

Improving listening (1)

Listening is one of the single most important elements of playing a musical instrument. If you do nothing else but improve your listening, so that you 'hang your ears on the sound' and are able to catch every single sound that comes out of the instrument, this alone improves the overall standard of playing immediately and dramatically.

DESCRIBING THE TONE

Describing tone is a quick way to improve listening. When you think of tone production in terms of proportions the description can always be brief, and in most cases no more than six or seven words.

Leaving aside the left hand, every sound that comes out of a string instrument is the result of 1) a particular speed of bow combined with 2) a particular amount of weight. Both of these are dependent on 3) the tension of the string at that particular distance from the bridge (called the 'point of contact' or 'soundpoint').

Whatever the soundpoint there is a certain combination of speed and weight that produces the freest and purest vibration of the string.

To get this quality, tone production is always a question of speed of bow, not pressure. Even when playing near the bridge, the flow of the bow and the distance from the bridge dictates how much weight, not the other way round. The art of bowing is always one of 'stroking' the string, however heavily this must be done because of the 'hardness' of the string near the bridge, rather than of 'pressing' the string.

Scraping, tearing, crushed, lower frequency sounds = too much weight (or too slow).

Whistling, fizzing sounds of harmonics and high frequencies = not enough weight (or too fast).

- 1 Play a bow stroke (a note, or a group of notes slurred), and listen closely to the sound.
- 2 Describe the sound in terms of speed, weight, distance from the bridge and evenness. For example:
'Too fast (or too light) too near the bridge'
'Too heavy (or too slow) too near the fingerboard'
'The right balance of speed, weight and soundpoint until the middle of the bow; then the soundpoint changed slightly and there was the crushed sound of too much weight; then the speed, weight and soundpoint were in balance again.'
'Good until just before changing bow when the bow speed suddenly increased, resulting in a slight whistling in the tone.'
- 3 Repeat the bow stroke, listen, describe, and so on. Continue until the stroke is exactly as desired and the tone is entirely free of blemish.

Playing sounds for the student to describe is a useful teaching tool. The teacher plays a series of single bow-strokes with a deliberate faulty sound in each, and the student describes that sound in terms of speed, weight and distance from the bridge. The following examples are written with tied notes to represent the different elements of the stroke, but are intended to sound as one, unbroken note:

The diagram shows five examples of bow strokes on a treble clef staff, each represented by a tied note. The examples are labeled as follows:

- 1. Near the bridge, good speed and pressure
- 2. Sound beginning to scratch
- 3. Near the bridge, good speed and pressure
- 4. Too much pressure, causing scratch
- 5. Too fast and light, too near the bridge, causing scratch

Below the staff, five arrows point to specific parts of the strokes with the following descriptions:

- Keeping same speed and pressure, moving slightly away from the bridge
- Keeping same speed and pressure, moving back towards the bridge
- Middle sound-point, good speed and pressure
- Less pressure again, pure tone
- Pure tone

Describing sounds in terms of speed, weight and distance from the bridge quickly becomes both automatic and immediate. Having gone through the process of using words, you soon find yourself doing the same thing naturally and non-verbally, from instant to instant of playing.

Next month's BASICS looks in detail at the different factors in the sound that we listen to.