

Lesson Five – Kitty Cats

Now that the orchestra is getting a good sound on both open string and octave harmonic rollovers, it is time to transition from the excellent hand formation achieved in mid-position to the part of the fingerboard where most of the music will be played throughout the remainder of the student's middle school experience. We will refer to that part of the fingerboard as low-position. At this level of development, for all practical purposes, it is first position.

Here is a bit of teacher talk:

Today we are going to learn something really fun that will turn our orchestra into one big kitty cat. First I want to talk to the violins and violas, the chin instruments. Endpin instruments, listen carefully, not only because most of what I am going to say to the chin instruments will also apply to you, but because I want you to be taking “sound pictures” of everything you are about to hear and connecting these images with bits of information that I present to create a properly saved “sound file” that will prove to be an invaluable tool in building your talent as a musician.

I would like to hear the chin instruments play one “Mississippi River” as an octave harmonic on the A string. Observe the steady movement of the bow across the string. Now I want you to re-set your bow and play one down-bow octave harmonic “a.” Before the bow reaches the mid-point, shuttle your left hand back to where the third finger is over the third finger tape, and push your third finger all the way to the fingerboard, producing a beautifully resonant “d” in low position. (Fig. 54 & 55)

Philosophy of “constructing meaning” in a music rehearsal by requiring everyone to be either a performer or an evaluator

A description of the “shuttle” movement from mid-position octave harmonic to low-position third finger “d” on the fingerboard



Figure 54. Kitty Cat in mid-position. (Notice how the body of the violin shapes the player's hand and trains the wrist in regard to angle and structure.)



Figure 55. When the player shuttles back to low-position, the perfect hand structure should be maintained by extending the whole arm at the elbow.



Figure 56. Problems occur when the player just moves the fingers back, instead of moving the entire wrist/arm assembly.

The concept of tuning the fingered notes to the open strings

Make sure that your third finger “d” in first position is in tune with the open “d” one octave lower. (Fig. 57)

Remember: the basic idea of excellent intonation on a stringed instrument is to *tune the fingered notes to the open strings*. The upper “d” played with the third finger should fit “like a hand slipping into a glove” into the sound of the D string “d.” When we analyze the situation, there are two very important intervals to listen to in the “kitty cat.” The sound of the harmonic “a” sliding down into the “d” is the sound of the perfect fifth. This sound is familiar to us because our violins, violas, and cellos are tuned in

▼ **Figure 57.** The Kitty Cat exercise establishes the third finger in low-position and “shuttles” the excellent hand position shaped by the body of the violin/viola back to low-position, as well as training the player’s ear to play in tune.

Kitty - Cats

The musical score for the 'Kitty - Cats' exercise is presented for four instruments: Violin, Viola, Cello, and Double Bass. Each instrument has a staff with a treble or bass clef. The Violin and Viola parts are in treble clef, while the Cello and Double Bass parts are in bass clef. The score shows a sequence of notes with fingerings (0, 3, 4, 1) and slurs, corresponding to the 'meow' sound. The Violin and Viola parts have a 'meow' sound written below the staff. The Cello and Double Bass parts have a 'meow' sound written below the staff. The Double Bass part includes Roman numerals II, I, I, II below the staff.

perfect fifths. The sound that the third finger “d” makes as it fits into the sound of the open D string is the sound of the perfect octave. That is the second interval to listen for. The perfect octave has a “same note” sound.

Learning the “same note” sound of the perfect octave

It is most important for us to accurately file these sound images in our brain under a name that is commonly used when musicians talk to one another about music. We already know that the word “interval” means the distance in pitch between two notes. Intervals commonly have two names. The *second* name is a *number* name and, in the same way that a family name reveals some general knowledge about a person, the second name of an interval is a general description of that interval. **The second name of an interval tells how many alphabet letters are included between the outer parameters of the interval.** (Example: from “a” down to “d” is a fifth because there are five alphabet letters included within the parameters of that interval: A, G, F, E, and D.) To describe the interval in greater detail, we need a first name. The five choices for a first name are *major*, *minor*, *augmented*, *diminished*, and *perfect*. The only first names that go with the second name “perfect” are octave, unison, fourth, and fifth. (By the same token, perfect can never be used to describe a second, third, sixth, or seventh.) The second names I just mentioned have the *possibility* of being called major or minor. Just like the second name of the interval informs us of the number of alphabet letters contained in the interval, **the first name of the interval tells us the number of half-steps.** A half-step is the smallest interval commonly used in music. An example of a half-step would be the distance from one key of a piano to the very next adjacent key up or down, black or white. If we know how many half-steps are in an interval, we are in command of a powerful evaluation of that measurement. There are 12 half-steps in a perfect octave and 7 half-steps in a perfect fifth. This is information that needs to be memorized now and will come in handy later when we wish to describe fifths and octaves that are not perfect. What is *really* important now is to listen to the “same note” sound of the perfect octave and to the “hollow stable” sound of the perfect fifth. As we mentioned before, the sounds of the open strings on the violin, viola, or cello are perfect fifths. Also the sound of the drone of a bagpipe is that of a perfect fifth. To a musician, this “sound definition” is actually more important to recognize than the word definition.

The definition of “interval”

An explanation of the way that intervals are named

Information conveyed by the second name of the interval

First name options

Information conveyed by the first name of the interval

Which first names go with which second names

Explanation of “half step”

Sound descriptions of a perfect octave and a perfect fifth

When we begin to learn songs “by ear” (I actually prefer to think of the process as “by heart,” a phrase used in rural Texas where I grew up), we will need a way to describe the differences in pitch between notes of a song. Musicians have devised this “interval naming process” as a way to talk about music with one another.

The reason we are learning about interval names

Note to teacher:

At this time, the orchestra should practice the downward meow of the kitty cat.

More teacher talk:

Now that we have executed a downward meow, let’s go the other direction, moving the left hand back up to mid-position when the string passes under the mid-point of the bow. Of course the third finger is pressed all the way down to the fingerboard on our “d” in low position and only touching the A string like a feather to produce the octave harmonic in mid-position.

Instructions for ascending kitty cats

Now let’s practice the entire meow of the kitty cat down and up.

Using the kitty cat exercise to ensure that students are securely holding their chin instruments on the shoulder with their heads

Using the kitty cat exercise to properly shape the left hand for chin instrument players

Working for an elbow that is swung under the chin instrument

How swinging the elbow under the chin instrument helps to properly shape the left hand

The importance of securing good hand position

Another note to the teacher:

At this time the teacher needs to double check to confirm that all of the students are holding their chin instruments on their shoulders solidly with their heads. Make sure that the tailpiece button is “buttoned” right into the player’s throat (voice box). All of the students should be provided with shoulder rests to make it easy for them to hold their instruments. Students who do not have their chin instruments securely held on their shoulders will not be able to do the shuttling motion of the left arm and hand because they are supporting their instruments, to some degree, with their left hands. More than likely, they will be the ones who do not keep the same hand shape for low-position as they had in mid-position. The playing of kitty cats is a wonderful activity because it requires that students securely hold their instruments with their head and free the left hand from the responsibility of holding the instrument. The teacher will quickly be able to single out the students who are not supporting their instrument properly and the ones who are not setting up their left hand properly in relation to the neck of the instrument. These students will not be flexing their left arm at the elbow. They will just move their left hand and usually just their fingers back to the low-position.

The next item will need to be reviewed for months or even years. The shape of the left hand assembly should be the same in low-position as it was in mid-position with the third finger on the octave harmonic spot. The index finger and the middle finger should be relaxed and sticking up, but not straight up and rigid. The middle finger should have a lot of curve to it, and the index finger should be only slightly curved at the two joints of the finger. To repeat the philosophy of this strategy: In mid-position the body of the instrument shapes the left hand. This should be maintained when the whole arm shuttles the hand back to low-position. This is a brilliant way to guide the player’s hand, creating its proper shape for violin/viola playing.

The other objective is to make sure the left elbow is swung under the instrument, moving toward the bow arm. (Fig. 58 & 59) It is a good idea to sometimes add the following step to the daily routine: After shuttling to low-position, the player should practice swinging the arm under the violin/viola like a porch swing. The swinging action tends to erase any tension in the upper left arm at the shoulder and just below. The player should get used to playing with the elbow swung quite radically (but not to the point of tension or pain) under the violin. The palm of the left hand should be facing to the left rather than facing up to the ceiling. (Fig. 60 & 61) The muscle on the side of the hand just below the little finger should be touching the body of the instrument in mid- (octave harmonic) position and be close to the neck of the violin/viola in low- (first, second, third) position. This way, the little finger is over the strings of the instrument rather than out in space.

Be patient: Good hand position will not happen overnight. This kitty cat exercise exposes almost every hand position problem and is not possible to properly execute if all the pieces are not in place. The longer the teacher makes this exercise part of the daily routine, the stronger will be the orchestra. If chin instrument players maintain what they learn in playing kitty cats while they assimilate other skills, they will develop excellent hand position. Good hand position leads to good listening skills,



Figure 58. Swinging the arm under the chin instrument to where the elbow is on the right side of the instrument is vital to establishing good hand position.



Figure 59. With the elbow on the left side of the chin instrument, the player will never be able to have consistent intonation with the fourth finger because it is obviously nowhere near the fourth finger spot on the lowest string. (The player will also have trouble getting the second finger of the left hand close enough to the first finger to ensure proper intonation on “low 2” fingerings.)

and more refined listening generally reinforces good hand position. I often tell my students that there are three factors in playing a stringed instrument in tune: hand position, hand position, and hand position. They have a great time chanting the answer in unison when I ask them to tell me, as a class, the three things to remember about playing a stringed instrument in tune.

Kitty cat instruction to cello and bass players should be incorporated into the instructions for the chin instruments. The presentation and sequencing of this information in this book about kitty cats (first for the chin instruments, then for the cellos and basses) is arranged in this manner only for the purpose of clarity. We can't have our endpin players sitting out for days while the chin instruments learn the kitty cat. Where I fit the cello information in depends on two things: (1) the relevance of chin



Figure 60. Notice how the face drawn on Lucinda's hand is looking to the left side of her violin.



Figure 61. Now that same face is inappropriately and incorrectly looking up at the ceiling.

instrument instruction to the set-up of the cello, and (2) creating an interesting class lesson that involves everyone.

Basic difference between cello and chin instrument hand position

The “relaxed sweep” of the right arm for endpin instrument players

Cello players switch fingers as they execute the kitty cat.

Cello hand position relative to the neck of the instrument

Importance of defining the left hand difference between cello and chin instrument players

Let’s compare the points of kitty cat instruction for chin instruments to kitty cat instruction for the cello. One of the most radical differences between cello and chin instrument playing is the hand position. The cello hand shape in low-position is so different from the cello hand position in mid-position that we cannot use the octave harmonic as a trainer for the low positions in the same way that we do with violin/viola. What the kitty cat exercise has to offer cello (and bass) students is the development of a “relaxed sweep” of the arm from the higher positions to the low and vice versa. Cello players should finger the octave harmonic “a” third finger just like the chin instruments, but when they “sweep” back to first position the cellists should “pop” the fourth finger all the way to the fingerboard on the A string to finger the note “d.” (Fig. 62 & 63) It would simplify the exercise to play the octave harmonic “a” with the fourth finger, but the relaxed, smoothly turning motion of the left wrist provides a workout for a motion that is a common one for cello and bass players. The tried and true set-up for the left hand of the cello (and the bass) is to position the fingers straight across (perpendicular to) the four strings of the cello. For this to happen, the muscle just below the little finger should be close to the neck of the cello. If this is not set up correctly, cello (or bass) players will have difficulty playing in tune when crossing from string to string. (Generally the notes on the lower strings will be sharp, and the upper strings will tend to be flat.) The contrast between a proper cello left hand position and the hand position of a chin instrument should be clearly stated, especially for cello players who have just transferred from violin. (Fig. 64) The middle joint of the thumb should be sliding up and down and always touching the backside of the neck of the cello. The thumb should be relaxed, not sharply bent in either



Figure 62. The cellist starts the Kitty Cat in mid-position with the third finger on the A string octave harmonic ...

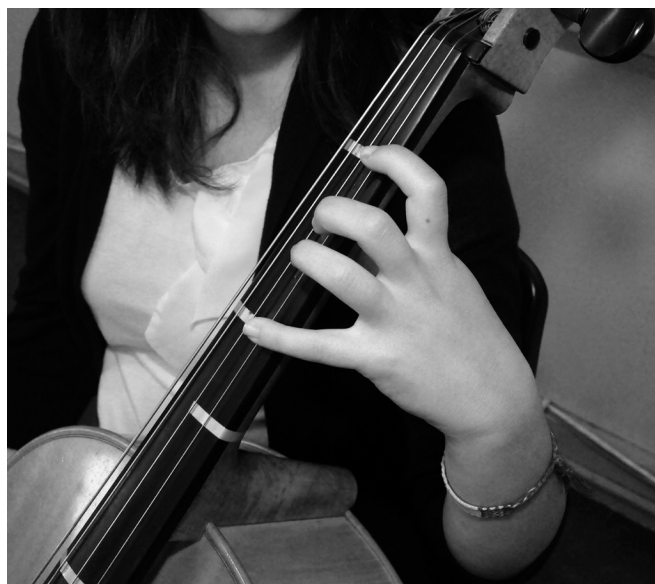


Figure 63. ... and moves back to low-position where the fourth finger “pops” down on the string at the fourth finger tape. (Notice how the fingers are perpendicular to the strings, as is the thumb crossing the neck of the cello like crossing a “t.”)

direction. The fingers should be loosely curved, the way they usually are during a handshake.

In performing the kitty cat exercise, cello players should maintain contact between the tips of the fingers and the A string as they transition from floating on the top of the string at the magic octave to pressing the fourth finger all the way to the fingerboard in first position.

The execution of the kitty cat exercise is a bit more problematic for double bass players, but there are several ways to create a valuable exercise for them. Remember that the main objective for bass players is to develop a smoothly sweeping left arm as the player moves from the high positions to the low positions. There are two reasons that bass players start shifting sooner and do more shifting than the other stringed instruments of the orchestra. The bass strings are traditionally tuned in fourths, and the traditional left hand position (from first to fourth finger) encompasses only a major second (rather than the perfect fourth of a violin/viola or a minor third of a cello). Because of this, there is much more shifting involved in playing the double bass, even when performing the simplest of melodies. The smoothly sweeping left arm developed in the kitty cat exercise is a valuable asset.

The best way to play the kitty cat on the bass at first is to play it on the A string, moving from the third finger magic octave “a” to a first finger “d” pressed down all the way to the fingerboard in third position. This is good for tone production, but third position is not the destination we are seeking as bass players at this point in

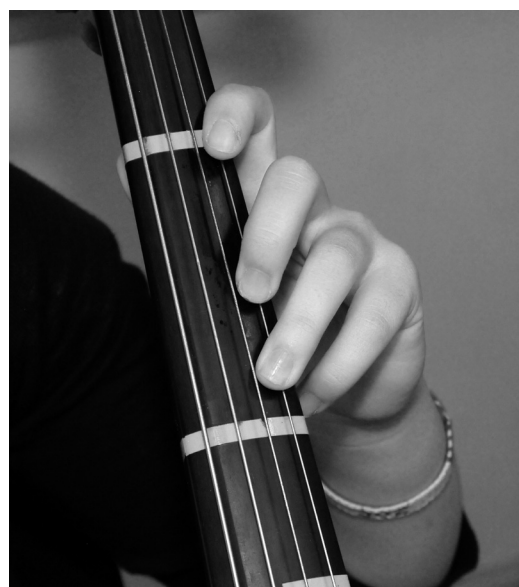


Figure 64. Students who transfer from violin to cello often try to graft a violin hand position onto the cello with less than satisfactory results.

Reasons that bass players shift more

Four ways for bass players to learn the kitty cat exercise



Figure 65. The first bass Kitty Cat can be played moving from the octave harmonic on the A string ...

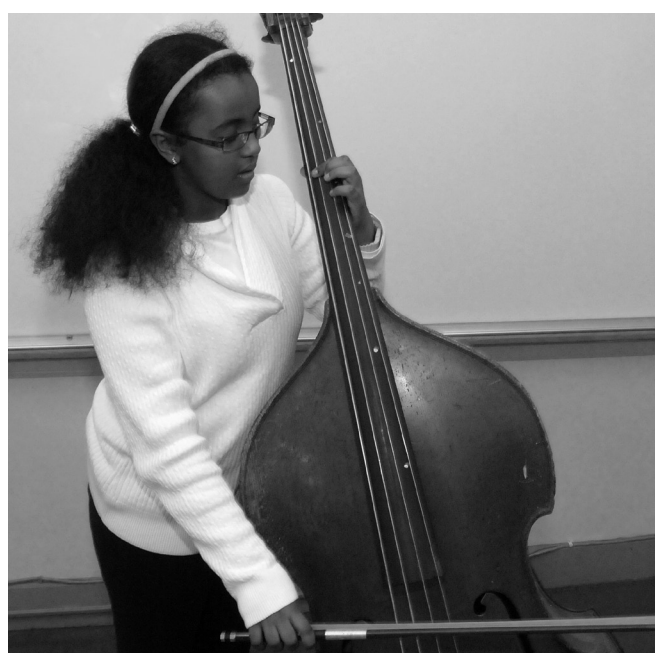


Figure 66. ... to a first finger “d” on the same string.



Figure 67. A Kitty Cat that emphasizes a big sweep of the left arm starts with the high “a” at the bottom of the fingerboard ...



Figure 68. ... traveling to the “nut” at the top of the string.

our development. (Most of the work during the first year of study will be in fourth position.) After the player achieves mastery over this way of performing the kitty cat, the exercise can be practiced entirely on the D string. In this version of kitty cat, the player will perform a huge sweep of the left arm and produce a kitty cat that has an extra octave in the interval between the two notes of the kitty cat. The harmonic that the player should use is the “a” harmonic above (higher in pitch than) the octave “d” harmonic. You will remember that we marked this with the tape that is closest to the fingerboard. With this kitty cat, the player sweeps all the way to the top of the neck (just below the peg box) with the hand changing to first finger soon after leaving the high “a” harmonic. Another version of this exercise would have the player moving on the A string between the two harmonic positions (high “a” to the octave “d” harmonic) using third finger for the “a” and first finger for the octave “d.” Perhaps the most complicated version of kitty cat for bass involves string crossing. The player starts on the high “a” harmonic of the D string and moves the hand back to the first finger “d” in fourth position on the G string. (These last two versions should sound exactly the same, so the octave harmonic “d” can act as an ear trainer for the “d” that is on the G string.) This version of kitty cat, using the fourth position destination, provides the most productive link to the upcoming work. I require that bass students learn all four of these ways of playing kitty cat in the order I introduced them here. (Fig. 65 & 66), (Fig. 67 & 68), (Fig. 69 & 70), and (Fig. 71 & 72)

Now we have all four different instrumental groups up to speed on the meow of the kitty cat. This should be incorporated into the daily routine for many weeks.



Figure 69. Another option is going from the high “a” harmonic on the D string ...



Figure 70. ... to the octave harmonic on the D string.



Figure 71. The one that works best for subsequent bass Kitty Cats that match the other strings travels from the high “a” on the D string ...



Figure 72. ... to the first finger “d” in fourth position on the G string.

Giving the bass players a song of their own that strengthens their hands in fourth position, develops their ability, and builds double bass pride and morale.

Shortnin' Bread cultural information

Shortnin' Bread bass instructions

At this point, the set-up of the left hand for bass players is not as complex as that for the chin instruments or even the cellos. However, there are some real challenges for the bass players in regard to the amount of force needed to press down the strings and the amount of finger spread required of the left hand. It will entertain your bass players and make them proud to play the bass if they have a song of their own to learn. I usually teach them *Shortnin' Bread*, (Fig. 73) written by the American writer and poet James Whitcomb Riley at the turn of the twentieth century. Shortening bread is a fried batter bread, the ingredients of which include corn meal, flour, hot water, eggs, baking powder, milk and shortening.

All of the notes for bass players in *Shortnin' Bread* are to be played either open strings, first finger, or fourth finger, and the song is fun and easy to hear because of its pentatonic nature. Bass players will also get used to doing the extra string crossing necessary for learning the bass in fourth position. The first interval of the song is a major sixth (six alphabet letters and nine half-steps) from the open D string to the “b” fourth finger fourth position on the same string. Most of my students are familiar with the NBC melody, (“d-b-g”) (Fig. 74) so I have them play that melody, tuning the “b” (played with the fourth finger on the D string) with the open strings G and D. This song *Shortnin' Bread* also sets up the “a” (first finger on the D string) in a way

Shortnin' Bread for Double Bass

The musical score for 'Shortnin' Bread' for Double Bass is presented in five staves. The key signature is G major (one sharp) and the time signature is 4/4. The score includes fingerings (0, 1, 4) and bowing/playing techniques (II, III, I, II) indicated below the notes. Measure numbers 6, 11, 16, and 21 are marked at the start of their respective staves.

Figure 73. *Shortnin' Bread* is a great song to establish fourth position and introduce the level of string crossing that will be required for learning the bass starting in fourth position.

NBC Melody

for learning the sound of an ascending major sixth
and a descending major third

The musical score for 'NBC Melody' is written for Violin, Viola, Cello, and Double Bass. It consists of three measures. In Measure I, all instruments play the open A string. In Measure II, the Violin and Viola play F#4 (first finger), the Cello plays F#3 (first finger), and the Double Bass plays F#3 (fourth finger). In Measure III, the Violin and Viola play C#5 (third finger), the Cello plays C#4 (fourth finger), and the Double Bass plays C#4 (open string, 0). The key signature has one sharp (F#).

Figure 74. The “NBC melody” trains the bass player’s ear to play the “b” in tune.

that teaches the player to listen to the octave between the open A string and the “a” one octave higher. I have experimented with many different bowings on *Shortnin’ Bread*, and they all seem to work. I have found it beneficial to sing the lyrics of the song along with the bass players while we play the song together. It is such a distinctive song that the students have an easy time remembering the pitches, and this usually provides a significant breakthrough in their ability to play fourth finger “b” and “f#” in tune. They will really enjoy working on this song, and it will set them on the road to becoming a great bass section. I do not introduce *Shortnin’ Bread* to the other sections of the orchestra for another month. This makes the bass section feel very special and they are quite pleased and happy that they have chosen to learn the double bass.

To recapitulate: the learning objectives of *Shortnin’ Bread* are:

- ♦ To develop balance in the left hand of the double bass players
- ♦ To give the bass players a strong pitch image to help them play their fourth finger notes in fourth position more in tune
- ♦ To strengthen the bass players’ left hands
- ♦ To teach the sound of ascending major sixth
- ♦ To allow the other stringed instruments (at the point that the song is introduced to them) to benefit from the challenge of executing smooth, accurate, and timely string crossings

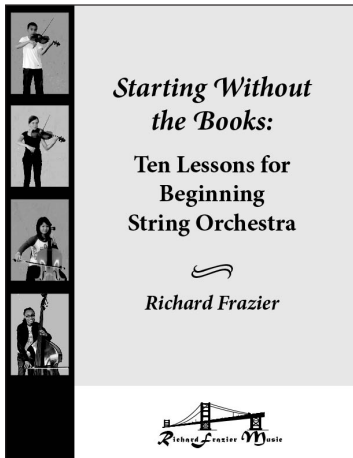
Introducing a new text for string teachers

Starting Without the Books: Ten Lessons for Beginning String Orchestra

A method for starting students without the clutter and distraction of music books

Richard Frazier credits the superior ratings his groups have earned to this sequence of highly structured lessons that allow students to become more visually connected to their hand position, body balance, bow movement, bow hold, bow geography, and tracking while tuning their ears with familiar melodies that establish a tonal awareness of scale degrees and an aural definition of basic intervals. This system prepares students to move into Book I of any string class method in a few months (depending on the frequency of sessions). Despite the book's title, the focus is on what to do rather than what not to do.

With 140 pages and over 160 illustrations, *Starting Without the Books: Ten Lessons for Beginning String Orchestra* presents a step-by-step plan that interweaves an innovative pedagogical approach to string teaching with a friendly narrative style. Classroom tested, the concepts presented in *Starting Without the Books* are changing the way the first months of mixed string classes are taught. So much valuable information about all of the stringed instruments is embedded in the text that any string teacher or performer will find *Starting Without the Books: Ten Lessons for Beginning String Orchestra* a useful and entertaining read.



"I love it! It's like being right there, in the classroom, with a master teacher who you can tell loves his students as much as he loves his subject! It's going to be equally valuable to teachers just starting out and those who've been in the classroom a long time and want refreshing new ideas. Great work!"

—Michele Winter, Orchestra Director
Lowell High School, San Francisco, California

Order from www.richardfraziermusic.com using PayPal or mail the attached order form with payment to Richard Frazier Music, 130 Maywood Drive, San Francisco, CA 94127

----- Order Form -----

Please send ____ copy(s) of *Starting Without the Books: Ten Lessons for Beginning String Orchestra* to (name)_____ at (address)_____.

Price: \$55. *California residents please add \$4.67 for state sales tax for a total of \$59.67 for each book.*

Please add \$6 shipping and handling charges for an order of two books or less.

Mail Orders: Make check out to Richard Frazier Music • School Purchase Orders are accepted. Please order from the shopping cart at richardfraziermusic.com for orders of more than two books. Email richard@richardfraziermusic.com for questions