
BASICS

Technique through music

Under the heading of ‘mechanics’ come the basic physical operations of holding the violin or bow; moving the fingers up and down from the base joints, rather than partly from the hand; moving the bow parallel to the bridge; the basic setup of the vibrato or shift; subtle aspects of technique like finger preparation; and so on. All the mechanics of playing are describable, and therefore teachable. Just about anybody can learn them if they are interested to.

‘Technique’ is the overall ability to play a phrase musically and expressively, in a flowing and natural way. This is of course helped by good mechanics; but it comes more from musical expression and instinctive ‘singing through the instrument’ than from conscious mental commands aimed at specific mechanics.

It is like a horse pulling a cart: the ‘horse’ is the musical expression – the emotion, character, colour, atmosphere, drama, and so on – the ‘cart’ is the technique that happens as a result of the musical expression.

It is not the other way round, i.e. a technical horse pulling a musical cart. Music does not come from technique, but technique comes from playing music. Mechanics, however, do not come from the music.

The first thing is to have musical imagination; then to play music rather than ‘play the violin’; then to listen closely to the sound.

The inner super-computer

Suppose you are playing a long, slow, sustained down-bow, and you want the tone to change to a slightly darker, more expressive colour in the middle of it (Fig. 1).

Part of the colour will come from the left hand, perhaps making the vibrato slightly faster and narrower for a moment. Part of it will come from the right hand ever-so-slightly altering the weight and speed of the bow.

There is no doubt that you do need to be in control, make decisions, and ‘send’ certain commands to the fingers, hands and arms; but at the same time it is as or more important to concentrate on the overall tone, and expressive quality that you want, and forget about the hands and fingers.

- If you try to create the subtle change of colour only by deliberately *doing* something – e.g. leaning the right hand more on to the first finger, or doing something with vibrato – you may send perhaps three or four commands to the fingers, arm or hand. Also you remain separated from the music.
- Instead, if you picture the quality you want and *let* the bow arm do what it needs to do, your brain may send hundreds of thousands of commands, or thousands of millions, to the muscles in the same time that you would have been able to send only a few. Then you can also ‘lose yourself’ in the music.

Nobody is ‘clever’ enough, using conscious control, to play as complex and subtle a musical instrument as the violin; but the brain and body is a super-computer that responds at faster-than-lightning speed to the musical images you hold in your mind. Then there is a quickness, smoothness, and flow of muscular action that you cannot imitate using conscious control.

Whistling experiment

You can prove how incredibly clever you are with a simple experiment.

- Whistle a note, and then sing exactly the same note; then the same a tone higher, and so on:



Most people can do this immediately, or at least without much practice. To be able to shape the lips so precisely, to within thousandths of a millimetre, so that the whistle is exactly the same pitch as that produced by shaping the vocal chords to within thousandths of a millimetre, and to be able to do this instantly, is a miraculous ability that ‘we’ cannot take credit for, since we could not possibly do it ‘on our own’ using conscious control.

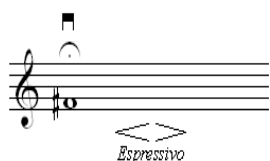


Fig. 1

