
BASICS

Rhythm

There are three factors in playing music: pitch, sound and rhythm. Looked at from one angle, none are more important than another since you cannot do without a high standard of any of them. Looked at from another angle, rhythm is the most important.

It is rhythm that locks the audience on to the performer. It may actually get the audience's feet tapping. If you play in tune and with a good sound, but with poor rhythm, you cannot grip an audience the way you can if you play with many accidents of pitch or sound, but with infectious rhythmic vitality. It goes without saying that you need to play in tune and with a good sound as well, but that is a different subject.

Many string players, even if they have not been playing for long, will notice and make a face if they play a note out of tune, or if they scratch or squeak; but even if they are quite an advanced player they will often be unaware if they play a little too long or too short. In effect, all the attention is on 'playing in-tune notes with a good sound'.

Sub-dividing and feeling the pulse

Playing the printed rhythms is one thing, but playing them on top of the foundation of a regular rhythmic pulse is another. The underlying rhythmic pulse is the base on which you stand, without which you may constantly feel technically and musically unstable.

One of the keys to feeling the pulse is to sub-divide everything you play into smaller units, except notes that are too fast. For example:

- Playing minims, feel an underlying pulse of crotchets and quavers. You may even feel a flow of sub-divided semiquavers, depending on the tempo.
- Playing crotchets, feel an underlying pulse of quavers; playing quavers, feel semiquavers.
- Subdivide dotted notes and triplets in the same way.

The mechanics of rhythm on a string instrument

There are six technical factors that affect when a note sounds:

- 1 Playing slurred notes on one string the rhythm is created only by the left fingers. The bow has nothing to do with it:



- 2 Playing separate bows on one note, all the rhythm is in the right hand and none in the left fingers:



- 3 Playing different notes with separate bows the rhythm is in both hands, though it is the bow that speaks:

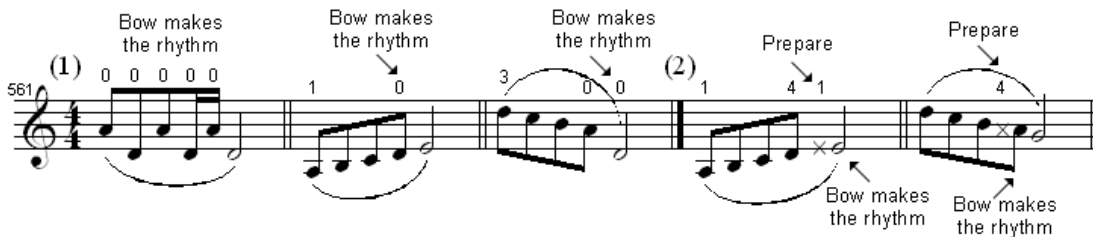


A particular danger is that it is often much easier for the bow simply to stop, change direction, and go the other way, than it is for the left finger to find its place on the string. If the bow plays with more immediate rhythm than a slightly-delayed left finger, the result is the impure sound of bowing a half-stopped string.

Avoid this by always leading the bow with the left hand, rather than the left hand following the bow.

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4 During string crossings, all the rhythm is in the bow:



(1) All the rhythm is in the bow, none in the left fingers.

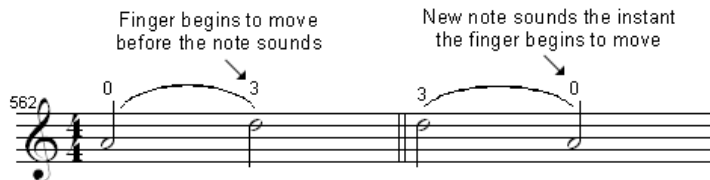
(2) There is a particular problem of co-ordination when you have to prepare a finger on the new string before touching that string with the bow. The rhythm is still all in the bow, but that is a matter of the *musical* timing.

The *technical* timing is earlier than the moment when you want the new note to sound: the left finger must be on the string and stopping it sufficiently before the bow gets there; and the bow must start moving towards the new string before the moment when it must arrive there and sound the note.

Prepare the first or fourth finger on the string and then time the sounding of the note with the bow.

5 The timing of dropping a finger is different from that of lifting a finger off the string.

- When a new note is played by placing a finger during slurred ascending notes, the finger starts off in a place above the string; moves towards the string; and only when it arrives does the new note sound. The order is: 'move, new note'.
- When a new note is played by lifting a finger during slurred descending notes, the new note sounds the instant the finger begins to move; then the finger continues away from the string. The order is: 'new note, move':



Notes played with bad rhythm due to fingers dropping too late are not so common; but fingers lifting too early, before the notes should be played, instead of lifting them at the precise moment that the new note should sound, is a frequently-heard cause of notes rushing.

6 Starting to shift at the precise moment that you actually want to arrive disturbs the rhythm. The shift must begin before the moment when you want to arrive on the new, shifted-to note.

The blended sound of a brilliant orchestral section

One of the purest and the most beautiful sounds is produced when every member of a section plays in tune, with a similar strength and type of tone, and at exactly the same time. This creates a blended sound that is completely different from the sound of, say, fourteen violins all playing the same notes together, but where you can almost pick out each individual's sound from the mix.

It is in the sound you produce that you are allowed the most variation without spoiling the blended section sound. You can play slightly stronger or slightly weaker within a narrow range (and one that widens or narrows depending on the music you are playing), but the corporate section sound still remains blended and pure.

Much less variation is allowable in intonation. Again this depends on the actual notes or composer, but there can be extremely slight differences of opinion as to what the pitch of a sharp or a flat should be exactly, or a B, C or F; and yet the section can still play one together that blends and sounds unanimous.

It is in rhythm that no variation at all is possible. If one person in a section plays slightly too early, or holds on slightly too long, or plays with the slightest lack of rhythmic control, the blended, corporate sound of the section is lost. This is why excellent rhythm is so vital in anything to do with orchestral playing, and can easily determine the outcome of an audition, even though the player may be thinking only about playing 'in-tune notes with a good sound'.