Part Three: A Sequential Approach to Etudes

by Robert Jesselson

The first two parts of this series discussed the benefits of employing an organized and sequential approach for teaching the intermediate string player. With this method the string teacher can create a solid technical and musical foundation for the student, and avoid skipping over important information that will be required for his/her future growth. Part One explored the complex set of skills, knowledge and experiences that a developing string player needs to acquire in order to become a competent musician and creative artist. Part Two of this series discussed the use of organized exercises to address specific aspects of the technique. These exercises, along with the ubiquitous scales and arpeggios that musicians need to master, are the basic building blocks of technique. Etudes then expand on the micro-technique of the exercises. They begin to put the technical pieces together into musical shapes, and should be approached both technically and musically. The current article will explore the importance of providing a good sequence of etudes in order to solidify the technique and facilitate the learning of literature.

The repertoire of cello etudes is large and varied, with many excellent studies from which to choose. Besides Duport, Dotzauer, Lee, Popper, Franchomme, Piatti, and Servais, we have etudes by Gruetzmacher, Kummer, Klengel, Merk as well as contemporary etudes by Minsky and others. There are also collections of etudes compiled by pedagogues such as Alwin Schroeder. Although I use individual etudes by all of these composers to address specific issues, I prefer to use a succession of complete etude books in order to immerse the students in a specific technical and stylistic approach by one composer at a time. (see Figure 1 “Sequence of Etude Books”). For example, the Duport etudes are in the style of the late classical period, as opposed to the Franchomme (1835) with its early Romantic French style influenced by Chopin, or the Popper with its late Romantic style influenced by Wagner (1901). The syllabus of etudes that I use also provides a technical progression from “easy” to “difficult” in a way that helps the young musician to grow organically in a slow and healthy manner. I have noticed that some teachers assign difficult Popper etudes to students when they are not yet ready to handle the complexities of those etudes. The result can be frustration and occasionally actual physical harm. In addition, the students are stuck on one etude for a long time as they try to come to terms with the difficult

challenges. This then breeds an overall dislike of etudes resulting in their reputation as the cod-liver oil of technique. When etudes are presented to the students as a regular part of their musical diet, when they move through them easily and quickly, and when they realize the benefits that they accrue from working on them, then etudes become more like the daily habit of brushing one's teeth!

My students are expected to be working on two etudes every week. One of these assigned etudes is new. In the first week they "sketch" it for the next lesson. This means that as they practice they write in any information that will help them play it: fingerings, bowings, positions if needed, and dynamics. They also write in the tempo at which they are currently playing it, as well as the "goal" tempo at which they imagine it should eventually be played. They should know the meaning of all the words that are in the music, looking them up in the dictionary if necessary. I rarely tell the students the meaning of musical words or foreign terms – I feel that it is better for them to look them up and read about them as part of a process of exploration. Learning becomes more meaningful through their own active discovery of the information rather than passively hearing about it from me. In addition, they should be able to verbalize what the etude is "about", meaning the technical and/or musical issues that are the focus of the etude.

The second etude should be approached during the week as a "playthrough" for the lesson. This means that it is a real performance of the etude, with no stopping for mistakes. In this way students have weekly opportunities to experience the focus and concentration required for performing. This is also part of the continual process of becoming more comfortable with playing for people. The point of these "playthroughs" is not necessarily a perfect performance, but one that demonstrates a good command of the technical issues involved in the etude. Therefore, it is very important that the etude be within the technical grasp of the student. It should be challenging, but not too difficult for the student to be able to master within a short period of time. It is psychologically important to help build the student's self-confidence by "passing off" these etudes on a regular basis. In doing so, students obtain a sense of accomplishment, and can recognize that they are getting through a lot of material.

If the “playthrough” is not successful, or if the technical issues have not been completely absorbed, then I will ask the student to live with the etude for another week, focusing on the specific problems that need to be addressed. If the problem is just that there are too many “blips” in the performance I often ask the students to videotape themselves and send me the video by Dropbox or Youtube. The advantage of this method is that the students will see and hear their own performances and will usually record the etude multiple times before sending it to me. As a result, they will solve their own problems and set their own standards to a higher level.

Some of the etudes will be studied for longer than just two or three weeks. If they are to be “perfected” to be performed in a cello class for their colleagues, or in a college jury at the end of the semester, or as a memorization project, they will likely need to be massaged for a longer period of time. For some of the more challenging etudes I will tell the student that we will return to the etude in a few weeks or months after letting it lie fallow for a while. This is important in addressing some issues in which students have reached a temporary limit in their ability to master the technique (e.g. velocity, specialty strokes, some intonation issues, etc.).

For my college students the syllabus requires that they “pass off” a certain number of etudes each semester, and their grade depends on it. This ensures that they are moving forward with learning new etudes throughout the semester.

As indicated previously, I have found the sequence of etude books in Figure 1 to be an effective progression for the developing cellist. I usually start my pre-college students with the Dotzauer Book One, even if they are already somewhat more advanced as players. These etudes address many of the fundamental technical issues, and build on the concurrent work on the Feuillard and other exercises. I want to make sure that all the basic issues have been discussed and absorbed. For the right hand, these issues include tone production, bow distribution, bow strokes, string crossings, etc. For the left hand these include recognition of scales and arpeggios within a piece, velocity, shifting, and of course intonation. The Dotzauer etudes also challenge the student’s ability to concentrate for longer periods of time, since many of the later etudes in the book are two pages long.

In contrast, the Lee etudes are much shorter, and although they include many technical problems that need to be solved, they are more enjoyable on a musical level. I use these etudes to focus on various interpretive topics, such as tone color, phrasing, shaping lines and style. Each etude has a specific pedagogical focus, in addition to the obvious technical and musical issues. I will discuss some of these etudes in more detail below.

After completing Lee Book 1, the student continues with the Duport etudes. I usually use about half of this book, because some of the etudes are too difficult at this point in the student's development. I usually start with #11, and then do 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 (if the student has finished the Feuillard #35 exercises), 10, 13 and 19 (not necessarily in that order). As with the Lee etudes, I have specific goals for each study. For example, I use #11 to discuss various practice techniques, including the "Practice Flow Chart"[1]. This is also a long four-page etude that involves the entire range of the cello, so it is an important benchmark for the developing cellist.

After the Duport it is time to begin the Popper "Intermediate" etudes, Op. 76. Many cellists ignore this group of 10 etudes, but it is an excellent preparation for the "High School". As with most of the Popper etudes, these studies focus on the left hand, with the exception of number 1 (bow distribution), and number 6 (legato vs. up-bow staccato). The style of these etudes is radically different from the preceding Duport, Lee and Dotzauer studies, and the students will broaden their understanding of chromaticism and late 19th century harmony. I do not emphasize the son filé bowing at this point (e.g. in # 2, 5, 7, 8), and prefer for the students to ignore the printed bowings and play with fewer notes per bow with a good sound. Son filé requires a very slow bow speed and a tempo that is faster than is appropriate at this point for most students. That will come later.

Following the Popper Op. 76, I usually use the Franchomme Caprices, Op. 7 as an interlude before continuing with more Poppers. These etudes provide an opportunity to work on a "French" sound, as well as musical issues of style and timing. They are also nice as duets and some of them can be used as concert pieces.

At this point the student should be ready to tackle the Popper High School etudes, and not just the “easy” ones among the 40. Interspersed and following the Poppers are the etudes by Piatti and Servais, as well as those by many other composers.

As with any pedagogical material it is up to the teacher to find ways to make it as interesting as possible for the student. An etude can be a boring drudge or it can be a portal for a student to explore the depths beyond the printed page. If a musician can bring an etude to life and make it work as a nascent piece of music, then he/she will find it easier to make a great composition come alive. It is the teacher’s responsibility to show how this can be done with an etude – either by playing it for the student as a demonstration, or by presenting ideas that will excite the student and entice him/her to explore the possibilities.

In the next section of this article I will examine some of the etudes in the Lee Op. 31, Book 1 and explain some of the issues that I generally discuss with my students. Although one often thinks of etudes as purely technical studies, the Lee are especially useful for working on musical issues as well. Teachers often overlook this when working with etudes, resulting in students missing opportunities to learn more about form, tone color, phrasing, and dynamics through etudes.

Sebastian Lee (1805-1887) (picture below) was a German cellist and pedagogue. He was principal cellist in the Grand Opera orchestra in Paris. Lee’s melodies are essentially Classical in style, and they provide an opportunity to explore Classical phrasing in shaping musical lines.

The Classical concept of beauty traces back to the ancient Greeks, with the Golden Section or phi (.6). It shows up in architecture, art and music, as well as in nature. Classical beauty contains both symmetry and balance. In music the phrases have a high point and a low point that should be identifiable, and they usually have a fairly simple dynamic shape without as many “wiggles” in the line as might be found in romantic phrasing. The direction of the musical line is not necessarily towards the highest note in the phrase, but the high point is often slightly past the middle, in keeping with phi.

For example, in Lee etude #1 (Figure 3), the first phrase is four measures long. I ask the students to play the phrase and try making the line work

by going to different notes as the top of the phrase. For example, if they choose the C in the second measure, then they should crescendo up to the C and the diminuendo all the way to the end, for a simple phrase structure. After several experiments (perhaps phrasing to the D in the second measure, or the last F) they will often decide that the best phrasing is to crescendo to the open D in the third measure and then diminuendo to the end. At that point I will play the phrase for them, showing how a crescendo to the F in the third measure works slightly better, since it keeps the motion going longer and increases the tension slightly. I then point out that this is phi, at approximately the 2/3 point, which is typical of classical phrasing.

The next step is to recognize how the first phrase group of 16 measures includes 3 phrases consisting of 4, 4, and then 8 measures. Each phrase within the group has its own classical shape, but the entire phrase group works together with the point of arrival at the E-flat in measure 15. In other words, the third phrase in the group does not consist of two two-measure mini-phrases followed by a four-measure extension, but rather it is a long phrase that culminates in the arrival of the C in measure 17 and the return of the first phrase.

At this point the student should write in the dynamics for the entire etude as part of the sketching assignment, and be able to point to the emotional peak of the entire etude (which happens to be about 2/3 the way through the piece, in keeping with the Golden Section).

Below is a summary of some of the important concepts for several of the Lee etudes:

#2 – phrase groupings of 2-2-4 measures, proportionally similar to the first etude; simple crescendo/decrescendos within each phrase, similar to etude #1; measures 25-32 should be practiced as double stops, identifying intervals and writing in arrows to indicate high/low according to the principles of Expressive Intonation. As with all the etudes in Lee, dynamics should be written in throughout, according to principles of classical style.

#4 – Although indicated as a scherzo (“joke”), the form is actually a rondo. Students should figure out the form ($AA^1BA^2CA^1AC$-Coda or ABACAC-Coda). This etude provides an opportunity to discuss the

background of the scherzo as well as rondo form. Is the “joke” in this etude the flying spiccato stroke which sounds like “ha, ha, ha, ha”?

#5 – 2-2-4 phrase structure; Crescendo on the down-bow towards second measure with the peak after the bar-line; decrescendo on the up-bow; Where is the Golden Section for the etude? How to treat the ending? (typical fading away for many of these etudes).

#6,7,9, 10, 11- each of these etude has particular “issues” (classical vs. romantic shifts, sustaining notes over the bar-line, etc), but overall the student should recognize the different sound worlds for each, and provide descriptions of tone and mood using metaphors, colors, stories, etc.

#12 – again 4-4-8 phrase structure; sautillé stroke; measures 74-89 contain four 4 measures phrases that are a sequence based on the interval sequence: 8^{va}, 6^{th}, Tritone, 3^{rd}, and should be practiced as double-stops. If the students cannot grab the octave, they should work on over-extensions to broaden the hand and increase flexibility

#13 – provides a nice opportunity to discuss variation form, pointing out how the composer creates the variations from the theme; I usually ask the students to listen to other variation pieces, including Mozart’s "Ah vous dirai-je, Maman" and Dohnanyi’s “Variations on a Nursery Tune”, Op. 25.

#16 – for the sound concept of this etude I discuss “messa di voce” and the sound of a portative organ, and I point out the similarity in mood to the opening to the Bach Second Suite.

#17 – this etude is filled with possibilities for exploring polyphonic voices, as in Bach; I discuss terraced dynamics and ask the students to write in clearly where the voices change, (possibly using slashes to show the different voices), even in the middle of what may seem to be one continuous musical line; since this is a somewhat long etude in E-flat, I ask them to think of it as a training etude for the Fourth Suite.

#18 – this etude is reminiscent of a Rossini overture, and I ask the students to listen to several of them in order to understand the style. The Largo should be operatic and dramatic in nature; the Allegro uses a fast

sautillé stroke and should bring out some unexpected voices with small accents.

#22 – although this etude is mostly an exploration of string crossings using three strings, it also requires a shaping of the arpeggios with crescendos going up and decrescendos going down, using bow speed for the dynamics. In addition the fingers should be releasing in order to vibrate every note. This is a long etude, and requires awareness of relaxation in order not to get tight.

For some teachers the sequential approach to teaching described in these three articles may sound rigid or like a straight-jacket. However, the intent is to provide a pedagogical framework which will enable creative teaching and thinking to occur all the time. Much as our vaunted "Sonata Allegro" form provides an exoskeleton for compositions that are all unique, this pedagogical technique creates an environment for good teaching and learning on a regular basis. Needless to say, there are many exceptions to the syllabus and this sequential approach, and every lesson is not the same, just as every student has a different learning style and needs to be approached differently. Besides the regular weekly diet of scales, arpeggios, exercises, etudes and repertoire, lessons may also include sight-reading, student/teacher duets, orchestral excerpts, or even some time needed for "counseling". And sometimes it is important to just "break the mould". But every lesson should be a joyful exploration into the craft and art of playing an instrument, and a rich environment of learning and feeling.

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Figure 1:

Sequence of Etude Books

Popper – 15 Easy Studies

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Dotzauer – 123 Etudes - Book 1

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Lee - Melodic Studies, Op. 31 - Book 1

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Duport – 21 Etudes

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Popper - 10 Etudes, Op. 76

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Franchomme – 12 Caprices, Op. 7

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Popper – "High School" of Cello Playing, Op. 73

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Servais – 6 Caprices, Op. 11

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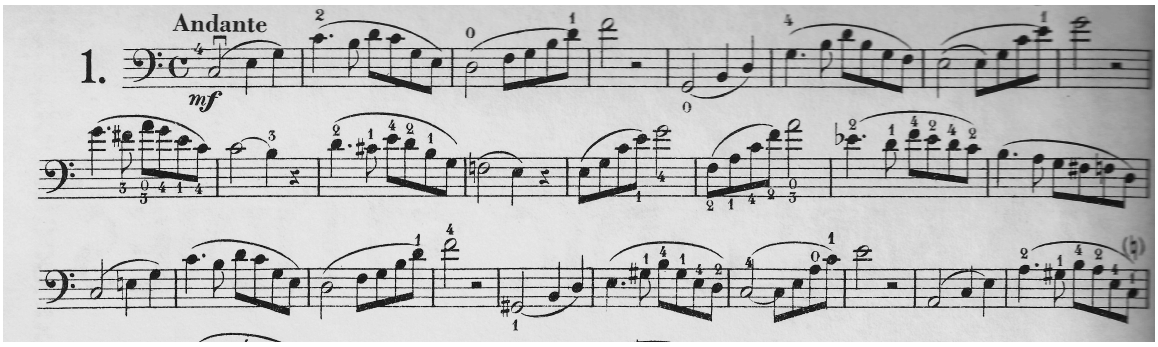
Piatti – 12 Caprices, Op. 25

Figure 2:

Sebastian Lee

Figure 3:



[1] "The How-To-Practice Flow Chart", American String Teacher, Spring, 1996