
BASICS

Smooth bowing

True-*legato* warm-up exercise

One of the first things a beginner has to tackle is how to do one thing with one hand while doing something completely different with the other. The issue does not disappear as you become more advanced, but continues to be a factor right up into the most advanced playing.

Two problems are 1) keeping the left fingers light when the bow is playing heavily into the string, and 2) keeping the horizontal bow stroke even and sustained as the left fingers move vertically up and down.

This exercise, which covers all possibilities of playing from one finger to another, is fantastic. Use it not only for warming up, but as a regular part of practice as you apply it to strokes and phrases in pieces:

(Silent fingering on the A string, bow the D string)

f

- Play on the D string, sustaining the bow solidly and evenly; finger on the A string.
- Concentrate on the evenness of the bow stroke, completely unaffected by the fingers rising and dropping on the other string.
- More advanced players can also finger scales and arpeggios up and down one string while bowing on another string.

It is remarkable how just a few moments of practising like this produces a wonderful feeling of silky smoothness when you then play normally again; and an entirely new, special quality enters the tone.

You can do a similar thing in pieces by missing out notes, and sustaining and expressing through the bow as you will in the piece:

As written *p*

Sonatina in G minor, op. posth. 137, no. 3
Schubert

Practice *p* molto espressivo

Son filé

Son filé means long, slow bow strokes lasting sixty seconds or more. This used to be seen as one of the most important practice techniques for developing tone production and bow control. In 1756, Leopold Mozart described practising long, slow bows in his Violin School:

...a very useful experiment may be made. Namely, to endeavour to produce a perfectly even tone with a slow stroke. Draw the bow from one end to the other whilst sustaining throughout an even strength of tone. But hold the bow well back, for the longer and more even the stroke can be made, the more you will become master of your bow, which is highly necessary for the proper performance of a slow piece.

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There can be nothing simpler than practising *son filé*. If all you do is sustain one single note for as long as possible, a few times, you will already begin to feel the benefit.

- Begin with the longest stroke that is comfortable – say, 20 seconds down-bow, 20 seconds up-bow.
- Then increase to 30 seconds, 40, 50, 60, and so on as far as you can go.
- When the bow is excessively slow it does not matter if the tone ends up as only a half-audible scraping noise. Just keep the bow moving as evenly as you can.

Afterwards, playing any strokes at all (not necessarily long bows), you may be amazed at the smoothness and ease that is instantly there in your bow arm.

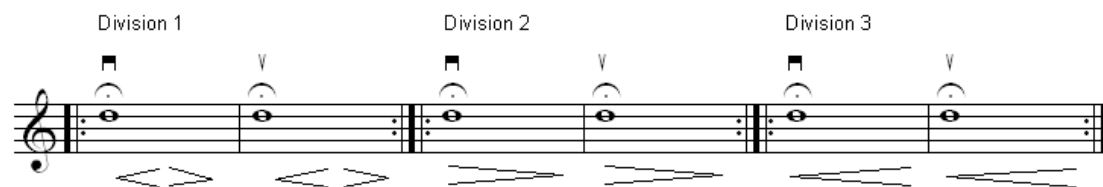
Adding dynamics: Leopold's 'Divisions'

- To go further with *son filé*, add dynamics. For example, during one, long down-bow you can crescendo from *pp* to *ff*, then on the up-bow diminuendo from *ff* to *pp*; or the other way round.

Leopold Mozart divided the various dynamic patterns in *son filé* into several 'divisions'. Division 1 was Soft–Strong–Soft, Soft–Strong–Soft:

Begin the down stroke or up stroke with a pleasant softness; increase the tone by means of an imperceptible increase of pressure; let the greatest volume of tone occur in the middle of the bow, after which, moderate it by degrees by relaxing the pressure of the bow until at the end of the bow the tone dies completely away.

Leopold's Division 2 was the pattern 'Strong–Decrease–Weak, Strong–Decrease–Weak', and Division 3 was Weak–Increase–Strong, Weak–Increase–Strong:



- Another way to practise *son filé* is to keep the dynamic of individual bow strokes the same throughout, but to change the dynamic from note to note:



- Going further still, add string crossings and position-changes:



The great violinist Thelma Givens, a pupil of Leopold Auer, spoke in 1923 about practising *son filé*:

Then there is bow control. There the difficulty is to secure absolute poise and balance in the control of long bows. I always practice half an hour daily on long bows, and, before giving a concert, I devote an hour to them for the space of a month: half an hour in the morning and half an hour in the afternoon. It is very monotonous to play them up the scale and down at the slowest possible tempo; but it is very rewarding. Zimbalist always did a good deal of long bow practice; and aside from bow control I found it helped me to gain that equalized quality of tone which a good violinist must have. It is a wonderful refining process for tone, but must be kept up.

Next month's BASICS looks at how to improve your playing by remaining a constant 'beginner'.