
BASICS

Playing with expression

What is the ideal performance? In the beginning I thought that it consisted of five headings: pitch, sound, rhythm, style and expression. I reasoned that (1) if every note was in tune, and (2) it had the desired sound, and (3) it was musically in time, and (4) the style suited the period or the composer, and (5) if it were played with feeling – then it would be ‘perfect’. Later I realised that those five headings should have been only three – pitch, sound and rhythm.

Pitch, sound and rhythm are the three main aspects of music:

- To play anything, the first question is **what note** you want to play; the next question is **what sound** you want that note to have; the last question is **when** you want that note to sound.
- In other words, every note must be in tune; played with the right musical sound for the note or phrase; and sounded at the right moment rhythmically.

While each string on a piano is already the right length and tension, inconveniently on string instruments you have to create the different string lengths as you play. So to play any note on the violin the first thing is to decide on the exact string length by putting a finger down; next you have to bow the string in order to hear it; the final question is *when* to bow it.

Style or expression, and the exact pitch–sound–rhythm, are one and the same thing. You cannot separate one from the other. It is the precise pitch, sound and rhythm you play that *creates* the expression, style or character:

- Intonation and expression are inseparable. Think of the second notes of the Bruch and Tchaikovsky concertos, which are both Bb. The expression is utterly changed (to its detriment) if these are not played expressively ‘low’, rather than the higher tuning where the Bb would be theoretically in tune with the D string.
- Sound and expression are inseparable. If the sound is dull, or without the right character or expression, and then you add expression, in doing so you must change the sound.

In the same way vibrato, which is a part of sound, *is* expression. If you change the character or expression of the vibrato, you change the character or expression of the phrase.

- Rhythm and expression are inseparable. For a particular effect you might play more (or less) exactly in time, or make a dotted rhythm more dotted, or play triplets in a particular slow, dragged way, or play them more quickly and lightly, and so on. In changing the rhythm you change the expression.
- Style is also not a separate issue. The only way to create style, or to change it, is through changing the exact intonation, sound (type of stroke and vibrato), and rhythm.

Uniting technique and music

The expression of music is the result of what the hands and fingers do to the instrument:

- What the bow does to the string, and sound; where the fingers touch the string, and pitch; when the fingers touch or leave the string (or when the bow moves on one note, or to another string), and rhythm – all these are obviously the same thing, or like two sides of the same coin.
- Then, if ‘musical expression’ and ‘pitch–sound–rhythm’ are one thing – and if ‘pitch–sound–rhythm’ and ‘what the hands and fingers are doing to the instrument’ are one thing – then it follows that ‘what the hands and fingers are doing to the instrument’ and ‘the music’ are equally one thing.

For a musician, sound – and therefore expression – is like a physical substance that you can shape and sculpt. Another part of the feeling of unity comes from experiencing all the physical sensations of playing as being what the sound ‘feels like’; and every sound is what the physical sensations ‘sound like’. A sobbing quality in the vibrato, for example, and the physical sensation of vibrating the finger on the string, and the musical feeling, all become one in your perception as a player.

BASICS

Channelling energy

Many players have, at some point, had the disappointing experience of thinking that their playing is at a certain level of expression, and recording themselves in the expectation of being pleased with what they hear, only to find that the play-back not only reveals pitch or sound errors that they had not realised were there, but that the playing is much less interesting than they had imagined it would be.

The most common reason is firstly that their listening is not as good as it could be. To a non-musician, the idea that a musician would not be 'good at listening' might seem extraordinary, but the truth is that good listening is a skill that must usually be developed along with all the others. To be working on improving a student's listening at conservatoire level is a normal part of the process and quite unremarkable. In fact, it is one of the great 'tricks' of teaching. It is often the most musical and expressive players who have the most trouble listening, if the music is so vivid in their musical imagination that in effect it 'drowns out' the actual sound.

Often it is also the most talented musicians who have the most trouble channelling their physical energies directly into the hands and fingers, instead of musical impulses coming out as extraneous physical motions unrelated to the actual playing. This is the other common explanation for disappointment in hearing a recording of yourself and finding it sounding flat. For example, the weight of the bow arm, or the forces of leverage exerted upon the bow by the right hand and fingers, feeds through into the wood of the bow, and from there into the hair and then into the string.

If the player, instead of channelling this energy through into the string, moves their body forward in an 'expressive' way, or makes an expressive face, or goes tight in their left hand, then of course the microphone is not going to pick this up. So while they think they are being expressive, in fact nothing different is happening at the point of contact between the hair and the string.

The answer to this is simply to stand still, keep the scroll from moving, and to do only what is necessary to create the sound and nothing more. The immediate reaction of most people, if they keep still, is that their playing sounds flat and boring. But in most cases their playing is absolutely the same as it was before, but now they can hear the extent to which their musical ideas are not actually reaching the string.

In the course of writing this article I had to break off in order to teach. I was pleased that the students were coming because I wanted a good music example to illustrate channelling energy, and I felt sure that one of them would give me an idea. Sure enough, the very first student furnished me with a perfect example as she played the Presto from the Bach G minor Sonata for solo violin:

J.S. Bach, *Sonata in G minor, Presto*



She was trying to bring out the descending melody (marked with lines). But instead of using her bow hand to make the wood of the bow sink very slightly more deeply towards the hair, she was moving her scroll down towards the floor with a little 'expressive' movement of her head and upper body. She thought she was shaping the phrase, but in fact every note was played equally.

I didn't see this at first, since I always make a point of listening with my eyes shut when students, nearing the performance date, first play through a piece in the lesson. As Dorothy DeLay said, if you really want to know how someone is playing you should listen without looking. Otherwise there is the danger of 'hearing' what you are seeing.

At first my student wouldn't believe me, that the notes were too equal, until I asked her to place the bow on the string at the place where she was playing the passage. Using leverage on the bow with her right hand, she pressed the wood down until it touched the hair, and then released it, repeating this a few times. Then she realised that of course she was moving the bow along the string only horizontally, without any of this extra heaviness in the stick on the important notes.

When a student like this goes from how she was playing – 'expressing' with her body, and in her mind, rather than by sculpting the sound – to standing up and standing still, and keeping the scroll still, and channelling the energy from the right hand and fingers directly into the string – so that you can *see* the wood of the bow going down more deeply on the important notes – the resulting musical (and technical) improvement is astounding.