
BASICS

Reducing effort

We often get too caught up in all the things we have to do, and forget about all the things we have to *not* do. For example, in both music and sport one of the most common things is for a performer to tighten just before performing an action.

The key to absolute mastery of the violin is in not allowing unwanted extra physical movements to occur as a knock-on effect, or by-product, of the actions that are actually necessary. Any unwanted tension there or elsewhere in the body, or over-work, counts as an 'action' just as much as an unwanted physical movement in itself is an action.

Every action must occur in isolation as a focused, economical, minimalised movement that uses the least energy or effort. It takes place only there, in that locale, without anything else in the surrounding areas reacting.

Suppose you want to drop a finger onto the string and then lift it off again. The only thing that must happen is that the finger moves down, and then moves up again:

- What you do not want to do is push your wrist out, straighten the other fingers, squeeze with the thumb, clench your left upper arm, grip the violin more tightly between the chin and the shoulder, make a face, tighten the right shoulder, press harder with the bow, hold your breath, and so on.

Naturally there are sympathetic movements that occur throughout the body, in reaction to every action, which are an essential part of balance and flow. The more we operate from a position of balance and mobility, and the more every action is localised, the more easily and naturally these sympathetic movements can occur. It is the self-made, unnecessary actions that must be eliminated.

Suppose you are going to play a *martelé* stroke. There are two elements of the stroke that may encourage excess or unnecessary effort: (1) making the bite at the beginning of the stroke, and (2) the fast–slow and heavy–light speed and pressure pattern.

- To 'bite' the string before playing the stroke, while the bow is stationary on the string, the right hand must lever the bow down into the string so that the hair grips the string.

During that moment of direct pressing, do not use a single muscle in your bow arm that is not required to push the wood down towards the hair, and to push the hair into the string. Grip the string with an imperceptible movement of the hand, forearm, and first and second finger.

What you do not want to do, as you play the *martelé*, is to raise your upper arm; raise your shoulder; jerk your head; pull a face; tense your left arm; press the left finger harder; squeeze the neck of the violin between the thumb and finger, and so on.

- The same applies in the moment of the fast–slow and heavy–light *martelé* stroke itself, which is very energetic and powerful. There may well be a natural, sympathetic 'follow-through' motion elsewhere in the body which is desirable, but that is clearly a different matter. Basically, keep still and do only what you need to do to make the stroke.

When every action on the violin is performed in a localised way with minimum effort, everything becomes light and easy. The question is, how to stop doing all the things you don't want to do. The first thing is to have a clear understanding of what to do and what to not do. The second thing is the application of will-power.

Imagine two electrical wires running parallel to each other. One wire makes the finger go down on to the string to play a note; the other wire makes the thumb squeeze hard against the neck of the violin. The wires have become tangled and are 'shorting', so the signal to put the finger down makes the thumb clench at the same time. You have to grab hold of the wires and pull them apart so that one thing does not trigger another.

One good approach is to become expert at doing what you do not want to do, to take it from the involuntary to the voluntary. Consciously squeeze your thumb: learn what it feels like; find different ways of squeezing, at different angles. Then don't squeeze.

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It can be very helpful to play without the instrument. In other words, mime the physical actions of a phrase or an attack, or a series of strong chords, in the air. Then you immediately realise many things you obviously shouldn't be doing. It is quite extraordinary how much more stream-lined the playing immediately becomes afterwards.

These ideas are not modern. Here is Alexander Bloch writing in 1923:

Relaxation, or, to speak more accurately, the localization of tension required for the effort of violin playing, is entirely a question of mental control. Thus, we can press thumb and finger together so that the entire arm tightens, or, by so willing it, confine the tension to a small radius. There are some who tighten so that merely to watch them gives one a crick in the back: the hand grasps the neck of the violin frantically, the chin clamps the fiddle in a death grip, the shifts in position are a series of spasmodic jerks, the bow arm seems as though cast in one piece. How to stop this? Simply by *willing* to relax. The muscles will obey the brain; and in practicing, when the tightening spasm comes on, stop, consciously relax, and begin again, until the control becomes automatic.

You've got to stop before you start

Two key terms in Alexander Technique are 'inhibition' and 'direction'. Inhibition is like saying 'no', when you stop yourself from doing or acting in any particular way. Direction is like saying 'yes'.

Before you start, you've always got to stop. 'Stopping before you start' is the opposite of rushing into an action. I often think of the time I took my violin to my Alexander lesson with Walter Carrington. Having arrived in the room I put the violin case down on a chair while Walter stood and waited, watching me. I took the violin out of the case, put the shoulder rest on, took the bow out and tightened the screw, turned to Walter and put the violin up on to my shoulder, and began to tune.

He immediately stopped me. "That was a bit hurried!" he said.

"Suppose you want to take the violin up into playing position," he explained. "First, don't put the violin up into playing position. Just stop. Then, only when you're ready, raise the violin. Never rush!

"The stopping is a chance to find balance and a clear vision of exactly what you want, and what you don't want. Having become completely clear, and without any hurry – moving only when you want to, and not before – let the action complete itself naturally, on its own, without any effort or interference."

At first, practising stopping may be conscious and deliberate, and each stop may be measurable in seconds. Once you have formed the habit of stopping before you start, your playing (as well as your everyday life) becomes filled with millions of unnoticeable, undetectable moments of 'stopping'.

Suppose you want to shift from one position to another. First, don't shift; then, in the next instant, make the shift. 'Fast fingers', i.e. moving the left finger later and faster, is a feature of left-hand technique that is a natural application of 'stopping before you start'.

'Stopping before you start' in sport

In any short period of any game of football, tennis, or practically any other sport, there are always countless examples of 'stopping before you start', or of rushing into an action because of not 'stopping'. A footballer finds the ball coming towards him. There is nobody in the way between him and the goal, and he suddenly has a chance to score. If you watch closely you can plainly see that the successful player, on nearly every occasion, literally stops for an instant before going for the shot. There is the briefest moment when he is not yet acting on the impulse or desire to kick the ball. He is finding his balance, his aim and focus, all in an instant. Then he strikes, and the ball invariably goes in.

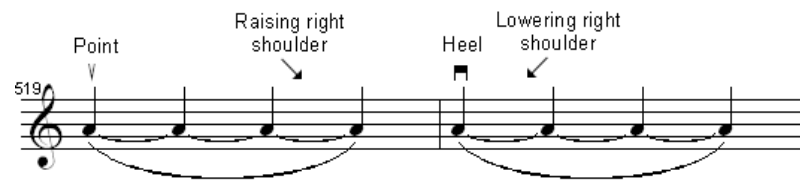
Similarly, it is plain to see how the unsuccessful shot is usually rushed at, without any stopping whatsoever before launching into the action. Tennis offers endless clear examples of players being offered an easy point but then rushing at the ball and missing it completely.

Naturally there are all those occasions when there really isn't time and you simply have to move as a reflex action, and act instantly without preparation. Those situations are a different matter. However, the more balanced and generally un-rushed you are, the better you are able to react unconsciously at lightning speed when instant reactions are required.

Saying 'no' and 'yes'

Suppose you have a habit of raising your right shoulder during each up-bow in the lower half:

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Having decided that this is not something you want to continue doing, the first thing is to say ‘No!’ to the shoulder going up as you bow towards the heel.

At the same time you have to be saying ‘Yes!’ to the shoulder staying down.

This is one reason why part of the art of teaching is in showing what *to* do, but part is in showing what to *not* do.