performance by listening to audio and incorporating classroom feedback.

Bach’s Prelude in „Cello Suite No. 1 in G Major“ was chosen for this analysis because it is a well-known and widely studied piece. Almost every instrument has its own arrangement of this work. It is also the earliest and most representative example of unaccompanied music, highly valued for its musical depth and composition. While challenging for 11-to-13-year-old students, it is still attainable with appropriate teaching methods.

## 3. Violin Teaching

Among various musical instruments, the violin is known for its difficulty, requiring highly developed playing techniques. To help students quickly master the music, it’s essential to focus on specific methods. This section uses the first 15 bars of Bach’s Prelude in „Cello Suite No. 1“ as an example to discuss effective violin practice techniques.

### 3.1 Open Score Preparation

When first approaching this classic work, students should begin by “opening the score.” This preparation involves identifying key elements of the music, such as pitch, rhythm, tonality, musical terms, and tempo markings. Understanding these foundational aspects is critical before moving on to more complex practice methods.

### 3.2 Slow-to-Fast Practice

For 11-to-13-year-olds, it is unrealistic to expect immediate mastery of the piece. Therefore, starting practice at a slow tempo is crucial. Practicing slowly prevents frustration and helps students focus on accuracy in pitch and rhythm, ultimately improving the precision of their playing.

### 3.3 Split Bow Practice

String students should practice with split bowing techniques. After achieving proficiency at a slow speed, they can begin practicing faster sections and more complex rhythmic patterns. This method also prepares them for practicing string changes, an essential skill for this particular piece, which involves numerous chord changes. It is important for students to maintain tonal consistency when transitioning between strings.

### 3.4 String Changing Techniques

Mastering string changes is fundamental for any violinist. The violin has four strings, and careful attention to angle is required when switching between them. Incorrect angles can lead to unclear transitions and poor tone quality, potentially causing accidental contact with other strings.

Violin string changes generally fall into two categories: same-direction or opposite-direction string changes, and large-scale chord replacements. In Bach’s „Cello Suite No. 1“, both types of string changes are present. For same-direction or opposite-direction changes, players must find the optimal angle to transition smoothly. During upward movements, the index finger provides more pressure, while downward movements require coordination between the pinky and wrist. The entire string change should follow a smooth curve, and players must listen carefully to ensure the correct sound is produced.

Large-span chords, which require coordination between the upper and lower arms, are another key element. Players must control the direction and angle of their bow with joint action from the forearm and upper arm. Figure 1 illustrates these techniques, showing bars 1-8 of Bach’s Prelude in „Cello Suite No. 1“.



**Fig. 1 J.S. Bach, Prelude in „Cello Suite No. 1 in G Major“, BWV 1007, mm.1-8**

After mastering string changes, students must also focus on intonation, rhythm, tone, and synchronization between the left and right hands. Intonation and tone are particularly important and should be honed by practicing with a metronome and listening carefully to the intervals and harmonic relationships. Additionally, the left and right hands must be in sync, with the bow hand ready at the same time as the left-hand fingers. By gradually increasing the tempo and practicing diligently, students will improve their proficiency and begin to infuse the piece with emotion, ultimately leading to a full performance of the work.

#### 4. Teaching Saxophone

In teaching wind instruments like the saxophone, the focus shifts slightly compared to other instruments. For example, teachers emphasize aspects like breathing, embouchure (mouth shape), and air support, rather than just finger movements. However, mastering the score remains essential before addressing these issues. After students complete the preliminary steps (like identifying musical terms and key signatures), they proceed to step 3, where

they practice with a metronome, starting slowly and gradually increasing speed. This section will discuss specific strategies for teaching saxophone, focusing on bars 15-29 of Bach’s Prelude in „Cello Suite No. 1“.

In these bars, the rhythm is relatively simple, consisting mainly of 4/6 fast note patterns. For 11-to-13-year-old students, this can be intimidating, and they may not know where to start or how to avoid mistakes. The following sections will discuss these challenges.

#### 4.1 Practice in Sections

When confronted with a large, complex, or fast-paced piece, it’s essential to break it down into smaller, manageable sections. For instance, you could divide the rhythm in bars 15-29 into two-beat segments, one-bar units, or even phrases, depending on the student’s skill level. Each segment should be practiced repeatedly until it’s mastered. A helpful rule of thumb is to practice each segment ten times, and if a student plays it correctly three times in a row, they can move on. If they can’t meet that standard, they should repeat the section at least five more times until achieving proficiency.



**Figure 2: J.S. Bach, Prelude in „Cello Suite No. 1 in G Major“, BWV 1007, mm.15-29 [1]**

#### 4.2 Use a Metronome

To ensure rhythmic accuracy, using a metronome is essential, particularly for fast, dense, or complex rhythms. Once the music is broken into segments, students should practice slowly and gradually increase the tempo. Begin with a metronome set at 80 beats per minute. Once the student can play the segment three times without mistakes at that tempo, increase the speed to 85, then 90, and so on, until the student reaches the performance tempo. This method increases efficiency and reduces errors, helping students make steady progress.

#### 4.3 Pitch and Breathing Issues

Intonation is a crucial concern for wind instruments. Unlike string instruments, intonation in wind instruments can be influenced by several factors, such as temperature, humidity, embouchure, and the size and shape of the mouth. Maintaining proper pitch is one of the biggest challenges for saxophone learners, especially since many of Bach's works were not originally composed for wind instruments and therefore don't account for breath control. For young students, controlling breathing while maintaining musical flow can be difficult. Here are some techniques to address these issues:

#### 4.4 Using a Tuner for Long Notes

To tackle intonation issues (excluding external factors like reeds or the instrument's condition), students can make small adjustments to their embouchure to control pitch. When the pitch is low, tightening the embouchure will raise it, while relaxing the embouchure will lower the pitch. After completing basic steps of the practice routine,

students should move on to addressing intonation problems by using a tuner. As part of their daily practice, students can play long notes while checking intonation with a tuner. If the pitch is correct, they can continue; if not, they can make adjustments to the embouchure. Over time, this practice helps students develop a mental concept of correct pitch, improving their ability to play in tune without relying on the tuner. This method has proven effective in training intonation in 11-to-13-year-olds, as confirmed through both the author's teaching experience and discussions with other educators.

#### 4.5 The "Micro-processing"

Breathing control is another important skill that can be fine-tuned using microprocessing techniques. For modern wind music, most scores include breath marks, which students should follow. If a score lacks these marks, teachers can guide students in marking breath points by listening to audio recordings and analyzing the phrasing. This approach helps students develop musicality and a deeper understanding of phrasing.

One key aspect of wind performance is maintaining the smoothness and fluidity of phrasing. For pieces with few breaks, like „Cello Suite No. 1“, students must find subtle ways to manage their breathing. A helpful technique is to slightly accelerate the first half of a phrase and decelerate the final few notes, creating a natural point to take a breath without disrupting the musical flow. For example, in bars 22-25 (see Figure 3), the student can slightly speed up in the middle of the phrase and slow down towards the end, allowing for a smooth breath. This method adds musicality and prevents abrupt pauses in the phrasing.

Figure 3: J.S. Bach, Prelude in „Cello Suite No. 1 in G Major“, BWV 1007, mm.21-28 [1]

#### 4.6 Benefits of Structured Practice

These practice methods help standardize how students approach music, ensuring that they use effective strategies

for learning difficult pieces. Teachers can track students' progress by observing how well they complete homework, perform in class, and apply practice techniques at home.

By communicating with parents, teachers can also ensure that students are practicing correctly outside of lessons, allowing for timely adjustments and reinforcing good practice habits.

Overall, these structured approaches help young students build their skills in a methodical way, improving their proficiency, musical understanding, and ability to manage the technical demands of the saxophone.

## 5. Piano Teaching

The piano, a keyboard instrument, differs significantly from single-part instruments like the violin and saxophone in terms of style, technique, and practice methods. For pianists, mastering hand coordination and developing a refined touch on the keys are essential. In this section, we will explore key questions in bars 29-42 of Bach's Prelude in „Cello Suite No. 1“, including how to handle dynamics (strength and weakness) and how to convey emotion through performance.

**Fig. 4 J.S. Bach, Prelude in „Cello Suite No. 1 in G Major“, BWV 1007, mm.37-42**

For example, the left-hand column chords in bars 37-42 move up in half-tone increments. To teach these chords, students can practice using the first, third, and fifth fingers to control the three-note chords. If students struggle to play all three notes simultaneously, they can break the chord down into simpler exercises to build muscle memory. Repetition is key to mastering the feeling of exerting equal pressure on all three fingers, eventually playing the

### 5.1 Touching the Keys

For beginners, controlling dynamics isn't just about applying more or less force. Instead, it's about the speed at which the keys are pressed and the subtle involvement of the fingers, wrists, and even the palms. In Bach's work, the emphasis is on a light and smooth touch, mirroring the clavichord's feel, as his music was originally composed for that instrument. Consequently, there's little need for the use of the piano's pedal when playing Bach. His melodies are straightforward yet powerful, characterized by clear rhythms and progressions.

When teaching, it's crucial to convey the balance between strength and weakness in the right hand when playing rhythms in 4/6 time. The goal is to achieve a smooth and continuous touch that reflects Bach's lightness and rhythmic clarity. Students should focus on creating an elegant and rhythmic performance by directly touching the notes without lifting the fingers too high or pressing them too hard. Instead, they should rely on relaxed fingers and controlled wrist movements to press the keys, managing the dynamics of the melody with sensitivity.

chords smoothly. Additionally, students should ensure that the volume of the left hand doesn't overshadow the right hand's melody. It's important to note that weak touches on the left-hand chords don't mean lightly grazing the keys; rather, the student should aim for a clear, full sound.

### 5.2 Breathing Sensation and Strength Manage-

## ment

When teaching the concept of „breathing“ in musical phrases, consider bars 29-42 of Bach’s work. The fluidity of the melody is tied to a sense of breath. For example, bars 27-28 contain a rising rhythm, followed by a descending scale run in bars 29-30. Students can breathe musically at bar 28, using the rhythm patterns to guide their phrasing. This approach helps them clearly express different phrases with appropriate tonal contrasts, enhancing their musical interpretation.

In terms of dynamics, students can manage the strength of melody lines by following the direction of the music. In bars 27-30, the upward progression suggests a gradual increase in strength, while downward passages call for a softer touch. In bars 31-36, both hands play a La note. To emphasize the highest note in the melody, students should stress the La note while maintaining clarity in both hands. They can achieve this by slow, deliberate practice, repeatedly linking the notes with an emphasis on the La note.

The intensity of the music increases steadily from bars 27 to 40, with the dynamic peak arriving in bars 37-38. Students must create a strong contrast between soft and loud dynamics, moving from weaker sections to stronger climaxes. Finally, as the music reaches its conclusion in bars 39-42, it gradually fades. At the end of the last bar, students can extend the final note slightly to add grace and poise to their performance.

By following this practice method, students will not only become proficient in handling dynamic contrasts but also improve their ability to express emotion through their playing. Watching professional performance videos can further help them understand how seasoned pianists manage dynamics and emotion, enabling them to incorporate their own emotional interpretations into their performances. Ultimately, this method will help students breathe life into the music, making their playing lively, clear, and elegant.

## 6. Conclusion

Instrumental music students often face challenges due to varying degrees of professional training and a lack of clear, standardized methods. This paper addresses these challenges in students aged 11 to 13, using Bach’s Prelude in „Cello Suite No. 1 in G Major“ as an example, and examines the practice principles and methods for violin, saxophone, and piano. By outlining step-by-step teaching strategies, the paper provides instrumental music teachers and students with valuable guidance.

Although a general teaching method applicable to all instruments is introduced at the beginning of this paper,

it’s impossible to cover every unique playing technique or training method within these pages. The hope is that this paper will inspire educators and scholars in the field of instrumental music education to further refine teaching theories and methods in the future.

### Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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