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Eric Kim

Garnering acclaim from audiences and critics alike, Eric and Benny Kim will perform at ASTA's National Conference in March.



Benny Kim



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BALANCE TRAINING *for Musicians*

by Hillary Herndon

"Tell me and I forget. Show me and I remember. Involve me and I understand." Chinese Proverb



Of all the skills we teach as musicians, feeling is one of the most challenging. To encourage the emotional side of feeling, a teacher can create storylines and invoke images or colors, but how do you teach a student what a supported body or bow arm feels like? Moreover, how do you teach a student to embody the emotional feeling of a piece without physically embodying the mood in a manner that is conducive to producing a good sound? This leap is nearly impossible to reach without comprehension of a grounded body balance. I've heard teachers ask a student to "ground" themselves, to center, to relax, to breathe from their toes, and in one memorable lesson, to "feel the earth move under your feet!" All of these teachers were attempting to explain body balance through words, which are certainly valuable tools. But words do not necessarily facilitate the basic understanding of what it feels like to be grounded with proper body balance. Once a student can physically experience this feeling of a centered balance, the words we use to explain will take on new meaning and deepen the student's body awareness, leading to enhanced tone production and a decrease in tension issues.

Given the challenge of explaining such an elusive feeling and the numerous skills that young musicians need to learn, body balance could seem like a low priority on the to-do list. Yet consider the effects of improper balance: excess tension, strained tone production, difficulty in shifting, tight vibrato, tuning issues (especially in double stops), uneven bow strokes, uncontrollable off-string strokes, poor breathing and potential nervousness and performance anxiety. Proper body support is the foundation of everything we teach. Therefore, it should be an integral part of all student lessons.

The challenge in all of this, of course, is how to teach a physical feeling. Somehow we need to move beyond mere words and actually involve the student in what balance feels like. Strangely enough, an answer is available in a new generation of exercise equipment. Many string teachers are familiar with rocking style balance boards as they are excellent at helping students evenly distribute weight between their feet and help particularly mobile students stay in one place. There is now a new generation of devices that balance weight between the toes and heels as well as the traditional balance between each foot. These 360-degree motion boards are remarkable at enforcing the basic principals of finding a "core" body balance.

Once a student is able to feel this core feeling himself or

herself, the door is open for improvement and refinement in other aspects of his or her playing. Only from this basis of powerful stability can more advanced issues be mastered; attempting to do so without this core strength would be like building a skyscraper on quicksand. "In truth, everything we accomplish as a result of moving our bodies can be traced back to our physical connection to the earth." 1

With an average of about 15 minutes of work on one of these balance boards, most students are able to understand proper body balance, feel where their core is located, and most importantly, are able to recall the feeling weeks later. The guidelines and exercises below explain how to use a 360-degree balance board to jump-start the process of understanding a centered balance.



Julie naturally has a high and forward center of balance.



After several minutes on a balance board, Julie's balance is more centered and grounded.

What does a 360-degree balance board do?

- Helps students find and experience their "center."
- Naturally lowers the center of gravity.
- Improves a dynamic posture.
- Drops and expands breathing.
- Increases oxygen supply.
- Helps release neck and shoulder tension.
- Mimics "off-balance" feel of nervousness, making use of the board excellent practice at calming nerves.
- Helps hone mental focus.
- For women, highlights exactly how much extra work they require to stay properly balanced in heeled shoes.

Ultimately, all of these factors help to enhance sound production, tone and projection. Balance board work helps foster a healthy approach to the instrument and works on debilitating aspects of performance anxiety such as shallow breathing, increased tension, increased heart rate and poor focus.

How to pick a Balance Board

The first step is to find the right balance device. Every few weeks a new unit is introduced to the market. Many of these can be used effectively for our purposes. I currently use an Indo Board with the IndoFLO Balance Cushion, but others will work equally well. The following items should be included in your search list:

- Look for a board with 360-degree motion (both front-to-back rocking as well as side-to-side).
- The base of the board should be long enough to accommodate the normal performance stance of the user. Several inches longer than shoulder-width is a good guide for the ideal length

of the board.

- Look for at least 4 inches of "tilt" to achieve maximum success.

**Note: If you opt to use an IndoBoard, make certain to use the "IndoFLO Balance Cushion," not the "Original" IndoBoard Roller. The IndoFLO Cushion was developed specifically for 360-degree motion while the "Original" is geared for skateboarders and surfers to work on tricks. Attempting to stand on one of these roller boards could be dangerous to musicians' hands and arms and is not recommended.*

Exercises Using the Balance Board

At first, wear either comfortable shoes or use bare feet. (No heels, flip-flops or shoes without traction.)

Before you step on, visualize where your feet will go. They should be about shoulder-width apart and centered along the board's axis.

For your first try, have a friend help out by offering their hands and arms for stability, or place a high backed chair in front of you to use as a stabilizer while you step on the unit. Step on one foot at a time and find your balance.



At first, have a friend help steady you when you step on the balance board.

Go over the following checklist for tension, from the ground up:

- Keep your ankle, knee and hip joints unlocked and flexible.
- Keep your chest and head up.
- Look straight ahead, not down at your feet.
- Breathe!
- Roll your shoulders, and let them hang in the back of their sockets.



Keep your arms relaxed and hanging by your side.

The goal is not to stay “perfectly still,” but rather to adjust to minute changes with a minimum of erratic or flailing movements. Keep your upper body quiet and relaxed, and allow your legs to adjust.

Find your “center.” Your center of gravity is located about 2 inches below your belly button, and two inches into your gut. A Hula Hoop would spin around this spot. Touch the spot with your fingers to help your brain “locate” there.

Once you feel fairly comfortable, make sure to stay on the board for a couple more minutes. Then step off. Immediately take stock of your body and its feeling of balance.



After stepping off the board, stand still to find your “roots.”



Try playing your instrument next. Keep this grounded feeling present.

How do you feel? Do you feel grounded? Students describe the feeling as akin to stepping off of a moving walkway, or as if they suddenly have “roots” reaching into the ground. Try to play while keeping this rooted feeling. Remember this feeling so that you can recall it in moments of stress.

Advanced Exercises

While on the balance board, read a book aloud. Children’s books are great for this. Be able to act out the conversations using different voices, all while staying physically relaxed, with supple joints, hanging shoulders and a balanced head. Remember that your legs should be moving and constantly adjusting while your upper body is relaxed and supported.

Play your instrument while on the balance board. Start with simple scales. Eventually, when you feel comfortable knowing you won’t drop the instrument or fall off, practice difficult spots from your repertoire. This will be an eye-opening experience. Often, students will realize the passage giving them difficulty is much easier than they had anticipated, as their physical stress and tension were responsible for the extra work they had to do.

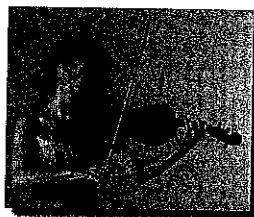
Advanced Exercise: Play while on the board.

Proper body balance isn’t relegated to standing positions. While the effects of bad bal-

ance are more pronounced when standing, it is equally important to learn how to sit properly. Place the IndoFLO cushion on a chair and sit on top of it. Work to find your center from a seated position and maintain loose, supportive hip joints while sitting. Locked hip joints are responsible for much lower back pain in orchestral musicians.

Be creative in finding additional ways for students to find their center. Use other “exercise equipment” such as large exercise balls, the Bosu Ball (a half of an exercise ball that is incapable of rolling), or other items that are geared towards balance and stability for either standing or sitting postures.

Once the basic concept of “center” is understood, there are many ways to help maintain and improve the basic principals. Tai Chi, Yoga, Pilates, Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais and Roling are activities that enhance and compliment an understanding of centered balance. Exploring these activities can be a fun and rewarding process. Encourage your students to “cross-train” by studying one or more of these. Every activity we approach in life can benefit from a centered balance; therefore encourage the growth of this awareness in activities your students might already enjoy such as dancing or sports. The more these ideas are incorporated into daily life, the easier it will be to harness a centered, powerful balance while performing.



Violist Hillary Herndon has an active career as a teacher and performer. Herndon has a thriving studio at the University of Tennessee, where she is the founder and director of the annual Viola Celebration, and holds summer positions at both the International Festival Institute at Roundtop and the Sewanee Summer Music Festival. She has taught numerous guest classes at universities

and music programs throughout the states including The Perlman Music Program, Juilliard, SUNY Fredonia, University of Alabama, University of Arizona and the South Carolina Governor’s School for the Arts. As a performer, Ms. Herndon has collaborated with such notable artists as Itzhak Perlman, Charles Castleman, Felicia Moye, Gregory Fulkerson, Merry Peckham, Jeffrey Irvine, Victoria Chiang and the Avalon String Quartet. Ms. Herndon holds degrees from the Eastman and Juilliard Schools of Music where she studied with George Taylor, Heidi Castleman and Hsin-Yun Huang.

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Dan Levitov — Cello
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