

# Son filé

One hundred years ago ‘*son filé*’ — long, slow bow strokes lasting sixty seconds or more — was regarded as one of the most important practice techniques for developing tone production and bow control.

Writing in 1924, Carl Flesch said that *son filé* “are among the oldest, best-known, most popular and also most appropriate of tone and bow exercises...Their simplicity and usefulness...give them a place of honor in the arsenal of bowing and tonal exercises.” (*Carl Flesch, The Art of Violin Playing, pub. Carl Fischer, New York, 1924, page 98.*)

Holding one note for a whole minute may seem to be an impossibly boring proposition. Even Flesch added that *son filé* “may be regarded as the most tiresome item in the whole field of violin technique.”

However, the results of only a little work on *son filé* are both extraordinary and immediate — even if the sound scratches or disappears from time to time because the bow-speed is so excessively slow. Afterwards, all the bow strokes feel marvellously smooth and even.

## Exercise 1

- Playing near the bridge, sustain single notes for as long as possible on each string, using every centimetre of the bow.
- Set the metronome at 60 (ie one beat per second). Begin with down- and up-bows lasting 30 seconds each, and gradually increase day by day to 60 seconds or more. Even at the slowest speeds, always strive to produce a pure sound.

## Exercise 2

- Repeat the bar of rapid semiquavers for ten, twenty, thirty seconds or more. The longer, the louder, and the faster the semiquavers are, the harder it is to begin the pause note.
- Play straight from the semiquavers into the pause, beginning it *piano* without any hesitation or unevenness in the stroke. Hold the pause ten, twenty, thirty seconds or more, sustaining evenly.

Play on each string.

## Exercise 3

There are an infinite number of possibilities of *crescendo*, *decrescendo* and *sostenuto* when you play long, sustained strokes. You can also add different lengths of bow, string crossings and position changes.

However, since all variations come from the following basic patterns, practice of these alone is sufficient to cover the essentials.

- Play as slowly and as evenly as possible, at about semiquaver = 40-60 (the slower the better).
- Stay close to the bridge, rather than going to the fingerboard to play the *piano*.

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#### Exercise 4

Play whole bows on one note with the metronome at 60. *Keep going without stopping throughout the exercise.*

- 1 Bowing near to the bridge, play 10 beats on the down-bow and 10 on the up-bow. Keep the speed, pressure and distance from the bridge absolutely even.
- 2 Without stopping, play 12 beats on the next down- and up-bow, and then 14, 16, 18 and 20. Play closer to the bridge as the number increases.
- 3 Gradually get faster again by reducing the number to 18, 16, etc., down to 10, 8, 6, 4, 3, 2 and 1 bow to a beat. Play slightly further from the bridge as the number decreases, but stay as close as possible.

At each bow speed, feel the exact distance from the bridge that produces the best sound and feeling in the bow. It should feel as though, were you to play a hair's breadth closer to the bridge, the sound would break. 'Ride' the hair against this point like a surfer riding against a wall of water.

#### Exercise 5

Holding the bow half a centimetre above the string, move as slowly as possible from the heel to the point and back again.

- Keep the bow absolutely smooth and even, without wobbling or moving closer to or further from the string.
- Relax all the muscles in the bowing arm, and the muscles in the back (between the shoulder blades and on either side of the spine).
- Breathe normally.
- Do this above each string. It feels considerably different on each level.

Play these exercises once or twice a week, for just five or ten minutes at most. Also use Kreutzer Etude No. 1, playing with the metronome set at semiquaver = 40.

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Next month's BASICS returns to the left/right hand, with