
BASICS

Enlarging the playing

There is a type of student that one may encounter where although everything is apparently in order, their playing lacks a certain something that would make their performances more engaging or compelling. They play pretty well in tune; their tone is clean without any distracting accidents where there are scrapes or scratches in any notes; you know they are trying to play with musical expression and that they love music, listen to music, go to concerts (where they are highly critical of major players and soloists, and often justifiably so), practise hard, and so on.

Yet early on in any performance they give, the sharp attention of the audience that was there at the beginning has already given way to distracted, polite attention, and for some reason the performer has lost them. Why is this? Why do these students always pass their exams but never with flying colours? How can they move their playing on to a new level of greater engagement and interest?

In this situation some teachers even begin to doubt the character or psychology, or basic talent or musicality of the student. Yet it is a simple matter to improve, without for a moment calling into question the personality or potential of the student. You have to look at it in entirely practical terms of what the hands and fingers are causing to happen to the instrument.

In the same way, while it is perfectly normal to say something like 'this phrase should be like the sun coming out from behind the clouds', in the end you have to know what that means in practical terms: does it mean to play nearer the bridge or further from the bridge, with faster or slower vibrato, sharper or flatter intonation, the bow stroke more or less accented? In other words, the first is an intangible, artistic expression; the second is the concrete reality of what is actually happening on the instrument.

Musical rhythm

One of the most common reasons for a good, solid but otherwise uninspiring performance is lack of good, musical rhythm. There are only three things in any musical performance: the pitch of the notes, the sound, and the rhythm. Of course, you have to play in tune – good intonation is the ticket without which you cannot even get on the train – and you have to have a pure, beautiful and varied 'voice'; but rhythm is just as important. If you play only 'good-sounding, in-tune notes' but without communicating through the rhythm, it is difficult to give an exciting performance. Rhythm is what makes people start tapping their feet – in other words, joining in with you – if not literally, then at least inside themselves as they listen to you in a 'gripped' way. The key point is that there is a difference between playing the printed rhythms, and playing with rhythmic pulse; and of course a difference between playing metronomic rhythm and musical rhythm.

So working on musically expressive rhythm is often the place to start. But the whole issue of playing with accent is the one that can really inject more excitement and interest into the playing.

What is an accent?

To play a stroke that is entirely even, without accent, the bow must be pulled or pushed with even speed and even pressure throughout its length. To make an accent, the even bow-speed changes to faster at the beginning of the stroke and then slower, and the even pressure becomes heavier-lighter.

Of these two changes, the extra pressure that is needed with the extra speed is rarely the problem, since with good listening you automatically give more during the faster part of the stroke. So playing more heavily is not something you need to think about. The speed of bow is the essential thing to work on, and this is linked inextricably to the amount of bow. If you travel further, within the same period of time, you must travel faster.

So one of the keys to injecting more energy into the playing is simply to use more bow. In playing an accent, it is a question of firstly using more bow overall, and secondly of moving the bow faster at the beginning of the stroke. It is easy to make a simple exercise out of this:

First establish the areas of the bow: H, at the heel; PoB, at the point-of-balance; M, at the middle; M-Pt between the middle and the point; Pt, at the point.

BASICS

Play a repeated accented stroke, each time using more and more bow during the fast part of the stroke. Each tied pair of notes represents one, unbroken accented note:

H PoB Pt M-Pt H M Pt M H M-Pt Pt PoB

Fast Slow Fast Slow Fast Slow Fast Slow Fast Slow Fast Slow

Start each stroke at the heel or the point. Move very quickly at the beginning of the stroke and then sustain at a later and later place in the bow. Join the 'kick' at the start of the note with the sustaining part so that it is one, seamless note that begins with a burst of energy. Repeat the same exercise playing only in the lower half, and in the upper half.

There are plenty of examples of slow-fast bow-speed strokes throughout the repertoire, but for every one of them there must be hundreds of fast-slow speeds, i.e. accented. Working through any music in your repertoire, whenever the bow speed is not even always ask the simple question: can I do this with more bow?

Watch the great players

What is it about players like Maxim Vengerov or Leila Josefevitch that makes their playing so exciting? Of course there are an uncountable number of factors, but much of it comes down to the sheer energy with which they play.

What that means is that they put together all the things that give the playing more energy: more bow, deeper in the string, nearer the bridge, faster vibrato, greater left hand articulation, faster trills, and so on.

For students, playing with more accent – which generally means more bow – is usually one of the most urgent issues to address to increase the overall energy of their playing. Where the student uses 10 centimetres of bow during the fast part of a stroke, the virtuoso uses 20.

Whole bows

Thinking that you are using the entire length of the bow, when actually you are not doing so at all, is a common mistake. Unintentionally, many players always stop well short of the point at the end of the down-bow, and at the end of the up-bow stop at the place where their fingers 'begin'. Instead, you can play 'under the fingers' at the extreme heel.

When you are used to bowing only between those two points (stopping a few centimetres before the end of each bow), and then you add that little extra bow at each end, the bow speed can seem disproportionately much faster.

- The total playing-length of the hair, leaving out a little space at each end, is about 64 centimetres.
- If you add the 7 centimetres that you miss out at the heel, to the 7 centimetres you miss out at the point, you get a total of 14 unused centimetres.
- Therefore, the amount of bow you are not using is actually just a little less than a quarter of the bow. So an increase of about 25% in bow speed, playing whole bows, is not disproportionate at all.

Whether playing exercises like the shifting studies in Ševčík Op. 8, or playing a concerto, using all the bow (where appropriate) raises the stature of the playing to an entirely new level.

In both of the following examples every down-bow can begin a couple of centimetres from the heel; every up-bow can begin a couple of centimetres from the point:

Ševčík: Changes of Position and Scale Exercises, op. 8, no. 1

Begin at the extreme heel Begin at the extreme point Extreme point Extreme heel

1 1 2 1 1 2

BASICS

Point Heel Point Bruch: Concerto no. 1 in G minor, op. 26, mov. 1

3 *espr.* 2 3 3 2 2 2 1 3 4 0
cresc. *f*