Soundpoint practice

Everything about tone is to do with the balance of speed of bow and pressure in relation to the distance of the bow from the bridge (soundpoint). There is also the question of the amount of hair, from tilted to flat; and many faulty sounds are the result of poor co-ordination where the bow begins to play an as-yet not fully stopped string, i.e. the left finger is late to the bow. But leaving these things aside, every sound that comes out of a string instrument can be described, and in very few words, as a certain combination of speed, pressure and soundpoint.

Soundpoint exercises

The best and quickest way to improve tone production is simply to experiment at different distances from the bridge, feeling the differences in speed and weight that are appropriate on each soundpoint.
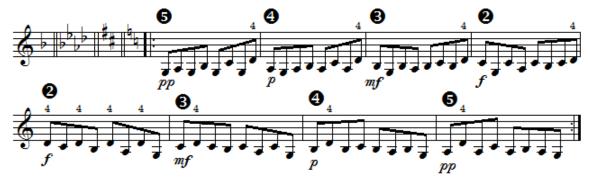
The first step is to give each soundpoint a name. The moment you do this you are able to be specific instead of having only one general area where you bow between the fingerboard and bridge, if even sometimes you play nearer the bridge sometimes nearer the fingerboard. With delineation comes real control. Soundpoint 1 is near the bridge; soundpoint 5 near the fingerboard; soundpoint 3 is at the centre point between bridge and fingerboard.

The simplest soundpoint exercise consists of whole bows on one note starting at the fingerboard (soundpoint 5), and then moving to 4, 3, 2 and 1. On soundpoint 5 the bow will be fast and light, and then slightly heavier and slower on 4, much heavier and slower on 3 and 2, and very heavy and very slow on 1. The circled numbers show the soundpoints:
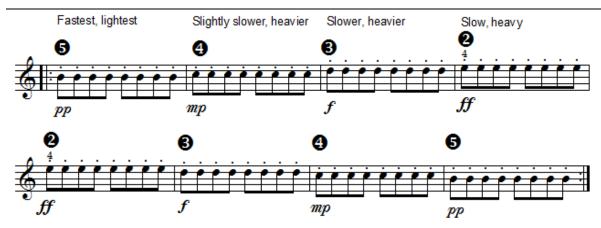

Begin without vibrato. Repeat several times, experimenting with more and less weight until you are sure that the string is vibrating to its maximum possible amplitude. Then, without stopping, add vibrato. When you add the vibrato be careful not to change the speed-pressure-soundpoint balance that you had set up beforehand.

After that you can do the same thing using faster notes and very little bow, beginning fast and light at the fingerboard and ending up slow and heavy at the bridge. You can do it on one note or make up patterns. This pattern includes every possibility of moving from one finger to another:

Add different slurrings to introduce new challenges. You can also experiment with spiccato, where the main proportions to consider are height of bounce to length of bow; but during the instant that the hair contacts the string the same proportions of speed–pressure–soundpoint apply:
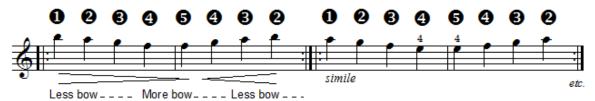
BASICS

In the next example angle the bow very slightly non-parallel with the bridge ('in'), the frog of the bow nearer the body than the point:

Repeat starting down-bow with the bow angled 'out'.

Continue the following pattern all the way down to the G string:

As soon as you add bowing or rhythm patterns to a sequence like this, the exercise becomes endlessly challenging:

Naturalness of touch

A major part of good tone production – or is it actually the only part? – is simply a matter of us using our natural, extraordinary powers of sensitivity of touch that we use all the rest of the day when we are not playing the violin. We can pick up the most delicate object and set it down again without breaking it. We know how to stroke a baby or a cat with utmost sensitivity of touch. However, when these natural abilities are seen in action on the violin, when the bow is sitting beautifully in the string and the tone is resonant and perfectly unforced, these same abilities are then called 'talent'. If a student has any difficulty making a pure tone, in many cases all you have to do is to remind them that they have supercomputer-like powers of sensitivity of touch, and that they are getting in the way of their natural instincts (perhaps because they are trying to do it 'right'). Their use of the bow and their tone always improves drastically and instantly when you point this out, and instead of trying to do the correct thing they instead begin to stroke the string with natural sensitivity of touch.