
BASICS

Staccato

Up- or down-bow staccato is a unique and individual stroke, and so long as it works it does not matter how you do it. It is a curious fact that there are many examples of violinists who are not particularly fine in any other respect of their playing, except that they can unleash the most fantastic staccato. On the other hand, there have been many famous violinists who could never master it.

The legendary Russian violinist David Oistrakh often played staccato runs using ordinary spiccato (though his staccato in the last movement of the Sibelius Concerto was exemplary). The great Polish violinist Ida Haendel, in her autobiography *Woman with violin*, described how, at the age of twelve, she had a busy solo performing career but could not play staccato. Finally she was put in touch with a local violinist who was not a great player, but had a fine staccato. Ida Haendel spent an entire day working on her staccato with him, and at the end of it was at last able to do it herself.

There is a type of on-the-string staccato played by making the arm go into a sort of spasm which produces an uncontrollably fast (and often rather scratchy) stroke. The most desirable staccato is light and *spiccato*-like, played with a free and relaxed right arm and controllable at any speed.

PHOTO 1

Bow on string, 20 cm from point.

Graphics: arrow carrying on in direction of bow

Caption: *The bow does not go along the string in staccato*

PHOTO 2

Same.

Graphics: arrow curving up

Caption: *The point of the bow makes little dipping movements during staccato*

PHOTO 3

No bow, hand alone: finger straighter

Caption: *Fingers ready to flex slightly*

Working from the inside out

The bow does not sit in the string as a dead weight. The hair, the wood of the bow, and the string, are all springy. All that the bow ever wants to do, if it is pushed down towards the string, is to spring back up again. In staccato, as in the other lifted or bouncing strokes such as *spiccato*, *sautillé* and *ricochet*, the fact that the bow wants to bounce is the single most important element. The first thing is to *go with* the natural tendency of the wood and hair of the bow, rather than to try to do something specific with the arm or hand.

Any movement of the right arm, hand or fingers then *responds* to that natural bounce of the hair out of the string. Encourage the bow, give life to it, but do not get in the way of it.

Understanding what the bow does to the string

Everything in violin playing, as in the rest of Nature, is a simple matter of cause and effect. Every specific cause leads to a specific effect. If you repeat the same cause you get the same effect.

Everything the bow does to the string is a cause, and every sound that comes out of the violin is an effect. And, like the familiar saying ‘the customer is always right’, the violin and bow are always right. Each sound is a perfect representation of what the bow did to the string. Everything that happens during a bow stroke is exactly ‘what you asked for’ by performing the stroke in that way.

How exactly does the hair of the bow act with the string in staccato? The impulse from the fingers–hand–arm causes the hair to impact the string at a slight angle, which causes it to bounce out again. Obviously, a purely along-the-string stroke will produce no impact into the string and therefore no bounce out of it.

Little dipping movement of the point

Like every other stroke on the violin the basic movement of the bow, to make each individual note in a staccato run, is curved, and in this case causes the point of the bow to make little dipping movements.

Look at the point during staccato: it should not be going along–along–along the string (Fig. 1), but up–up–up as the bow goes along the string (Fig. 2).

The up motion, at the end of the tiny curve, is the part of the stroke that causes the hair to impact the string at the angle that brings it out of the string.

Direction of bow

- In up-bow staccato, play on the *outer* edge of the hair, and angle the bow ‘in’ (heel closer to bridge than point).
- In down-bow staccato, play on the *inner* edge of the hair, and angle the bow ‘out’.

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Finger movement

There is often a particular movement of the fingers that is behind the most spectacular staccatos, the fingers moving the bow up–up–up with a flex–flex–flex movement. In other words, the fingers go from slightly straighter and with higher knuckles (Fig. 3) to more flexed and with lower knuckles (Fig. 4).

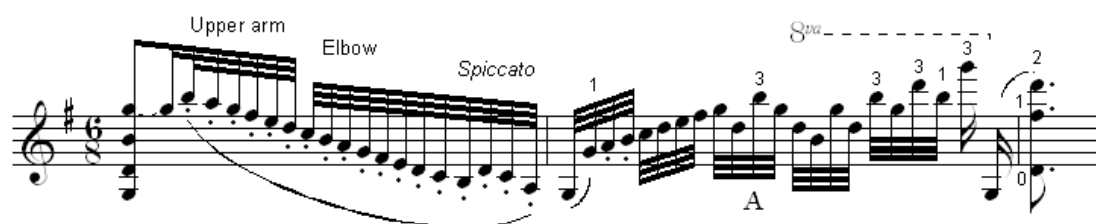
This finger movement is passive rather than active, and happens in response to the movement of the hand and arm. However, a super-fast, tiny but active finger-movement might work for some players: nothing can be ruled out when it comes to staccato.

- While practising a run of staccato at a slow tempo, use an active, deliberate finger-movement to build the motion into the stroke. Afterwards, *let* the action happen rather than making it happen.
- Give a little extra bow pressure just before each flexing, so that the movement becomes press–flex–straighten; press–flex–straighten, etc.

Three stages of the arm in staccato

- 1 Staccato is usually an upper-half stroke, but may sometimes carry on below the middle of the bow. In the upper half, the chief movement of the right arm (in a staccato run) is the forearm moving at the elbow. Go ‘up–up–up’ with the forearm.
- 2 As the bow travels up-bow towards the middle of the bow, the forearm movement decreases and the upper arm takes over. The feeling is one of ‘push-push -push’ with the elbow.
- 3 As the bow continues up-bow past the middle and into the lower half, the stroke turns into a fast *spiccato* in the last few notes of the run.

24 Caprices, op. 1, No. 15
Paganini



Rocking the hand

An element in many successful staccatos is a sort of fast rocking of the hand (i.e. back and forth between upright and tilted towards the first finger) made by a very fast, tiny forearm rotation (as though turning a door handle back and forth).

- Practise with the arm in position in the air without the bow: keeping the fingers completely relaxed and floppy, shake the hand so fast that the hand and fingers become a blur (Fig. 5).
- Then find an element of this motion during the staccato.

It is to allow this forearm rotation to happen that the Armenian–American teacher Ivan Galamian (among others) suggested taking the second and fourth fingers off the bow, and slightly turning the hand away from the first finger (leaning slightly more on to the fourth) so that the hand is more supinated (Fig. 6).

Even left fingers

It always helps a staccato run if you practise it first without the staccato, and play smooth and even slurs. The point is to get the left fingers absolutely even. Any unevenness in the left fingers messes up the co-ordination with the bow, which plays each staccato note with machine-like evenness.

When practising slurs, remember to use the same length of bow as you will use in the actual staccato, and play in the same part of the bow.

PHOTO 4

Same, flexed.

Graphics: arrow curving up

Caption: *Fingers ready to straighten slightly*

PHOTO 5

Right hand in bow hold shape, no bow

Graphics: arrow curving up

Caption: *Rotate the hand in a tiny tremor-like movement*

PHOTO 6

Second and fourth fingers not on the bow

Caption: *Typical bow hold for staccato*