

# Karen Tuttle and the Coordination Approach:

## Teaching Physicality of Musicality

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**Karen Tuttle:** American violist and viola teacher, founder of viola pedagogy

**Born:** March 28, 1920, Lewiston, Idaho

**Died:** December 16, 2010, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

The purpose of this article is to provide readers with basic knowledge and an understanding of Karen Tuttle's string pedagogy approach which is known as the *Coordination Approach*. While developed for viola students and teachers, this approach could be of interest to all string teachers because one of the main objectives of this approach, which is to teach the "physicality of musicality," is applicable to the mastery of all string instruments.

### Biographical Background

#### Uniqueness

Throughout Tuttle's long and prolific life, she exhibited a tendency to do things differently. She lived through two divorces at a time when the dissolution of marriage was not a common practice, and kept pregnancy with her daughter a complete secret from her work colleagues for eight months, announcing one day, to the great surprise to her fellow musicians in the Schneider Quartet, that she wouldn't be able to play for some time because she was having a child. For a while, Tuttle was the only woman member of the NBC Orchestra, which placed her in a position to deal with the issues surrounding gender equality in orchestras much before discussion of these concerns became a popular topic. Her third marriage to a well-regarded psychiatrist resulted in the family setting off for Fiji, Samoa, and Tahiti where her husband studied the sex life of indigenous peoples for two years. While there, she played the viola for villagers who had never heard bowed string instruments and who, reportedly, would start running away from her every time she used vibrato.

#### Early years

Tuttle's early years were no less unusual. She was born to parents who owned a wheat farm in Idaho. When Tuttle was twelve her family moved to Walla Walla, a small town in the south eastern portion of Washington state. Tuttle disliked official schooling, so after the completion of the eighth grade she made an agreement with her parents that she will no longer be required to go to school as long as she would use the time she would otherwise spend in school in an activity that she enjoyed and felt she could excel. Tuttle decided that two activities she would enjoy were reading and playing the violin. Her first violin instructor was a local violin teacher in Walla Walla who was considered to be a free spirit because she

smoked on the streets, which was considered to be inappropriate for a young woman of that time. Eventually, Tuttle began taking lessons in Pullman, Washington, with Czech violinist Karel Havlíček, a student of Leopold Auer, who according to Tuttle's recollections "had tremendous energy and enthusiasm, .....[but] was [a] difficult man" (Tuttle in Ritscher, 1993, p. 56). At age 17, Tuttle moved to Los Angeles and began studies with Henri Temianka, a well regarded violinist and conductor whom she described as "an excellent violinist....., but [who] could not verbalize how to be comfortable" (Tuttle in Ritscher, 1993, p. 56). At one point Tuttle saw William Primrose playing with the London String Quartet. She was inspired by the naturalness of his techniques, and with no hesitation, after the concert, went back stage and asked Primrose if she could become his student. He said "yes" under two conditions: she had to switch to viola and she had to move to Philadelphia to study with him at the Curtis Institute.

#### Influences

Once at Curtis, Tuttle realized that although Primrose was a great viola player, he could not explain to his students how he executed his well-regarded playing techniques. To overcome this obstacle Tuttle asked Primrose for permission to observe him practicing so that she could understand his movements and actions. Through the keen observations of his movements and her experimentations with what she observed, Tuttle began developing an understanding of how to bring the bow and instrument into a harmonious relationship with the player's body, mind, and heart. This became the main objective of her Coordination Approach.

Another important influence on the development of her approach came from Marcel Tabuteau, an oboist for the Philadelphia Orchestra who conducted the string orchestra at Curtis in which Tuttle played. Tabuteau taught his students the concept of musical phrasing through the grouping of notes that belonged together. His musical phrasing made each note go either "out of note" or "to other note" while creating an unending musical line. This way of thinking about musical phrases had a profound effect on Tuttle's understanding of pacing and directing musical energy from one note to another and caused her to begin experimenting with ways that will include body movements and physicality into the execution of musical phrases.

As it will be explained throughout this article, the third profound influence on the development of Tuttle's approach to teaching musicality came from two unrelated sources. From Pablo Casals, a legendary Spanish cellist with whom Tuttle studied chamber

music at the Prades Festival in 1950, Tuttle adopted the belief that discovering the character of the piece must come “before one does anything else [with the piece of music]” (Tuttle in Ritscher, 1993, p. 57). From Wilhelm Reich, a somewhat controversial Austrian psychoanalyst with whose work Tuttle became acquainted through her third husband who was trained in Reich’s psychoanalysis approach, Tuttle adopted the classification of emotions into five categories: Love, Joy, Fear, Anger, and Sorrow. She further developed a long list of nuanced feelings for each of these five categories (see Table 1). She used this list of emotions and feelings as a starting point for her students to discover the character of a piece of music and to pinpoint the emotion to be communicated during its performance.

### Legacy

In addition to teaching viola and chamber music at Curtis, where she replaced Primrose and where for many decades she served as the chair of the string and chamber music department, Tuttle also taught (often simultaneously) at Juilliard, Manhattan, and Mannes Schools as well as at the Peabody Institute. Her summer teaching engagements included performances and master classes at Aspen and Banff Festivals. Throughout her teaching career she enjoyed enormous popularity with students, some of whom developed into the leading violists of today, Kim Kashkashian and Steven Tenenborn being just two of many other leading violists, teachers, and orchestra and chamber musicians trained in Tuttle’s Coordination Approach.

## Major Principles of Coordination Approach

### Philosophical principles

Tuttle’s teaching philosophy was influenced by her own playing experiences, her keen observations of other players (e.g., Primrose, Casals), evaluation of influential string pedagogues of her time (e.g., Dounis), her experimentations with students, and to some degree, her interest in Reich’s psychoanalytic theory. She believed in the importance of the musician feeling balanced and natural while playing and she advised her students to not do what is painful or what goes against what they can do naturally. Tuttle advanced the field of string pedagogy by providing her students and future generations of teachers with tangible means to teach the concept of the “character of the piece of music.” Another important mark of Tuttle’s teaching philosophy was that she emphasized the viola as an instrument different from the violin, with its own intricacies and demands. Interestingly, Tuttle believed that it is better to start students on violin and then switch them to viola before the end of high school, rather than start them on viola because acquiring playing techniques on the smaller instrument is easier and more natural for most students.

**Table 1** Karen Tuttle’s List of Emotions

Love	Joy	Anger	Fear	Sorrow
Nostalgia	Peaceful	Frenzy	Ominous	Tragic
Passion	Whimsy	Rage	Mystery	Longing
Sentimental	Ecstatic	Madness	Suspense	Sad
Cry	Sassy	Fury	Reverence	Yearning
Melancholy	Elegant	Fierce	Eerie	Prayer

## Teaching stance

Tuttle’s approach to teaching stance was informed by the Alexander Technique and Feldenkrais Method. She proposed that stance, the concept that includes teaching the position of the feet, knees, hips, torso, and neck, needs to be learned and practiced away from the instrument. Her approach to teaching stance included consideration of position of:

### Feet

After the feet were set slightly apart, there are two possibilities: (a) the feet remain parallel or (b) if the student is right-handed, the left foot goes forward or if the student is left-handed, the right foot goes forward.

### Knees and hips

There should be no tension in the knees or hips. This is achieved by making “release” movements such as moving knees and/or hips to avoid the static feeling in these parts of the body.

### “Loose belly”

The abdominal part of the body should be relaxed and this is accomplished by asking the student to expand these muscles by making a “un-huh” sound.

### Neck

Tuttle viewed a “loose neck” as a very important part of good stance and she never tired of reminding her students of its importance.

## Teaching instrument hold

### “Balancing viola”

Rather than teaching the concept of “viola hold,” Tuttle taught the concept of “balancing viola.” Balancing is accomplished when the instrument’s weight is equally distributed between the chin, chinrest, and left shoulder. In addition, the left shoulder and neck both need to maintain looseness and freedom. Tuttle gave a great deal of attention to “set-up” and was tirelessly encouraging her students to experiment with chinrest shapes and heights along with adjusting the height of shoulder-rests with additional sponges to achieve optimal balance of the instrument on the player’s shoulder. Another important principle connected to “viola balance” was helping students understand that the instrument is brought to the body and the neck and not the other way around.

## Right hand/arm

The uniqueness of Tuttle's Coordination Approach is probably best exemplified through the way she taught bowing techniques and tone production. In her words, string playing coordination is "the relationship between the horizontal movement of the bow and the movement of the neck, shoulders, chest, and pelvis" (Tuttle in Ritscher, 1993, p. 59). Simply stated, when it comes to bowing, Tuttle's coordination is a concept of going from the frog of the bow to the tip and back in an endless circular-8 shaped movement.

### **Bow hold**

Rather than "holding the bow," Tuttle taught the concept of "suspending the bow." The bow stick is suspended by the last joint of the middle finger and the opposing thumb with the help of the index and ring fingers, both of which play an important role in drawing the bow. The thumb should be malleable, changing shape from bent to straight in accordance to what part of the bow the player is using. The pinkie is positioned at the top of the stick. The space between the fingers should not be too tight or too wide. The choice between the shallow position in which the bow stick touches three fingers in the tip joints and the deep position where it touches the fingers in the first joint depends on the size of the hand and fingers. Tuttle encouraged early development of right-hand finger flexibility by playing as much as possible in the frog area of the bow while flexing the fingers.

### **Drawing the down-bow**

Whether the bow goes down or up, Tuttle reminded students that the "big" sound on the viola is produced by drawing or dragging the bow hair across the strings rather than pressing or pushing the bow into the string. Another important principle to ensure resonant sound is to "bring" the instrument (strings) to the bow rather than the bow to the strings. The bow should feel like it is resting on a well-balanced platform. Unlike several other string pedagogy approaches, which advocate for a "side bow hair position" particularly in the frog area of the bow, Tuttle advised "flat bow-hair position" in all parts of the bow including the frog area. The right shoulder should be relaxed all the time to ensure the "get into the string" feel in the right hand/arm that will result in full string vibration with minimal effort. Exhaling before starting the sound on string instrument is another unique recommendation of Tuttle's approach, which is different from singers and wind players who usually start sound after inhaling.

The very first motion in the right arm when going down-bow is called "pull." As the player approaches the balance point there is a need for a slight motion in the right-hand fingers that Tuttle calls "re-pull." "Re-pull" is basically re-rotating the hand towards the frog to avoid pronation of the right-hand, which Tuttle viewed as an obstacle in sustaining big sound. After the player passes the middle



Karen Tuttle. Circa 1985.

point of the bow, it is important to keep the right elbow either at the same height as or even slightly higher than the right wrist to ensure alignment of the right shoulder, upper arm, and elbow. This will ensure that the weight initiated in the right scapula or shoulder blade, which Tuttle called the "shoulder wing," is transferred from above and not pressed into the string. To ensure continuation of "big" sound, Tuttle suggested another "re-pull" motion around the upper third of the bow (the "counterbalance point"). At the tip of the bow, when playing the down bow, Tuttle taught a movement called "neck release" to maximize the length of the bow and support a smooth bow change in the tip. "Neck release" is a slight upward movement of the neck, similar to the motion that occurs when we extend the neck to "reaching something from the high shelf". After this subtle upward motion, the chin is lowered back onto the chinrest after the bow change which Tuttle called an "over the bow" extension.

### **Drawing the up-bow**

When drawing the up-bow, the motions are the same, but they come in opposite order. From the middle point of the bow to the frog the feeling in the right arm is of "scooping in." To ensure a smooth bow change in the frog, the elbow should start the down bow motion while the wrist and fingers lag behind so that for a moment, the wrist and fingers are still drawing the bow up while the elbow is initiating another "pull" motion. The sequence of "pull," "re-pull," and "over the bow" movements allow the bow to go "around the corner" in endless circular-8 motions. The purpose of "pull," "re-pull," and "over the bow" motions is threefold: (a) to ensure big sound in every part of the bow, (b) to "fill up the notes" while allowing extra length of the bow for phrasing and (c) to support smooth bow changes in the frog and tip areas of the bow.

## Neck releases

The unique characteristic of Tuttle's "neck release" movements was not limited to the tip of the bow. She taught four specific places on the bow where the neck needs to be released by lifting it slightly: (1) before the start of a down bow, to help the instrument to meet the bow, (2) at the balance point where the student allowed the shoulder to go down by saying an "un-huh" sound, (3) in the tip of the bow while making a bow-direction change by saying "hi," and (4) when allowing the neck and head to "wobble" during string crossing and in spiccato.

## Left hand/arm

In Tuttle's view, left-hand techniques are directly correlated to a well-balanced instrument's position. If the student has a long neck, Tuttle recommends a high chinrest and high shoulder-rest, with a lot of sponges attached to the shoulder-rest to fill up the gaps between the instrument and player's shoulder to ensure optimal balance. However, as soon as a student starts developing the feel for "balancing the instrument," Tuttle suggests removing some sponges because "sometimes, too much mechanical support does get in the way of mobility" (Tuttle in Ritscher, 1993, p. 59). She suggested that the upper left arm is more or less passive, while the lower arm, wrist, and back of the left hand are active. In addition, the left thumb should be in constant motion, to allow optimum shifting, playing in varied positions, and vibrato. Actions of the left-hand fingers start in the base joint and the downward pressure of the left fingers should be released as soon as the finger touches the string. Because of the larger spacing of the strings, and the increased space between the fingers, it is important to remember that each finger should have its own weight and balance when playing the viola. This is particularly important for continuous vibrato which requires that the hand be in more than one position

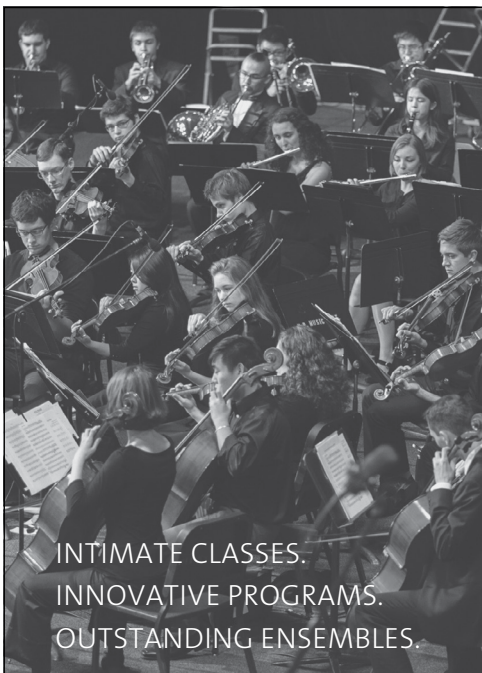
to accommodate the transmission of the fingers' weight and balances on the viola.

## Summary

American violist and viola teacher, Karen Tuttle, was an individual and pedagogue who in many ways lived ahead of her time. She had the courage to live a free spirited and self-fulfilling life at the time when these terms were a novelty. Her way of teaching viola advanced the reputation of the instrument and many of her students appear as major soloists with major orchestras and in major concert halls around the world. Tuttle's Coordination Approach advanced string pedagogy, particularly viola pedagogy, in many important ways including giving us a tangible means for teaching the "physicality of musicality" and "character of the piece of music". To learn more about Karen Tuttle and her approach, refer to the reference list at the end of this article including two doctoral dissertations written about her approach (Anderson, 2002; Sander, 2013) and/or consider attending the annual *Karen Tuttle Coordination Workshop* at the University of Delaware.

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