
BASICS

Higher compatibility solutions

The phrase 'You cannot keep your cake and eat it' is a proverbial, everyday expression which few would question. If you want to keep the cake in your pantry you cannot eat it. If you eat the cake, it is gone. You cannot have it both ways. You cannot keep your money in the bank and at the same time spend that same money. You cannot be in two places at the same time. The two situations are incompatible. One rules out the other. Certainly when it comes to these examples there is no doubt that the saying is true. Yet in just as many situations as not, you actually can have your cake and eat it. But the solution which makes the two situations 'compatible' is usually (though not always) more complex, or demands a higher level of ingenuity, or simply harder work, than the either-or choices.

In the days of living in a mud hut you had a choice: either you could cut a hole in the wall to let in light, in which case you would get cold; or you could keep the walls solid, in which case you could stay warm but have to remain in the dark. The invention of glass, a major technological step forward at the time, was a 'higher compatibility solution' (HCS) which enabled you to let the light in and not get cold. But the important thing to note is that glass is a much more complex thing than either a hole in the wall or no hole. You could also choose between leaving the door open or not; but a door is itself an HCS. In effect it is a bit of wall that is moveable.

Coming back to modern times, it is not so long ago that you could either stay at home to watch your favourite television programme, or you could go out and do something else. The one ruled out the other. The invention of the video recorder was an HCS. But again, a video recorder is much more complex than a mere television, or merely stepping out of your house. A takeaway coffee with a lid, especially if you try to drink from it in a car, is a bit of a nuisance: either you keep the lid on, and can't drink the coffee, or you take the lid off and run the risk of spilling it. A lid that has a sliding component to create an opening through which to drink is an HCS. But clearly such a lid is 'more complex' than a simple one without the special lid. The fine tuner for the E string, or the screw on the bow to tighten or loosen the bow hair, are both HCS.

To accept that you can't have it both ways is like being forced to choose between having your right hand cut off, or your left hand. Which would you like to lose? Clearly the answer is neither, thank you very much. So every time we accept that we can't have what we want, it is like accepting a sort of maiming.

Thinking in terms of HCS is not merely very important. While there are lots of things one can use the word 'importance' for, it could be suggested that HCS are actually a question of success or utter failure in life. They're absolutely right at the top of anything which can ever affect your day-to-day living. Looked at from one point of view it is not that the more intelligent you are, the more HCS you find, but rather that it is in the forming of HCS that intelligence works. The great teacher-philosopher J. Krishnamurti counselled against ever 'coming to a conclusion' about anything, because the moment you do that you stop thinking. In the same way, if you refuse to accept an either-or choice, it means that your intelligence continues to strive to find a 'have your cake and eat it' solution. Otherwise, your intelligent seeking of a solution literally stops, which is a long way of saying that you cease to be intelligent about whatever the problem is that you are trying to solve.

Playing from memory

In violin playing, the added complexity of 'having your cake and eating it' often amounts to no more than both working harder and 'working smarter'. One of the most frequent hazards in teaching is the challenge of students who present problems about playing from memory. As long as they think that they cannot have their cake and eat it, the alternatives seem to be that either they play well from the music, or catastrophically from memory. The problem persists if either student or teacher thinks that you can't have it both ways. The insistence that it is possible to play well and from memory means that better ways are found of memorising, and more time to practise is found.

What are the better ways of memorising? Making sure that all four aspects of memory are strong – the aural memory of what the phrases sound like; tactile memory of what they feel like (imagine having a 'memory slip' in the first note of the Brahms Violin Concerto, and coming in on an up-bow instead of a down-bow – the memory of what the opening 'feels like' makes this an impossibility, and the same principle applies to everything else); the visual memory of all the markings on the page, from the notes themselves to all the markings of dynamics and articulations, so that although it may look as though you are playing without the music, in fact you are reading off a mental photograph of it); and the 'intellectual memory' of your

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understanding of the structure, or the fact that one time the theme goes this way, the next time that way, and the time after that is the same as the first time, making a 'sandwich' for which you have a 'memory tag'.

Playing expressively in time

It is relatively easy to play metronomically in time, but without musical expression; it is relatively easy to play expressively with lots of rubato, pulling the phrase about and disturbing the pulse and the rhythm. It is music-making on a much higher level when you can play in time and expressively. The Russian pianist Artur Rubinstein was once asked if he was from the 'playing in time school of playing', or from the 'playing with feeling school'. He replied: 'Can't one feel the music in time?'

Movement and expression

Last month's *Basics* dealt with the whole issue of not allowing excess physical movements to take the place of actual musical expression (*Keeping still*, May 2014). Instead of the musical idea reaching the bow or the fingers, it comes out instead as a physical 'expressive' gesture in the body or the face; but if you listen to the performance with your eyes shut, or on a recording, the actual sound produced by the player is flat and uninteresting. It can be extremely difficult to convince students of the necessity of keeping still and making the music purely through their instrument, because the immediate reaction of most is that either they can move around in the name of 'freedom' and play 'musically', or they can stand still and play only mechanically; but they cannot possibly do both. So long as they think you cannot have it both ways, it is very difficult to attain, and yet you only have to look at the really good players to see that of course it is not only desirable but absolutely possible. But the HCS of playing expressively while keeping still is clearly a vastly higher level of accomplishment.

Examples of technical issues

If the first and second fingers on the bow are placed either side of the thumb, as Carl Flesch recommended, there is not enough leverage because the first finger is too close to the pivot. If instead the second finger is positioned to the left of the thumb, tension may be created in the base of the thumb. With the second finger almost opposite the thumb, but ever-so-slightly to the left of it, you can have enough leverage and no tension.

If you press the fingers hard into the strings, the thumb has to counter-press too much and tension is inevitable. Not enough finger-pressure means the tone becomes full of the sound of notes that are not sufficiently stopped. The fingers must stop the string just enough to make a pure tone, and no more. Add to this a slightly backwards direction in the pressure of the thumb on the neck – rather than pressing directly into the neck – and the finger action becomes tension-free while the sound remains pure.

There is a particular angle of the violin to the body that enables you to play to the point without the arm straightening: the scroll must not point in to the body too much, which makes playing at the point easy but playing in the lower half awkward; it must not be angled too far out to the left, which makes playing in the lower half easy, but difficult at the point. There is a particular tilt which lends enough support for the bow on the E string while the G string is easily reached – too tilted, and the G feels good but playing on the E string is weak, and if too flat the E string feels good but the arm has to be too high when playing on the G.

Teaching.

An old-fashioned approach, still quite common, is that to get your students playing well you simply hit them over the head with a stick; and then, if that doesn't work, you find a bigger stick and hit them with that until either they drop dead (i.e. give up the violin), or finally do whatever you want them to do. While this is obviously speaking figuratively (unless, in modern times at least, the teacher wants to be taken to court), there are plenty of ways of smacking somebody on the head without actually using a physical implement. Yet there are clearly four possibilities: (1) you can be the nicest teacher and create a pleasant atmosphere which the students enjoy and always look forward to; but they never end up playing well. (2) Or you can give the sort of lessons which the students dread, and get fantastic results. (3) Or you can be the terrifying type but be quite useless, with none of your students able to play the violin; (4) or you can be saintly in your pleasantness, positivity, support and encouragement, while at the same time getting the very best results and bringing great success to your students. This fourth possibility is perfectly attainable; but so long as you think that you cannot have it both ways – you cannot be nice to your students and get first-rate results – your intelligence to find a way to do it is not even awakened.

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Running to eleven syllables, the term 'higher compatibility solution' is quite a mouthful. I have often thought of trying to find an HCS for the name itself, but have never found one. Perhaps a reader could send in a suggestion for a one- or two-syllable term which does the job just as well.