

GENERAL & TECHNICAL INFORMATION ON PLAYING THE MUSICAL SAW

As Played By Morgan Cowin (10/24/2006)

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Or Email: Sawman@DistinctivePhotos.com



Since I don't know what you already know, (I hope you've got some time...), following is probably more than you'll ever want or need to know about the musical saw. If played on pitch and with little bow noise, the musical saw produces a beautiful, clean, pure sound. I often describe it as being similar to whistling, but with a slightly more metallic (of course) timbre. While most people use the traditional sitting posture, I play standing up, so you may be interested in this different style which I will describe below, but much of the information is valid no matter what style you use.

I won first place at the "1982 Festival of the Saws" in Santa Cruz, CA, and - having played the saw since about 1971 - I am often asked to give advice on my saw-playing techniques. A lot of styles of playing have evolved around the world, but few people do it the way I do. But, I'm considered among the best players in the world, so hopefully you'll learn something and benefit from what I've written. I'm not a professional performer or entertainer - just a man that loves to play music and loves the pure, clear voice of the saw.

Little-known musical trivia: As far as I know, the saw is the only musical instrument that can still be played after stirring a fire. If the temperature is cold, I find the cold steel more difficult to play. In fact, when playing around a campfire, I often "warm-up" by holding the saw over the flames (it seems to get the molecules moving faster and makes it easier to play - or perhaps that's just my imagination... ?)

WHAT KIND OF SAW IS BEST FOR ME?

Like almost everything, picking a saw you are comfortable with is an individual choice, and a matter of compromise. Most saws can produce nearly the same sound, although there are qualitative individual differences depending on the quality and thickness of the steel, the usable length of the blade, the width of the blade at the base (handle end) and the width at the tip. The range can vary from less than two to more than three octaves, but most saws are generally about 2 - 2.5 octaves. If you can learn to master playing harmonics, (which is more difficult to control, but it IS possible), you can extend the range higher.

The main difference between musical saws and regular saws is that musical saws usually don't have sharpened and "set" teeth. Regular carpenter saws, when sharpened, have every other tooth bent to the side in the opposite direction ("set") so that the blade of the saw doesn't bind in the wood. A musical saw whose teeth are flat is just a little safer to play (it won't cut up your pants and MAY not draw blood if you accidentally hit someone with it). Regular saws are often fine for music, but some are easier to play than others. Professional musical saws are made by at least three companies in the U.S., as well as others manufactured in England, France, Germany, Sweden and China.

A saw that is a few thousandths of an inch thicker (ie: .037") will take more physical strength to play than one that is .035" or thinner. But an advantage of a thicker saw is that once the vibration begins, the tone will "sustain" (last) longer than on a thinner saw. A saw that is longer and wider at the handle end (for instance a 36" Charlie Blacklock Special) will have a bigger range than a shorter saw, but may be a little more challenging to play because you have to move the blade farther and you have more steel to work with. A saw that is wide at the base and narrow at the tip will have a bigger range than one that does not taper as much. Another example: a standard hardware store like a Stanley or a Sears Craftsman saw is played basically the same as a "Stradivarius" saw - which is made in Sweden by Sandvik (the Stradivarius is a limited edition musical saw). But, the Stradivarius, being wider at the base, will play lower notes, and because it has a slightly thicker blade - it sustains the notes longer than the Stanley. The shorter, thinner steel of the Stanley will take less strength and energy to play than the Stradivarius, and the range will be a little higher, since it is narrower at the tip end. One saw does not fit all, and compromises have to be made - depending on the range of the piece of music, the players hand strength, and personal taste.

To start, I would suggest getting a 26" or 28" saw (generally measured along the length of the teeth) and a cheap violin bow (my last bow cost about \$35 a few years ago). Cello and Bass bows are heavier, and although they have more hair to "attack" the edge of the saw, they also have more mass - which takes a little more energy (and stamina) to move fast. If you have a choice, bows with dark hair - or a "salt and pepper" (a mix of dark and light colored hair) are said to "grab" the steel a little better than bows with white hair. I think in general - cheap, thinner saws (every thousandth of an inch makes a difference in the ease of bending the blade into the required "S" curve) are easier to play. Most old or antique saws, if not too rusty or obviously bent, should work OK too. If your saw gets very dirty or rusty you can rub it (vigorously) with a "Scotch Brite" pad (used for cleaning pots & pans), steel wool or an "SOS pad" to clean it (adding soap is fine), and then rinse it in warm water and dry it completely. Then use a rag or your fingers and apply a little "3-in-1 Oil" (or even a few drops of regular motor oil from the dipstick in your car), or spray it with a little "WD-40" from an auto parts store or hardware store. Wipe the oil all over the metal, and then wipe most of it off with a clean rag. The little bit of oil left on the blade will protect it from future rust (for a while).

WHERE CAN I BUY A "PROFESSIONAL" MUSICAL SAW?

"Mussehl & Westphal" musical saws: I bought my first musical saw from Mussehl & Westphal in 1971 (they have been selling musical saws over 80 years!), and although I have other musical saws (as well as hardware store saws), their 28" saw remains the one I use the most (probably because it's the one I've used the longest and am most familiar with). I think their 28" "Tenor" musical saw is now \$50.00 (all prices are in U.S. Dollars). You can get one from:

Mussehl & Westphal (Attn: Mary Kay Dawson)
W626 Beech Dr.
East Troy, WI 53120-2416 (USA) (262)642-3649
Email: musicalsaws@musicalsaws.com www.musicalsaws.com/

"Charlie Blacklock Special" musical saws: Charlie was the founder and President of the California State Saw Player's Association (CSPA), and I was the CSPA Vice President. Charlie's a really nice older man (late 80's), but Charlie's advanced age (late 80's) and general health now limit his energy, and I took over as President at the end of 2002. The CSPA has now evolved into the International Musical Saw Association (IMSA) to be more welcoming to our many members in other states as well as other nations around the world.

Charlie's musical saws are no longer available directly from Charlie. But you can still purchase them on the internet at both of the following places:

Elderly Instruments: www.elderly.com (search for "Blacklock")) and
Lark In The Morning: www.larkinthemorning.com/ (do another search as above)

“Charlie Blacklock Special” musical saws are available in four sizes: (1) the “Tenor” saw with a 26” (66 cm) blade, (2) another “Tenor” saw with a 28” (71 cm) blade, (3) the “Baritone” saw with a 30” (76 cm) blade, and (4) the “Mini-Bass” with a 36” (91.4 cm) blade.

I have one each of Charlie’s 30” and 36” musical saws, and I believe the prices currently range from about \$70 - \$95. Charlie also has a Musical Saw Instructional Video available. (Charlie’s technique is much different than my own... I’ll explain more below.) Shipping and handling is additional, and varies depending on the number of saws ordered, whether a bow, Charlie’s Instructional Video etc. is included, and where the instrument is being shipped.

“**Stradivarius**” musical saws (yes, really!) - are made by the Swedish saw and tool company now called Bahco Sandvik - and are also available from Elderly and Lark In The Morning (see above). The current cost of them is about \$80 - \$85)

“**La Lame Sonore**” (The Singing Blade) is a saw-related instrument from France which is longer and wider at the base than most saws, and does not have teeth. It is much more expensive than other musical saws (I believe they are currently around \$250-\$400 US) but it produces a beautiful sound and features a bigger range (over 3 octaves) compared to about 2 to 2.5 octaves for regular saws) and because it is thicker, it sustains the vibrations longer. It is available through Mr. Sylvain Pichet - the president of the French Musical Saw Association - who was the First Place winner of the Saw Off competition at the Saw Player's Picnic & Music Festival in 2001. Mr. Pichet does not speak English, so you may need help in translation, but you can contact him via email through his Grand-Daughter Julie Schaub (preferably in French) at: <Julie Chaub c/o Nelly Chaubet <nchaubet@9online.fr> or:

Mr. Sylvain Pichet
A.N.D.I.A.L.S. (Association Nationale Des Interprètes et Amis de la Lame Sonore)
9, rue Guy Mocquet
94700 Maison-Alfort (Maison-Alfort is a suburb of Paris)
FRANCE
Email: Sylvain.Pichet@andials.com www.andials.com
You might also try writing: Alexis Faucomprez aleexiis@yahoo.fr

The Feldmann Musical Saw is apparently a popular musical saw in Europe, but I have not personally seen or played one. They are available on the internet at:
www.fine-tools.com/divsae.htm

“**Seagull**” and “**Golden Musical Saw**” saws are made in the PRC (People’s Republic of China) but I don’t know how to obtain them. (I recently learned that the manufacturer may have gone out of business, but please let me know if you find a source for them!)

Peter Wentworth has a commercial website on the musical saw and related items:

Peter Wentworth
2016 W. Clarke Ave.
Peoria, IL 61604
Email: sawmaster@musicalsaw.com
Website: www.musicalsaw.com

There are other musical saws and accessories available around the world...
Please contact me if know of other sources for buying professional musical saws.

PLAYING THE MUSICAL SAW

(MORGAN COWIN'S STANDING STYLE)

As I mentioned, there are lots of techniques and styles for playing the saw. I play standing up, unlike most others, because I feel I can play with more vigor and speed, and also because I don't have much padding on my rear and I get uncomfortable sitting for very long. Just about any saw will do - it does not have to be a musical saw. I use a violin bow, some people use a cello or bass bow, but people often begin playing with a mallet and graduate to the bow. You need to learn how to bend the saw, and where on the edge of the saw to place the bow before you can produce a good quality sound without too much bow noise.

I think that learning to play the saw is really just a matter of having the desire, and the stamina to stick with it awhile. It is really a simple instrument to learn to play, although it does take practice, like any other instrument. If you play another instrument or can whistle or sing on pitch - you can play the saw. What is necessary is to learn some techniques, "sharpening" your ear to hear (and produce) notes, intervals and melodies, and finally practice to learn how much to bend the saw to reproduce them.

Following is a detailed description of the techniques I have developed to play the Musical Saw:

1: HOLDING THE SAW



(Photo 1) Foot position



(Photo 2) Handle between knees



(Photo 3) Left hand position

Assuming you are right handed (everything is simply reversed if you are left handed) - Stand comfortably upright with the heel of your left foot against the arch of your right foot (looking down at your feet it is sort of an upside down "T" position). **[See Photo 1]** Hold the handle of the saw between your knees with the teeth toward you. I put a bony part of my right knee into the hole in the handle of the saw, with the front inside of my right knee pushing against the back inside of my left knee.) You should be able to support the saw just with the knees, and stand upright without bending forward, in order to remain comfortable. **[Photo 2]**

With the left hand (assuming you're right-handed) - place your left thumb about 1.5 to 4 inches (4 - 10 cm) from the tip - and (while holding the handle still between your knees), get a "feel" for bending the WHOLE saw blade from straight (or nearly straight) to an arc far to the left. You can bend the saw as far as you want - it will not break or damage the steel. The arc changes the pitch, from the lowest note (when the saw is nearly straight) to the highest note (when it is bent far to the left).

2: BENDING THE SAW (Left Hand Technique)

The critical part of producing a musical tone with either a mallet or a bow - is that you have to bend the saw blade into an "S-shaped curve." Up to now you have been bending the saw along an arc, and it was sort of a "C" shape. But now you ALSO have to bend the tip of the saw in the opposite direction of the "C" to form a sort of "S" shape. How to do this varies from player to player. The way I make the "S" curve is to place my thumb flat on the blade a few inches from the tip, and position my fingers parallel to and along the tip of the saw blade, with only the side of the index finger (and thumb) actually touching the saw. The middle & ring fingers are pressing next to each other to support the index finger. **[Photo 3]** Again, this is the method I use, but most saw players sit (again with the saw handle between the knees, or sometimes between the thighs), and put the tip of the thumb about 2-3" from the tip, and bend the tip into a "S" with the other four fingers placed over the tip end. Some people use various "cheat" devices to bend the tip into the required "S" curve, but in my opinion that is more "equipment" than you need. Yes, it takes some strength to hold this "S" curve for very long - but with practice your thumb muscle will get stronger.

As far as saw bending devices (or "cheats"), I've seen a variety of home-made wooden and metal devices used - as well as small "Vise Grip" or locking pliers, tennis balls held in the palm while pulling up the tip of the blade with the finger tips, leather pieces, "dipping" the tip in various solutions (rubber, for instance) for a better "grip," among others. However, each of these devices will add some weight to the tip area of the saw, and will take a little more effort to move along with the blade, and therefore I believe it will force you to make slower changes of pitch. I think you're better off in the long run if you can strengthen your left hand (try just squeezing and holding a tennis ball repeatedly, for instance) and use only your hand instead of adding the weight of another attachment.



(Photo 4) Low note position



(Photo 5) Middle note position



(Photo 6) High note position

(See Pages 6-8 for more details about the above positions)

All instruments produce sound by vibrations, of strings on stringed instruments, columns of air in wind instruments, and by the steel of the saw. On the musical saw the vibrations occur because of either a percussive blow to the blade by a mallet, a stick or spoon (etc.) or a bow that slowly rubs across the smooth edge of the blade - in precisely the right spot. The vibrations only occur (well, mostly occur) in an area that is relatively near the middle (the flat part) of the "S" curve. In other words, where the two curves meet there is a little straight (flat) area, and that is where the mallet should strike, and also where the bow needs to be applied. Another way to describe it is that there is a "C" shaped curve from the handle, then a little flat area (which varies in length depending on the note) and then another "C" shaped curve bending in the opposite direction, at the tip of the saw blade. Bending the tip of the saw produces the "S" curve. **NOTE:** you do NOT need to apply a LOT of pressure with the left hand, nor do you change that pressure as you make higher or lower notes. In fact, try to keep the same amount of pressure on the tip, and allow the notes to change **ONLY** by the amount of bend in the arc. You just need to bend the tip "enough" to allow the steel to vibrate.

The saw does take some muscle power to produce the "S" curve, and in the beginning your thumb muscles will tire very quickly. Play for a minute or so until your hand begins to ache, take a **SHORT** break (shake the hand and/or massage the tired thumb muscle) - and then begin again. Gradually your hand will get stronger and you'll be able to play for longer periods at a time before you get tired. If you play regularly (daily) you'll get much stronger, much faster. I know this is true, because when I **DO** play regularly, my playing gets **MUCH** better. If you stop playing for awhile, you'll lose your strength and it will take longer to get back to your previous skill level.

3: PRODUCING A SOUND WITH THE BOW (Right Hand Technique)

Many people learn where to use the bow by starting with a mallet or spoon or something which produces an instant vibration of the saw, but you can also use the bow to produce a continuous, sustained note. If you can produce a sound with a mallet you should be able to do it with a bow. Bow techniques vary with the person playing, but it is usually held in the right hand (assuming again you're right-handed). Good bowing technique can make a **HUGE** contribution to the quality of your sound, and can even extend your range into higher and lower notes.

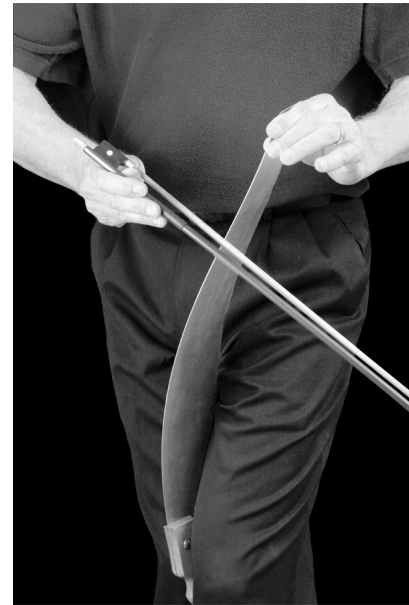
By the way, I've tried bows made for violin, viola, cello and bass - and I prefer a violin bow. It's lighter than the others and works just fine for me. Call local music stores and ask how much their cheap violin bows are. I've been finding them for \$35-55. You don't need an expensive, fine wood bow, but you should try to get one that is relatively straight when the hairs are tightened. Some **REALLY** cheap bows aren't straight, and they could make it more difficult to apply an even pressure over the length of the bow. Turn the screw in the "frog" (black wood piece at the handle end of the bow) to tighten the hairs until they are about 3/8" (1 cm) away from the wood part of the bow.

I hold the bow in a way that is difficult to describe, but easy to do. Point the tip of the bow down with the hairs below the wood and turned toward you, and put the tip of your right thumb in the space between the hairs and the bow near the "frog" end of the bow (the part that tightens the hairs). I put my fingers over the back of the bow to hold it and to be able to apply pressure with the hairs of the bow against the smooth edge of the saw. **[See Photo 7]** It doesn't matter too much exactly how you hold the bow, but rather the technique of applying pressure from the bow to the saw.

Hold the saw in a normal "S" curve, but don't move the saw... then - visually find the flat section in the middle of the "S". Maximum friction is obtained when the hairs of the bow are placed at nearly a right angle (90 degrees) to the flat surface of the saw, and also at a right angle to the edge. With a **SLOW** movement of the bow (keeping the right angles in mind) and with a slight-to-medium pressure from the bow against the blade of the saw (at the right point along the edge) - you should be able to produce a good sound. At first, don't change the arc (and note) of the saw - but rather work on producing a good sound quality on just one note. **[See Photo 8]**



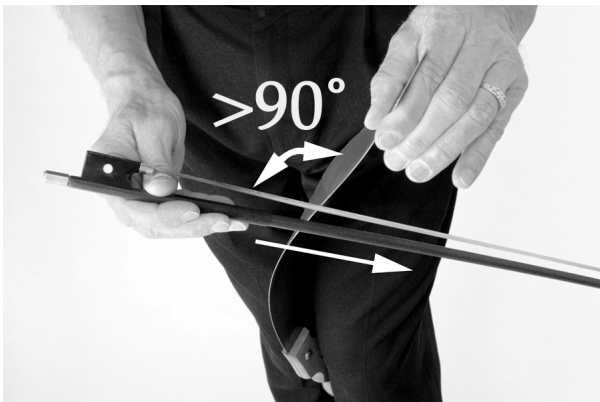
(Photo 7) Right hand position
Note the wrist is fairly straight and in a Naturally comfortable position.



(Photo 8) Note that the bow intersects the edge of the saw at the flat section in the middle of the "S" Curve, and is about 90° to the flat part of the blade and also about 90° to the edge.

If the saw isn't vibrating and producing a pleasing sound, try applying a little more pressure (but the **bow still needs to move SLOWLY**) - and if it is producing a screeching sound, use a little less pressure. The goal is to produce a nice sound with minimal bow noise. The bow can be drawn both ways, and you should practice with it both ways. If you **STILL** can't produce a good sound, you're probably not (1) making enough of an "S" curve, (2) bowing in the flat section between the curves, or (3) you're not applying quite enough pressure against the saw (usually it's either #1 or #2).

A fine point on bowing in both directions: If you look very closely at the edge of the saw blade, you'll notice it is actually squared off, with a little 90° corner on both the front and back sides. While pushing the bow "down" (from the tip of the bow toward the "frog"), angle the bow slightly away from you (more than 90°) so that the hairs only push against the far (lower) corner of the edge of the blade. [See Photo 9] Conversely, while pulling the bow "up" (from the "frog" end toward the tip of the bow), angle the bow slightly toward you (less than 90°) so that only the near (upper) corner has contact with the hairs of the bow. [See Photo 10]



(Photo 9) Bow Downstroke (Pushing)



(Photo 10) Bow Upstroke (Pulling)

An important consideration while using a bow with the musical saw is that you have to change the angle of the bow to keep the right angles at the correct intersection point on the saw when the arc (and corresponding pitch) is changed. Again, this is something I could show you in a few seconds, but is really difficult for me to describe in writing. What I'm trying to say is that when you move the saw to change the pitch - you need to remember to move the bow to the new flat part (remembering to keep the right angles of bow hair against the blade). **[Refer to Photos 4-6]**

One of the "secrets" to being able to play longer without (TOO much) fatigue is to bend the saw into the "S" curve ONLY as much as it needs to produce a clean sound. When playing higher pitched notes, many people tend to bend the saw more (to a more exaggerated "S" curve), but this is unnecessary and only tires your hand faster. In fact, when playing high notes I actually bend the saw in a less exaggerated "S" curve than with low notes. Depending on the pitch, I also vary the distance between the thumb and fingers: a bigger distance (up to 4 or 5 inches or 9-12 cm) for the very low notes, and perhaps only an inch or two (2-4 cm) for the very high notes.

Another tip is that you can literally "pull" out a better quality note by not only producing an "S" curve with the left hand, but simultaneously pulling the tip away from the handle at the same time. This actually flattens out the "S" curve a little, and it seems to make it easier to make a good vibration and will perhaps extend your range somewhat.

The more pressure you apply between the bow and the saw - the louder the sound (and also, unfortunately - the potential for more bow noise, including an unpleasant screeching sound). If you can learn to apply a little more pressure ON the beat of the music than you do to just sustain the note - you can actually play it more rhythmically. Most people play the musical saw in only a "glissando" style - just sliding from one note to another, rather than trying to accent or emphasize individual notes. In my opinion, emphasizing the first beat of each measure (or phrase) of the music usually makes the melody more recognizable and pleasing.

I've found that when playing with others, the saw is difficult to play quietly enough not to disturb/distract singers and other acoustic musicians. I almost always play as an acoustic instrument (I don't use microphones much for recording and/or performing for big audiences), so I have gradually learned to have a "light touch" with my bow. Literally, I try to use the minimal amount of pressure necessary to produce and sustain the vibration/sound. I usually try to play at the same volume (or quieter) than the person singing or playing the lead, until it is my turn to take the lead - when my volume goes up.

Too much bow noise or screeching can be very unpleasant, and you may notice people in the audience get up and leave, or see people with hearing aids covering their ears in pain. I have found that the screeching from the bow is caused by two factors:

- 1) Too much pressure of the bow hair against the steel edge of the saw blade
- 2) Bowing at the wrong speed - too fast or slow for the vibration of a specific pitch

Number 2 is the harder of the two to learn. Try this exercise: Produce a single note and SUSTAIN it with a delicate touch - trying to produce little or no bow noise. Bow in both directions, keeping the note on the same pitch, so it sounds consistently and continuously. Try to keep the same note going for a minute or two (or longer) while trying to NOT be able to detect a change in the sound when you are bowing - and when you are not bowing - even as you change the direction of the bow strokes. Note the slow speed of the draw of the bow when you accomplish this. You will also notice the very light amount of bow pressure necessary to sustain the note (at least at lower volume levels).

Next, try sustaining the same note while bowing in both directions - with the addition of some very BRIEF moments of applying some extra bow pressure ON the beat. Counting to your self, try emphasizing the first beat of a four beat measure - by applying a brief (but gentle) additional amount of pressure just on the first beat. The goal is to bow at the same speed as you used to produce a continuous sustained note, but just adding enough pressure to make the note a little louder. (**ONE**, two, three, four - **ONE**, two, three, four - etc.) Practice the same skills as above on the first beat of a 3/4 time (waltz) measure. (**ONE**, two three - **ONE** two, three - etc.)

While observing the bow techniques used with professionals on the violin and cello, I noticed they sometimes made back-and-forth bounces of the bow to accent notes, and sometimes they bounce the bow 2 or 3 or 4 times (depending on the rhythm and melody) in both directions of the bow stroke. I have been adapting this idea for the saw and have taught myself some exercises that enable me to have more variety in my music. Instead of merely moving the bow slowly along the edge, I learned to bounce the bow (hairs) off the edge of the saw to produce a little more emphasis on each note. Try moving the bow slowly back and forth, and use the bounce to emphasize each beat.

Start by holding one note only (don't move the saw), and try to gently and rhythmically bounce the bow once in each direction, back and forth, evenly. Once you feel like you're mastering that, try two bounces in each direction, then three bounces in each direction, then four. You can then advance to applying this bouncing technique to a scale or melody rather than just one note. You'll soon notice the musical quality of your playing is improving dramatically!

It just takes practice to learn to hear and "feel" the interval from one note to the next (and exactly how far to bend the saw to the next note in the melody), but in combination with a more expressive bow technique you can improve the quality of your repertoire considerably.

4: PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER...

Here's the real "secret" to learning to play the saw... **Practice!** Your thumb muscle in your left hand in particular will tire in just a short time, but massage it and shake it and perhaps give it a short rest - then try again. If you keep that up you'll soon be able to apply the pressure it takes to make the "S" curve for longer and longer times. Bow technique and learning to "feel" the intervals between notes, will take a while longer to develop, but just keep practicing. Observe violinists on TV or at concerts to watch their bow techniques - some of it can be applied to the saw. Don't OVER apply the pressure to the tip to make the "S" curve - that will also tire your thumb and hand muscles needlessly. You only need "enough" pressure to sustain a note. Actually, the concept of "just enough pressure - not too much nor too little" - applies to both your saw hand and your bow hand. While standing - notice your posture - don't get hunched over or contort your body - that will just tire you out needlessly. You can play much longer if you are comfortable.

"Vibrato" is a method of giving an expressive quality to the sound of a note by means of slight fluctuations of pitch (sometimes slowly, sometimes faster - depending on the pitch and the tempo of the music). It is usually reserved for notes that are sufficiently long to make it possible. Many saw players seem to think that vibrato is always necessary for musical interpretation. I strongly disagree. To me - the first goal in playing a melody is to play the notes on pitch. Don't worry about vibrato. Saw players who sit to play are often instructed to shake their foot up and down, which shakes the saw and usually makes a very exaggerated vibrato effect - which often completely masks the actual notes of the melody. When adding a little vibrato while I stand to play - I just shake my left hand (and the saw tip) back and forth a little. By far the most important thing is to play the notes on pitch. You can add vibrato later.

The musical saw requires you to be "right on" pitch or it can sound horrendous, but it is GREAT for ear training! Practice until you can master one octave of a major scale (Do, re, mi, fa, so, la, ti, do) both up and down (most saws have a range of about 2 octaves). Then try a few slow, simple songs like "Doe, a deer, a female deer..." from the Broadway play *The Sound of Music*, which is good for practicing a major scale. Also, practice "Here Comes The Bride" (the interval between "Here" and "Comes" is called a "Perfect 4th," or "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star", (the change between the 1st "Twinkle" and the 2nd "Twinkle" is another common interval called a "Perfect 5th"). Practice these intervals until you can do them accurately and quickly, as they are used in many songs. Soon you'll find other songs you will be able to play. I think it is important to practice with songs you know and like - whether from CD's, albums, tapes, or the radio. It challenges you to "keep up to speed" with the rhythm and learn new melodies. Pick a few songs you know well and practice them over and over until you feel good about them, then gradually add more challenging songs. Some of my favorites I've played literally thousands of times over the years.

I'd be happy to give you a short lesson in person if you come by my home in San Rafael, CA (12 miles north of San Francisco and the Golden Gate Bridge) - with advanced notice. Email me at: Sawman@DistinctivePhotos.com (I'm a professional photographer) or call me at my home office at (415)459-7722 and I'll give you some tips over the phone... or give you directions to my home. Although most saw players play while seated, I've taught myself to play standing up because I feel I can move faster and with more accuracy in this position (plus I don't have much fat on my rear - and my legs tend to go to sleep, and well... I just can't sit still very long).

In case you are interested, here is some additional background information about me:

Back in 1971 I was a music minor in college playing classical guitar, but I wanted to play a melody instrument as well. I tried the recorder, harmonicas etc. before I stumbled upon an ad in "The Whole Earth Catalog" for a musical saw (from Mussehl & Westphal). The saw, bow, lessons and case were only \$39 at that time! (It is still one of the cheapest instruments around, and it will last a lifetime.)

Being a "sharp" student and wanting to be on "the cutting edge" I recognized real value when I saw it and ordered one for myself. I won first place in the "Saw-off" competition at the California Saw Player's Association's (CSPA) "1982 Festival of the Saws" in Santa Cruz, California. I later became the vice president of the CSPA, and I have been a judge at the saw festival for many years). I am now the president of the IMSA (International Musical Saw Association): www.SawPlayers.org

I do occasionally play professionally, but I usually play just for fun, "jamming" with friends who sing and play various instruments informally at parties or around the camp fire (or with just about anyone else who asks). I was invited to play at the giant 1983 "Us Festival" put on by Apple co-founder Steve Wozniak near San Bernardino, California and I have played on television and at various events, but I don't aspire to be a professional entertainer. However, I volunteer for the Bread & Roses organization (www.BreadAndRoses.org), which brings free live entertainment to shut-ins such as those in juvenile and adult detention facilities, hospitals and nursing homes. I've also played with (take a deep breath...) accordions, bagpipes, cello, drums, flute, guitar, hammered dulcimer, harpsichord, lute, organ, piano, trumpet, ukulele, violin, a professional whistler, xylophone and zither - and even a symphony orchestra. But mostly I prefer to jam with other musicians, or play along with CD's/tapes/records, with favorite styles including bluegrass, blues, country, folk, contemporary, rock & roll, Broadway show tunes, and classical music such as that by Vivaldi, Boccherini, Haydn and Mozart.

To learn more about the Musical Saw and where you might see and hear it played, I suggest that you **join the International Musical Saw Association (IMSA)**! The dues are \$20 US/year for an individual, and \$25 US/year for a family - no matter where you live around the world!

There are currently about 200 members from all over the world. You may even have the dubious distinction of being the first Card-Carrying IMSA Member on your block (maybe even your city or state or country)! You will be mailed three issues of the IMSA newsletter - the "Saw Player News" - a year telling about musical events that include the saw, as well as other articles and tips on playing from other experts, and photos of some of the best saw players in the world. You can print and fill out an IMSA Member Application at the IMSA website: www.SawPlayers.org No matter where you live in the world, you can now pay your membership fees (without having to exchange your local currency to U.S. Dollars) by using a credit card and our "PayPal" secure connection directly from the website. But you can also just send a Membership Application and your personal check (payable in U.S. Dollars) and made out to: "IMSA" to: Kenny Blacklock, IMSA Secretary/Treasurer:

Kenny Blacklock, c/o IMSA
31 South 40 Pier
Sausalito, CA 94965

(This unusual address is because Kenny lives on a houseboat)

The IMSA hosts the annual "**International Musical Saw Festival**" every year at Roaring Camp & Big Trees, in the town of Felton - in the mountains about 10 minutes North of Santa Cruz, California. **The Saw Festival is FREE, and is now held each year on the 2nd Sunday in August, and the Saturday before.** You will meet other saw players from around the world, you can attend the free saw-playing workshop to learn new techniques from expert musical saw players - and even have the unique experience of playing with an average of 25-35 other saw players on stage at the same time!

The Festival has a main stage where bands (and individuals) play in front of a receptive audience, and there is also a "Saw-Off" competition to find the best saw player of the year. People come from all over the world to attend the Festival, and we've had some GREAT players (and Saw-Off winners) from Canada, China, Japan, Czech Republic, England, France, Ireland, New Zealand, as well as the U.S.A. The musical saw was at it's peak of popularity in vaudeville around the 1920's and 1930's, but many thousands of saw players still enjoy the instrument all around the world. YOU will too!

Thanks for your interest in the musical saw! I hope the above information helps you to improve.

Good luck, and HAVE FUN with the Musical Saw!!!

Sincerely,

Morgan Cowin, IMSA President

P.S. There is a lot of information about the Musical Saw on the internet, including:

- 1) **The International Musical Saw Association's** website at: www.sawplayers.org/
- 2) **Natalia Paruz** is famous in New York for her saw expertise and has a lot of interesting information about the musical saw: www.SawLady.com
- 3) A different approach from Swiss player **Alfons Eschle**, who plays the Feldmann saw from Germany: <http://www.datacomm.ch/fesch/musicalsaw.html>
- 4) **Robert Froehner** (a past winner at the Saw-Off competition) has a site for Saw & Theremin at: www.theremin-saw.com/
- 5) **Jim Leonard** (an early winner at the Saw Festival, is the author of the most complete book I know on the musical saw, "Scratch My Back." Unfortunately it is now out-of-print, but you may find a copy on Ebay or out-of-print book sellers. Jim's web address is: www.ridgenet.net/~sawjim
- 6) There is also an **on-line musical saw discussion group**: You will have to join "Yahoo Groups" at: <http://groups.yahoo.com> and the group is at: musicalsaw@yahoo.com

(I am sure there are other good ones... Please send me the address if you come across any.)