
BASICS

How to build technique

The taller the building, the deeper the foundations. If you want to add fifty floors to an already-complete 50-story building, you cannot simply build on top of what is already there. But when it comes to improving any skill like playing an instrument, you can always deepen and strengthen the foundations, and rather conveniently the extra floors magically appear on their own. So the fastest way to advance your technique, or to solve specific problems, is to keep on starting again from the very beginning.

There are two aspects to 'technique': mechanical and musical. While basic, mechanical technique is all to do with how you hold the violin and bow, move the left fingers, vibrate, shift, and so on, ultimately all the fine, subtle technical things we do with the bow or, say, the vibrato, or precisely how we shift, come from our *musical desire*. Our musical inspiration makes our fingers and hands 'clever' beyond our understanding. But feeling the music, as an artist, does not on its own make you have good mechanics.

Mechanical violin technique is made up of 'techniques' in the plural, like a mosaic or an engine where the whole is made up of many smaller parts. When technique as a whole is excellent, each individual component must therefore be excellent also. If the technique as a whole needs further development, the best thing is to improve each individual technique on its own.

6 different techniques to play 6 notes

Many wind, brass, percussion or keyboard instruments are quite straightforward to play compared with the violin. Pianists usually disagree if you say that playing the piano is simple, and will argue that there is an infinite number of different techniques required to create all the different tonal colours on the piano, never mind the fact that the violin is usually a single-line instrument while they may have several notes to play in each hand. Even so, six notes on the piano may require basically the same 'technique' to play each one: you press the key down; yet on the violin even a simple phrase may require a large number of different techniques to be performed one after another, often at great speed.

For example, this phrase from Brahms *Sonata* must be smooth and even, yet six notes in a row each require a slightly different technique to play them:



- (1) The bow is placed on the string, and then the first note is started by pulling the bow.
- (2) The physical actions of beginning this note are entirely different from those of beginning the first note. While playing (1), the bow pivots clockwise until it reaches and plays the D string. The 2nd finger must already be on the string.
- (3) Without having any effect on the bow, the third finger drops on to the string. Dropping a finger to create a new string length, while sustaining the bow on one string, clearly feels entirely different from the sensations and actions of playing the first two notes.
- (4) Without affecting the bow, the third finger lifts. The feeling of lifting a finger, to play a note during a slur, is quite different from the feeling of dropping it, and the timing is different. You have to lift *when* you want the note to sound, whereas you have to drop *before* you want it to sound.
- (5) The bow pivots anticlockwise over to the G string. This is an entirely different physical operation from pivoting clockwise, as in playing from (1) to (2).
- (6) This note must sound the same as the first note, but begins on the string, up-bow, without first having to be placed on the string.

Combining techniques

When technique is taken apart, or stripped down to its individual components and principles, everything is simple. If anything seems complex, it means that there is further to go in stripping it down to its basic parts.

The individual actions of playing are all straightforward, e.g. placing a finger on the string; crossing on a slur from one string to another; changing the direction of the bow smoothly; making a vibrato on one note;

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shifting. It is when we have to do lots of these things all at the same time, or within a very short space of time, that pieces feel difficult or technique feels complex.

This is why practising simple exercises that focus on only one aspect of technique at a time, like a beginner, is the fastest and most efficient way to develop technique. Otherwise, you are trying to improve several things all at the same time, which must be less focused than when concentrating on only one at a time. After that, you can put the techniques together in playing scales and etudes; but the way to build, maintain, and endlessly expand your playing as a whole is to continually revise and refine the individual techniques.

Advanced tennis training

Imagine the high level of a typical 16-year-old today who has been selected out of thousands to be part of a junior national tennis team. An important part of their training will typically be to spend many hours each week practising with a partner, or their coach, by simply knocking the ball backwards and forwards across the net. They will do this without trying to win points or competing in any way, but just calmly and evenly knocking it to-and-fro, continuing for as many as 1000 shots each session before turning to something else.

The fact that these 16-year-olds are already such good players, and would be fearsome opponents for any ordinary player, is not the point. What they do is focus on fundamentals, and return to them again and again.

Advanced violin training

Yuri Yankelevich was one of the foremost violin teachers in Russia at the height of the Soviet Violin School. He held regular performance classes for his students which were open to the public and were always a big event, with people regularly travelling hundreds of miles to attend. Imagine the fantastically high level of a typical 16-year-old studying with Yankelevich in Moscow in the 1950s or 1960s. Yet what would Yankelevich teach them? Part of the time they would work together on simple Kreutzer studies using bowing variations – different combinations of slurred and separate strokes. Of course these students could already play Paganini and all the rest, but that was not the point.

Practising like a beginner

Most of the technical challenges that advanced players face are the same as those of a beginner. Obviously there are techniques required in Paganini that are not found in elementary playing; but the basic issues are all exactly the same – not squeezing at the base joint of the left thumb; raising and dropping fingers from the base joints; minimum left finger-pressure; hovering the fingers just above the strings; co-ordination of the left fingers with the bow; bowing parallel to the bridge; changing bow smoothly; playing with a singing tone created by the right proportions of speed, pressure and contact-point; not ‘pulling down’ with the back, or ‘pulling in’ at the shoulders; and so on.

All of these apply equally whether you are playing elementary pieces or the Tchaikovsky Concerto. The language used to describe what is happening is therefore the same in both, too [see right].

The problems just get smaller

The less advanced the player is, the more obvious all the issues or problems are – e.g. problems of tension, intonation, poor tone or co-ordination, and so on. The more advanced the player, the smaller each of these issues becomes, until finally they are either so slight that they are unnoticeable, or else now really completely absent. But they are all still the same issues.

Often it is only after seeing a glaring error in an undeveloped student that you then notice the tiniest trace of it in a very advanced one, or in yourself.

Pablo Casals once taught an amateur cello student who was not very good. A friend asked him, ‘Pablo, why do you teach this man? You can teach the best talents and musicians in the world – why him?’

Casals answered, ‘Because from him I learn how to teach the good ones!’

- Practise basic technique by playing exercises that deal with only one thing at a time, e.g. tone exercises on one note, vibrato, intonation and shifting exercises, finger movement, string-crossing, etc.
- Intermediate and advanced players can also relearn elementary etudes such as those by Hans Sitt and Kayser. Pretend that you are seven years old again but be your own teacher, and learn to play them completely without blemish. By doing that, you can give yourself the sort of rigorous foundations you may not have developed when you actually were that age.

‘Sometimes I wonder why anybody is ever interested in anything I have to say about playing the violin, since everything I say is so simple.’

Dorothy DeLay