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# BASICS

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## RHYTHM

There are four key elements in playing any musical instrument: pitch, sound, rhythm and ease (lack of physical or mental effort). The first question is what note do you want to play. The second question is what sound do you want that note to have, and the third question is when exactly do you want that note to begin. Then there is the question of how to get the result you want with the least possible action or effort.

In contrast to the piano, where all the notes are already there for you, on the violin it is such a business just to play in tune - and with a pure tone neither over-pressed nor too feeble – that all-too-often the player's attention goes almost entirely on to playing 'in tune, good-sounding notes'.

Yet in the end good rhythm is arguably the most important of the three elements. Of course you have to play in tune and with a good tone; but without good, musical rhythm the playing may not be musically compelling even if it is in tune and clean.

Good rhythm is also the essential 'cement' that binds all the different elements of technique into one because the more definite the 'when' or the 'now', the finer the co-ordination between the hands.

### Sub-dividing and feeling the pulse

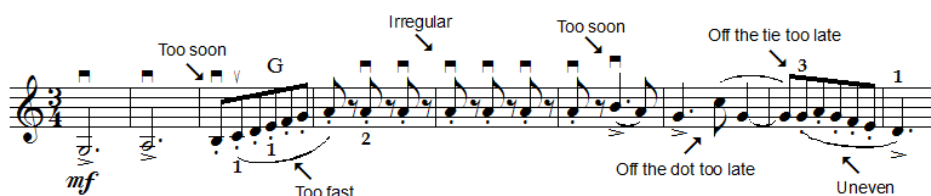
The most usual reason for poor rhythm is that the player is forgetting to feel and to enjoy the pulse of the music. The printed rhythms are one thing, but the underlying rhythmic pulse is another. The pulse is the rhythmic ground you are standing on, almost like a boom-ta-ta, boom-ta-ta going on underneath whatever you are playing. Mentally divide all longer notes into sub-values, for example feeling underlying quavers or semiquavers when playing crotchets. Sub-dividing is one of the absolute keys to playing with rhythmic control.

Suppose you are playing in 4/4. At the front of your mind are the four crotchet beats, the first and third probably slightly stronger than the second and fourth. At the same time, a little further back in your mind, you can have eight quavers pulsing away; and, depending on the tempo, right at the back of your mind you can have sixteen semiquavers chugging along rhythmically as well. When you play the printed rhythms on top of that rhythmic basis, everything takes on an entirely new musical quality.

### Practising with the metronome

As a child I was taught that metronomes are evil things that turn their users into unmusical robots. Later it turned out that in fact they are a most useful tool and can help in a multitude of different practice methods. (As to someone playing unmusically afterwards, they were probably playing unmusically beforehand - only not so in time!)

In a recent lesson an otherwise brilliant violinist played the Tchaikovsky Valse Scherzo as follows:



Each rhythmic disturbance was so slight that the average audience member would not consciously recognise them, but despite the good tone and intonation this playing actually had no rhythmic pulse whatsoever. Of course there is a difference between metronomic rhythm and musical rhythm – that goes without saying – and the first approach to improving rhythm must be to approach it musically, and in this case to remember that it is a waltz; but what is really useful is to have a way of ironing out, or at least exposing, all the a-rhythmic passages all in one go, and for that the metronome is indispensable. The improvement that comes after just a couple of minutes of playing with the metronome is

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immediate. Far from becoming wooden, the playing suddenly moves on to an entirely different level and becomes more musically compelling rather than less.

It is not so easy to play in time, and there are few who should be scornful of the rhythmic weaknesses illustrated above. A catch-phrase amongst studio musicians, who spend much time playing with a metronome beat in their headphones, is that 'the click is god'. In other words, don't argue with it because you'll never win. 'Playing on the click' is taken to such a precise degree that, although the norm is to play in the centre of the click, sections of the orchestra may be asked to play a particular passage 'just on the front of the click' or on the back of it. Recording sessions are often extremely taxing even if the notes are easy to play, because you cannot afford to lose concentration for a second.

The reason for such exacting rhythm precision is that the best string sections are so blended you cannot hear any individual players sticking out in the mix. On each desk the greatest freedom lies in the amount of volume the players produce. One will be a little louder or a little softer than their partner, but so long as the type of stroke is the same the section still sounds blended. There is a tiny amount of leeway possible in intonation – not everybody plays exactly the same Bb or F# - but so long as any differences are infinitesimal the blending will still be there. But if anyone plays the tiniest fraction early or late to the click, the unity and smoothness of the section is lost.

## Too-early lift-off

A subtle but common cause of weak rhythm comes from the difference in timing between placing fingers and lifting them. Imagine playing a few ascending notes slurred in one bow, say open A, B, C, D, E. To play a new note by putting a finger on to the string to shorten it, the finger first moves towards the string and then, at the end of this journey, arrives on the string and 'stops' it, thereby creating the new note. But when playing a new note by taking a finger off the string – imagine playing the same notes descending – the order is reversed: first the new note sounds as the finger leaves the string and thereby lengthens it, and then the finger continues its journey away from the string. So you have to drop a finger before you want the new note, but lift it when you want the new note.

It is rarely necessary to think about beginning to drop fingers before they are needed on the string. This is an entirely natural, unconscious thing that happens automatically. But in any phrase than contains falling notes on one string - especially under a slur – great care has to be taken not to lift off too early.

## Height of the left fingers

Another common reason for unreliable rhythm can be found in the height of the left fingers above the strings. When the left fingertips are all more or less the same distance away from the strings – rather than the tip of the first finger being closest to the string while the second, third and fourth are progressively further and further away - it is naturally easier to play rhythmically evenly than when each finger has a different distance to travel to get to the string.

In an ideal left-hand set-up the fingers do not lift too high above the strings. I often joke to students that after much scientific research costing millions, it has been proved that if the fingertips do not touch the strings they can have no effect on them! – so once a finger has lost contact with the string there isn't too much point in continuing to raise it further and further. Secondly, when the fingers are not being used they remain hovering above the strings ready to fall, rather than pulling off out to the side. Yfrah Neaman used to liken this to helicopters or vertical take-off planes hovering above their landing pad.