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# BASICS

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## Playing fast

### Practising at performance tempo

One day when I arrived for my violin lesson Dorothy DeLay told me how excited she was about the sudden progress of the previous student, a Russian in his early twenties called Vladimir.

Vladimir had had a big problem: he had never been able to play anything if it was at all fast and technically brilliant. He was very musical, and as long as the tempo was slow enough he could play well. But as soon as he had to play something tricky and fast, he could never get it to a high standard of secure intonation and tone. Miss DeLay said that apparently his previous teachers had given up with him, and had told him that he should take up a different profession. She explained how for many months she had tried everything she could think of to help him, and still there had been no progress. He just couldn't get anything really working well if it was at all fast and brilliant.

But she said that today he had arrived at his lesson beaming, took out his violin, and said: "Listen to this!" and started to play some difficult passages very fast and accurately, and with evident ease. Miss DeLay was astonished at the difference. "Fantastic!" she said. "What have you been doing to get this result?"

Vladimir explained what had happened. He had been in a practice room on the fourth floor of the Juilliard School in New York City (a floor which consists almost entirely of practice rooms), and in the room next to him Mark, a very brilliant and successful Russian violinist, was practising. Vladimir could hear Mark faintly through the wall.

Mark was practising a piece that was very fast and difficult. It was obvious that he was at an early stage of learning it – it was evident he could not yet play it fluently – yet he was practising it at performance tempo. Vladimir was very surprised. He had always been told that you should not play anything fast until you can play it perfectly at a slow tempo. You cannot run before you can walk.

He had never practised fast passages at performance tempo. Since he couldn't play them fast, he would practise them slowly; but because he practised only slowly, he couldn't play them fast. The moment he started to practise, at performance tempo, passages that he could not yet play fluently – as well as practising slowly, and in all the other ways of practising – the new results were extraordinary.

Possibly the factor that puts people off doing this sort of work is that in the beginning the passage may sound so bad that you can't believe that after only a few more goes it will begin to 'hold', and after only a few more goes after that it may start to feel quite comfortable. But if you don't realise that after only a short while the passage will start to come, it is understandable that you would think it a bad idea and go back to the slow, detailed work. Of course, it is all a question of balance, and all the fancy practice methods that you can apply to a passage are all helpful – ways to break the passage down into smaller chunks, practising in dotted rhythms and so on; but as well as that, you simply have to 'go for it' and 'start where you mean to end up'. You may be surprised at the extra ability you didn't know you had.

### Groups

When you play slow passages there is plenty of time to think. You can consider the expression of each note one by one if you want to. In faster passages, a speed limit is soon reached where you begin to struggle to keep up with each note. This is perfectly natural, and the struggle is not a measure of your talent or ability. All you are doing wrong is trying to keep up with each note in the first place.

Instead, you have to begin to think in larger groups, say eight semiquavers in two sub-groups of four; or a short phrase made up of different note-values. Then, one 'command' can set off all those notes at the same time, instead of each note requiring a separate command to itself.

Before you can set off a group of notes with one command, you have to have a feeling that the group is 'one thing', rather than a collection of notes or actions joined together quickly. You can easily make the group feel like one unit simply by repeating it over and over again.

After a while you forget about the individual notes, and the group as a whole becomes simply 'one of those'. Here is another of them: you play it. It is something in itself. You want another of them? Here it is.

Once the group has reached that stage, you can play whole runs with very few commands: you simply play 'one of those', and then 'one of those', and so on.

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## Sitting back

The great Hungarian violinist Sándor Végh likened slow and fast playing to driving cars. He would tell you that when you drive slowly you can sit up in your seat and look carefully just ahead of you, and to left and right; if you were driving slowly enough you could press your face up quite close to the windscreen and peer just in front of you, if you wanted to, without losing control.

But when you drive fast you have to sit back in your seat and look much further ahead. Imagine how difficult it would be to drive at high speed if you leaned forward, your face close to the windscreen.

In the same way, during fast passages you have to ‘sit back’ and take a larger view at the same time as playing the notes, and groups of notes, that make up the overall passage. If you mentally ‘lean forward’ and get ‘too close’ to the fast passage, you may find yourself forever stumbling at one place or another.

## Playing through without stopping

The idea that you should not practise passages at performance tempo until you can play them fluently at a slower tempo, belongs in the same family as the idea that you should always stop if you make a mistake – that playing through without stopping is bad practice.

Stopping and correcting, and doing all the different types of technical building work, is naturally a part of practising that everybody has to do; yet at the same time, it is at least equally important to play through as a non-stop performance, if not more important.

Like a gymnast always finding their balance again after the slightest mishap, you have to know how to be able to ‘rescue’ yourself in performance, either when things go wrong or when they may be about to. You can’t practise doing that if you always stop every time you make a mistake.

## How to play faster than Heifetz

At the Aspen Music Festival in Aspen, Colorado, USA, Miss DeLay was giving a technique class. She asked the class: “Did I ever show any of you how to play Scherzo Tarantella faster than Heifetz?” Pausing before playing, and putting on an act of great seriousness and earnest concentration, she played the notes shown in Ex. 1:

Ex. 1 shows a treble clef staff with two notes: an open A (0) and a D (3). Ex. 2 shows a treble clef staff with an open A (0), a D (3), and a note with fingers 1, 2, and 3 stacked vertically. An arrow points to the D note with the text "Only the D sounding". Ex. 3 shows a treble clef staff with an open A (0) and a note with fingers 1, 2, and 3 stacked vertically. An arrow points to the note with the text "Three fingers dropping together in a 'block'".

She had played only two, slow notes. It had turned out to be only a joke.

But then she explained that she had actually played four notes, but two of them so fast we could not even hear them. After playing the open A, she had dropped the first, second and third fingers together, in a ‘block’. Although all three fingers had dropped onto the string, naturally only the upper finger sounded (Ex.2).

Then she explained how to shape the three fingers like a fan, so that although the fingers moved together in a block, the first finger would contact the string first, then the second finger, then the third (Ex. 3).

So in a passage like the following, you could drop your fingers together and ‘play’ faster than Heifetz:

Wieniawski: Scherzo-Tarentelle, op. 16, b. 40

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The snippet shows a treble clef staff in 2/4 time. It begins with a violin bowing mark (v) and a fermata over a note. The first measure contains two notes with fingerings 2 and 1. The second measure contains two notes with fingerings 2 and 1. The third measure contains two notes with fingerings 2 and 1. The fourth measure contains two notes with fingerings 2 and 1. The fifth measure contains two notes with fingerings 2 and 1. The sixth measure contains two notes with fingerings 2 and 1. The seventh measure contains two notes with fingerings 2 and 1. The eighth measure contains two notes with fingerings 2 and 1. The ninth measure contains two notes with fingerings 2 and 1. The tenth measure contains two notes with fingerings 2 and 1. The eleventh measure contains two notes with fingerings 2 and 1. The twelfth measure contains two notes with fingerings 2 and 1. The thirteenth measure contains two notes with fingerings 2 and 1. The fourteenth measure contains two notes with fingerings 2 and 1. The fifteenth measure contains two notes with fingerings 2 and 1. The sixteenth measure contains two notes with fingerings 2 and 1. The seventeenth measure contains two notes with fingerings 2 and 1. The eighteenth measure contains two notes with fingerings 2 and 1. The nineteenth measure contains two notes with fingerings 2 and 1. The twentieth measure contains two notes with fingerings 2 and 1. The twenty-first measure contains two notes with fingerings 2 and 1. The twenty-second measure contains two notes with fingerings 2 and 1. The twenty-third measure contains two notes with fingerings 2 and 1. The twenty-fourth measure contains two notes with fingerings 2 and 1. The twenty-fifth measure contains two notes with fingerings 2 and 1. The twenty-sixth measure contains two notes with fingerings 2 and 1. The twenty-seventh measure contains two notes with fingerings 2 and 1. The twenty-eighth measure contains two notes with fingerings 2 and 1. The twenty-ninth measure contains two notes with fingerings 2 and 1. The thirtieth measure contains two notes with fingerings 2 and 1.

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Drop two fingers  
with one action



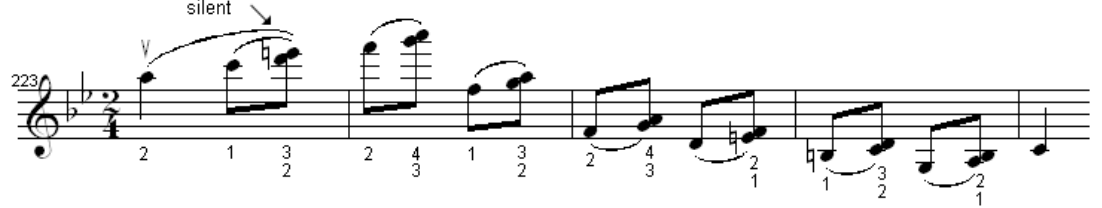
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2 1 2 1 2 1 1 1

Detailed description: This musical exercise is written on a single staff in 3/4 time with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). It consists of eight measures. The first measure starts with a 'V' (vibrato) over a quarter note G2. The second measure has a quarter note F2 and a quarter note G2. The third measure has a quarter note G2 and a quarter note A2. The fourth measure has a quarter note A2 and a quarter note Bb2. The fifth measure has a quarter note Bb2 and a quarter note C3. The sixth measure has a quarter note C3 and a quarter note Bb2. The seventh measure has a quarter note Bb2 and a quarter note A2. The eighth measure has a quarter note A2 and a quarter note G2. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-4 below the notes. An arrow points to the first two notes of the second measure with the text 'Drop two fingers with one action'.

To practise it, first put the fingers down at the same time, in 'blocks':

Lower finger  
silent



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2 1 3 2 2 4 3 1 3 2 2 4 3 2 1 1 3 2 2 1

Detailed description: This musical exercise is written on a single staff in 3/4 time with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). It consists of eight measures. The first measure starts with a 'V' (vibrato) over a quarter note G2. The second measure has a quarter note F2 and a quarter note G2. The third measure has a quarter note G2 and a quarter note A2. The fourth measure has a quarter note A2 and a quarter note Bb2. The fifth measure has a quarter note Bb2 and a quarter note C3. The sixth measure has a quarter note C3 and a quarter note Bb2. The seventh measure has a quarter note Bb2 and a quarter note A2. The eighth measure has a quarter note A2 and a quarter note G2. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-4 below the notes. An arrow points to the first two notes of the second measure with the text 'Lower finger silent'.

Then keep some of that feeling as you play the passage with a normal finger action.