

Improving at any age and stage

It used to be said that unless you had fully developed your violin technique by the time you were twenty or so, it would be too late. After that, the entire process of learning becomes very slow and difficult, it was thought, and you stand little chance of making further progress.

Johann Quantz expressed this in 1752:

He who wishes to distinguish himself in music must not begin the study of it too late. If he sets about it at an age when his energies are no longer vigorous, or when his throat or fingers are no longer flexible, and thus cannot acquire sufficient facility to perform...the passage-work roundly and distinctly, he will not go very far.

In fact, you can improve your playing at any age. 'Improving' means to change the way you play.

Everything in violin technique can be described; the language used to describe it is all about proportions: how much of this, in proportion to how much of that.

- To change the way you play, first you must know what all the different things are that can be measured in proportion to one another. (It is no use knowing only that the recipe for a cake is made up of certain proportions. You need to know what the ingredients are in the first place.)
- Then, making every change by altering the proportions of one thing to another, you can build changes into your playing at any age whatsoever.

But don't children learn much faster than adults?

Young children can learn a foreign language without even noticing; children's muscles are marvellously soft and pliable; every stage of their learning traces a brand-new path, without conflicts or confusions with previous paths; learning takes place on the deepest level of the psyche, perhaps to a far greater extent than later, rather than having first to be processed by the intellect.

It is common for a ten year-old to play difficult virtuosic pieces very well after playing for five years, but not so common for an adult. Yet as an adult you can learn just as quickly as a child, and in many cases much faster.

You have the ability to *measure*, which is a skill very young children develop only gradually. You have the benefit of all the general life experience that the child has not had, so you can make all kinds of connections that they cannot make; and you have the powers of reason, self-motivation and Will. You can become clear about where you are now, clear about where you want to be in the future, and then take definite steps to move from here to there.

To change from banging fingers down onto the string, and then pressing the string hard into the fingerboard, and instead to place the fingers gently and to feel the springiness of the string, is something you can introduce into your playing at any age and immediately notice the difference.

- At any age and stage, you can change from playing everything with the bow too near to the fingerboard, to playing a little nearer to the bridge where the string has greater tension
- Or find in the left hand a new feeling of release and lightness by stopping squeezing the neck hard between the fingers and thumb
- Or start to encourage a feeling of forward-forward-forward-forward in the vibrato movement instead of forward-back-forward-back
- Or refine your intonation by tuning all your G's, D's, A's and E's to the open strings, and by measuring all the sharps from the natural above, and the flats from the natural below
- Or stop extra, unnecessary physical motions that get in the way of everything else; and so on.

Then, you can use your adult resolve to continue to make the changes until they 'stick' and become habits. In just a few lessons or a few days, an adult violinist can change their playing as much as an unfocused child may do in months or years.

All of these changes are perfectly easy to make, and anyone can make them. There is no special aptitude or talent required to feel such things as the difference between the give of the bow at the heel and at the point; or to feel how you can *balance* the bow in your hand (when appropriate) rather than *hold* it; or to experiment with a new arrangement of the fingers on the bow; or to do anything else.

You simply need to know exactly what to do and what *not* to do, and then continue in the new way until it becomes a habit.

Simply trying harder often makes things worse. Everything is a matter of cause and effect, which means that for every specific action there is a specific reaction. If you carry on performing the same actions, you can expect to keep getting the same reactions or results.

In other words, if you carry on doing what you are already doing, you just get more of what you are already getting.

Then, if you try harder, you just get even more of what you are already getting. Instead, the answer is always to *change* something. The slightest change in what you are doing, or how you are doing it, will always bring about a completely new result.¹

For example, the tiniest change in the exact area of the fingertip that contacts the string, changes the character of the vibrato. Instead of continuing to put the finger down on the string on the same part of the fingertip each time, and trying harder to make different colours, all you have to do is put the finger down a little flatter (Fig. 1a), or a little more upright (Fig. 1b).

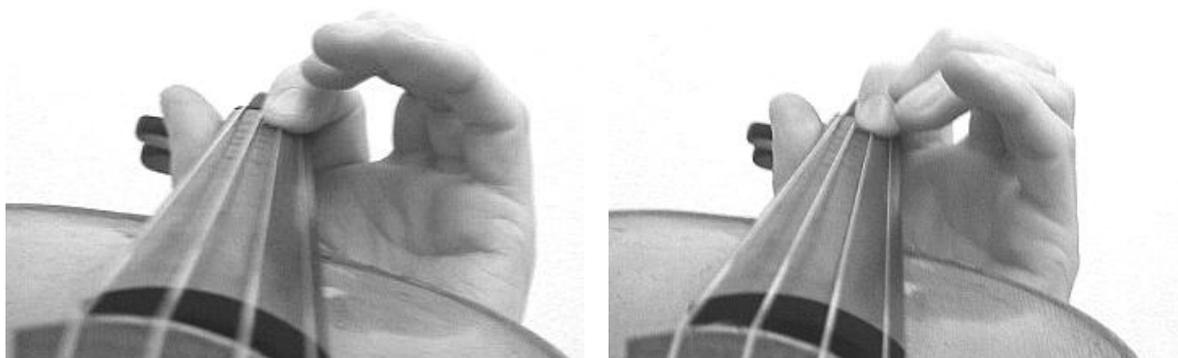


Fig. 1 (a) Vibrating more on the pad [002]

(b) Vibrating more on the tip [003]

A useful catch-phrase commonly used in everything from sport to business is: “Do not work harder, work smarter!”

Albert Einstein said: “The definition of insanity is to do the same thing in the same way, over and over again, and expect a different result.”

The danger to avoid is that you play more and more difficult pieces, but the way you play them, or the way you approach the instrument, remains the same. The path many students follow is like this:

Getting better without improving

Imagine Henry, a talented eleven year-old. He is not yet an advanced player but he is doing very well in his violin playing and everything is looking promising.

He does not know much about tone production, and basically just puts the bow on the string without thinking about it. He plays with quite a good tone, but his listening is not on a high level – so there are moments when his sound is not completely clean, and it lacks depth or variety.

Since he is not aware of what he is doing with the bow, there is no conscious bow division, or other planning such as bowing nearer to, or further from, the bridge. Of course he does change the

soundpoint a bit, here and there, but not in any really developed way. The bowing is therefore unplanned and undirected, which then leads to unevenness, randomness, and poor phrasing.

He has a good sense of pitch, so his intonation is quite good; but the intonation does not yet have 'structure', and there are occasional notes that are clearly out of tune.

Lastly, let's add that he holds the violin too far to the right, stops the string with too much pressure and thumb counterpressure, has many moments of tension in both arms and hands, and tends to over-exert. Every action is slightly too big and therefore has a hint of clumsiness about it.

Henry then spends the next seven years learning more and more difficult pieces. He ends up at the age of eighteen having reached the level of playing, say, the Tchaikovsky Concerto.

He plays the concerto with basically quite a good tone; but he still does not know much about tone production or bow division, and has never focused on improving his listening, so there are many little moments when the tone is not clean or lacks depth and variety.

His tuning is quite good because he has a good sense of pitch, but the overall intonation still does not have real structure, and there are occasional notes that are clearly out of tune; and he holds the violin too far to the right, over-presses and is tense in both arms, and tends to try too hard.

In other words, he is playing more advanced pieces but he has not improved. He has not changed his approach to the instrument, so because he is carrying on doing what he was already doing, he is getting more of what he was already getting. Instead, the slightest change would lead to great differences in result.