
BASICS

Pizzicato: a general cure-all

Practising bowed passages with pizzicato seems to be a little-known practice method, but it brings instant and obvious improvement. Once you discover the quick results that pizzicato-practice brings, you may find yourself using it regularly throughout every practice session.

Co-ordination

The open string vibrates between the bridge at one end and the nut at the other. To play a higher note we shorten the string by using a finger as a replacement nut. [See left.] It is obvious that you cannot play a pure-sounding stopped note if the string-length is not properly stopped at the finger-end. This is why good co-ordination between left-finger and bow is one of the prerequisites of a fine tone. The finger must stop the note before the bow sets the string into vibration.

Poor co-ordination is nearly always a question of the bow already beginning to play a note before the finger has fully stopped the string. It is rarely, if ever, the result of the finger being too early.

Co-ordination in pizzicato

Curiously, while poor co-ordination in bowed passages – where the bow begins to play a note that the left finger has not yet stopped, or has not quite finished stopping – is something that for most players crops up again and again, when we play pizzicato there is a sort of natural instinct that makes us unable to pluck the string before getting the left finger firmly in place. Unless the tempo becomes too fast there is an automatic feeling of stop-the-string – pluck; stop – pluck; with never any danger of pluck – stop.

Try plucking a moderately-fast scale, or a passage from a piece: notice how you always place the left fingers just before the pluck, and how clever the timing is, even at speed – left fingers and plucking finger moving absolutely regularly and at the same speed, but just slightly apart in timing.

Finger-pressure in pizzicato

In normal playing, the correct amount of finger-pressure is always ‘as little as possible’, i.e. just enough to make the tone entirely pure. Sometimes we might want to use more than that, to change the tone quality or as part of rhythmic emphasis in the left hand, but continual over-pressing is obviously a waste of energy and may cause tension.

However, since plucked notes ring better the more the string is stopped, pizzicato is an exception to the rule of minimum finger-pressure. Of course, you may want to produce a veiled, non-ringing pizzicato by only half stopping the string, but for maximum ring you need as good a stop as possible.

Using pizzicato as a practice method

The timing of the co-ordination that you automatically fall into when you play a passage pizzicato, remains with you when afterwards you return to playing the passage with the bow.

The extra weight that you automatically use to stop the string, when playing the pizzicato, stays with you also, but without it making you feel as though you are over-pressing. Rather, it is more a new feeling of strength, and a sort of confidence in knowing exactly where the note is on the string under the finger.

Take a problematic passage from a study, or piece or concerto; practise it for a short while using only pizzicato; then play it again with the bow. You will undoubtedly notice an immediate improvement in all respects, not just in co-ordination.

Practising *spiccato* using pizzicato

In *spiccato* (bouncing-bow) passages, the bow or the bow-arm is usually blamed when certain notes scratch, or the sound is splashy or without ring. Sometimes it may be the fault of the bow, but just as often the cause actually lies with the left finger being slightly late to the bow, so that the string is not properly stopped; yet for the purest, most ringing *spiccato* you need to stop the string firmly, almost as in playing pizzicato.

So *spiccato* passages benefit very well from short bursts of pizzicato practice. Afterwards, you may be surprised at how well co-ordinated the bow is with the finger, and how pure the *spiccato* note sounds.

Why does a plucked open-string ring on for so much longer than any stopped note? It is simply because the nut stops the open string precisely and perfectly, whereas the finger – unless pressing terribly hard – stops the string imperfectly.

You can prove this easily. Use the side of a pencil to stop, say, B or C on the A string. Now when you pluck it the stopped string will ring on as long as the open string did. (Be careful not to damage the string.)

Next
month's
Basics
looks at the
left elbow