
BASICS

Background resonance

The body of the violin is a ‘resonating box’. If it was made of solid wood, instead of being hollow, the sound of the bowed string would be small and thin. The soundpost transmits the vibrations down into the resonating box, where they are amplified.

- Using your knuckles, gently tap the body of the violin. Listen to the sound of each tap resonating through the instrument.
- Using your fingernail, scratch the top of the bridge between the strings very, very lightly. The sound is amplified greatly by the violin. Make the same scratching movement on a solid tabletop, or the wall, and notice the difference.
- Then bow a few notes on each string, listening to the amplification and resonance of the violin.

If you play a very short note and stop, you can hear the resonance carrying on afterwards; if you play the same note for longer, you can hear the resonance *during* the note.

Many players listen only to the ‘principal’ sound, i.e. the immediate sound produced by the friction of the rosined bow hair on the string. The moment you start to focus on the background ‘echo’ as well, an entirely new quality comes into the playing.

The following exercise helps alert the ear to the sound of the background resonance. Afterwards, listen for that resonance as a fundamental part of any note.

- First listen to a stopped G, D, A or E, since these ring more easily than a sharp or flat:

Practising in a dry acoustic



- To produce even more ring, or when teaching young children, play the exercise on the open strings.
- Repeat the same notes with slurs and with each bow smoothly connected to the previous one. Listen to the background resonance during the slurs and during the changes of bow.
- Repeat the same patterns with added sharps or flats.

The concert hall, the violin, and the soundpost

Here is an excellent way to approach playing in any sized space, from a room to a large hall, so that even when you play *piano* you reach the back of the hall but still sound as though you are playing softly, while at the same time the *forte* or *fortissimo* is always just the right amount without ever forcing.

Inside the violin is the soundpost, under and just behind the bridge. This wooden post transmits the sound from the bridge to the resonating chamber.

But instead of thinking of playing the violin in a room or hall, and that the violin is a resonating chamber, and the resonating chamber has a soundpost – pretend instead that the hall is the resonating chamber and the violin is the soundpost. Then you can *play the hall* instead of playing the violin *in* the hall.

Another way to think of it uses the strings instead of the soundpost. Rather than playing on the strings of the violin, which are amplified by the resonating box, imagine again that the room or hall is the resonating box and the violin itself is the string.

However you think of it, the moment you ‘play the hall’ instead of ‘playing the violin in the hall’ your entire approach to the instrument changes and a completely different quality of projection enters the playing.

If you can play well in a dry acoustic, you will sound even better in a resonant one. But if you practise in too resonant an acoustic and then play in a dry one, you may find that what had before seemed good is now disappointing. If a dry acoustic is unavailable, sometimes stand in a corner of the room facing inwards to the wall. The sound bouncing straight back to you will be clearer and more truthful than the echoes in the room.

The American violinist Michael Rabin liked to practise while standing facing into the bay windows of his music room: the curved windows threw the sound straight back out at him.