

# Pizzicato

It is a curious fact that, although pizzicato is usually the very first thing we do as beginners, even professional players may find themselves uncomfortable in pizzicato passages. It is not uncommon for an otherwise fine professional orchestra suddenly to sound a bit scrappy in a first rehearsal of the pizzicato movement of Benjamin Britten's *Simple Symphony*. Perhaps this is because we think of pizzicato as being easy, and therefore never practise it.

## Hand position

In pizzicato passages at a slow to moderate tempo, the thumb can rest against the side edge or corner of the fingerboard to support the hand. Playing individual pizzicato notes, with plenty of time between them, the thumb rests against the side of the fingerboard only before the pizzicato, and then leaves it as the note is plucked.

Many players choose not to rest the hand on the thumb, but pluck freely from above the string whatever the tempo. Some of the plucking movement then comes from the arm. In fast passages this can be much less tiring than when the hand is stabilized on the thumb, and the finger has to do all the work on its own. However, the faster the tempo the closer the finger must remain to the string, and this closeness must be maintained carefully. Lack of ensemble in the *Simple Symphony* can often be cured by this alone.

Playing chords, the thumb is rarely used to support the hand, the hand making a guitar-like, sweeping movement. ('Such a movement not only produces well sounding vibrations, but also gives an impression of gracefulness.' – Carl Flesch: *The Art of Violin Playing*, Carl Fischer Inc., page 49.)

## Finger movement and distance from the bridge

Playing chords, the finger often plucks the strings diagonally, i.e. from left to right and forwards. Plucking more on the pad of the finger can produce softer tones, more on the tip of the finger harder tones. Playing single notes the direction need not be diagonal but is usually still from left to right, and never upward from below to avoid the string hitting the fingerboard. (However, lifting the string so that it touches the fingerboard on the rebound is a special effect known as a 'Bartok' pizzicato.)

Near the bridge the string tension is too hard (and you get rosin on your finger), and too far over the fingerboard the string is too weak. Carl Flesch states rather precisely that 'The most favorable point of contact between string and finger is about 2.364 inches distant from the bridge'!

## Stopping the string and vibrato

Pizzicato is one of the few areas of playing where the harder the left fingers press the string the better. In normal playing with the bow, too much finger pressure can make the tone sound hard and brittle, and is also a common cause of tension in the left hand. The best amount of finger pressure is usually very light – just enough to stop the note cleanly. However, for a ringing tone in pizzicato the finger needs to stop the string very hard so that each note rings on like an open string. Suzuki called this ring 'the true sound of the string'. Of course, when the pizzicato needs to be very quiet, or very dry, the left finger can release the string a little to prevent the note from ringing.

It may not be too extreme to say that most players forget to vibrate pizzicato most of the time! Yet the difference vibrato makes can be extraordinary, especially when an ensemble plays large, ringing chords, or in a melodic solo line:

Sonata no. 2 in A major, op. 100, Brahms  
Second movement

1

Example

## Coming back for the next chord as part of the last

- In a rapid series of pizzicato chords (or individual notes), the hand needs to finish up where it started. Having played the chord the hand continues in a circular movement, in the air, back to the heel. In other words:

Play the first chord and in the same motion return in the air to the starting place. Wait.  
 Play the next chord and return, and so on. (Play–return – wait – play–return – wait.)

*instead of*

Play the first chord. Wait.

Return in the air to the starting place and play the next chord. (Play – wait – return–and–play – wait.)

2

Example

Zigeunerweisen, op. 20 no. 1, Sarasate

The musical notation shows a sequence of chords and notes. It starts with a pizzicato chord (marked 'pizz.' and 'f'), followed by a rest, then an arco chord (marked 'arco'), and continues with a series of notes and chords. The notation includes fingerings (1, 2, 3, 4) and a 'v' marking for a pluck.

- Practising by exaggeration, bring the hand back for the next chord earlier than necessary. Written out in double-time for the sake of clarity:

The musical notation shows a sequence of chords. The first chord is marked with 'x' notes on the strings, indicating finger placement. Below the first chord, it says: "Right hand index finger resting on the D string ready to pluck". Below the second chord, it says: "Right hand index finger resting on the G string ready to pluck".

The x-notes indicate placing the left fingers on the strings, with the right hand in position and ready to pluck the chord.

- Play strictly in time, placing the second chord on the string exactly on the second quaver beat.
- Begin slowly, and gradually speed up to the correct tempo for the passage.

## Placing the left fingers in time before plucking

It is always easy for the right hand fingers to be ready to play a chord, whereas the left fingers may need more time to find their places on the string. The fingers must be placed quickly enough to be ready before the finger plucks.

One way to improve the timing is to think of placing the next chord as the final action of playing the previous chord. In other words:

Play the first chord – instantly place the fingers ready for the next chord. (Play–place.)

*instead of*

Place the fingers – play. Place the next fingers – play, and so on. (Place–play.)

- To exaggerate the early placing of the fingers, practise in exactly the same way as Example 2.

## Tone production exercise using pizzicato

- This is a very simple but effective exercise. Pluck the string well to make a full, rounded note, and listen to the ring. Then listen for the same ring in the sound while playing the note with the bow.

3

Example

♩ = 50

The musical notation shows a sequence of pizzicato chords and notes. It starts with a pizzicato chord (marked 'Pizz' and 'f'), followed by a rest, then a pluck (marked 'v'), and continues with a series of notes and chords. The notation includes 'Pizz' markings and 'v' markings for plucks.