

**IRMTNZ Conference 2020**  
**Bridging Cultures: Beethoven 250 and Beyond**  
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**Cello after Casals – an examination of technical and expressive developments**

*“Mastery of technique is an individual’s pursuit based on his or her body type, taking into consideration the evolution led by great players and teachers”. Rolf Gjelsten reflects on his Conference 2020 session on cello technique.*

Throughout this talk, I demonstrated how cellists of the past, in particular Casals, but also Emanuel Feuermann, Janos Starker, Bernard Greenhouse and contemporary cellists such as Steven Isserlis have revolutionised cello technique with more efficient ways of using the body. Pablo Casals instigated revolutionary concepts of technique in the early 20th century, finding a more natural way of playing which allowed him to tackle more virtuosic repertoire and project more deeply his powerful musical voice. This took the form of changes in alignment of both left and right hand, liberating the elbows, purifying shifting and articulation. Casals was to have a profound influence on future cellists. I’m keen to pass on my interpretation of this technical and physical evolution of cello playing, such as the efficient use of the bowing arm, independent flowing left hand finger action with a relaxed flexible thumb and an awareness of alignment connecting the back, upper and lower forearm with the operation of both hands.

By ‘dropping’ and releasing the fingers of the left hand and relaxing the fingers not in use, the player can achieve more speed, cleaner shifts, and a more versatile and focussed vibrato. Without an articulate finger action on the fingerboard, the bow will not be able to produce a pure tone in good rhythm. Dynamic left hand movement enables more fluid vibrato and greater forward and backward momentum, allowing faster, cleaner shifts using less effort.

Liberation of the elbow and pronating the bowing arm enables the player to have more efficient power and achieve more tonal colours in their playing. This comes from using the power of the back muscles to support the arm, rather than using small muscles to generate power. The cello as a solo instrument, especially partnering with a grand piano or a modern orchestra, has an inherent projection problem which will always pose a challenge for cellists. Awareness of efficient sources of power will not only prevent injury but also enhance control on the instrument.

In short, take time to study your own body and observe the technique of the wealth of great cellists available to us through You Tube or in live concerts. It is easy to develop bad habits through wilfulness, tension, and end-seeking. Developing good technique is an evolving art; an attitude, a way of life, expressing the love we feel about the cello and the music we play. Serving the means to the end is the fulfilment. Only then can the instrument become a mirror of ourselves and we are able to give ourselves fully to our expressive desires.

*Rolf Gjelsten joined the New Zealand String Quartet in 1994 and in 2014 he was made a Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit (MNZM) for his services to music. You can see his full biography [here](#).*