

# About rhythm

Looked at from one angle, you cannot say that any one of the three factors of playing – pitch, sound or rhythm – is more important than another. You cannot do without a high standard of any of them.

Looked at from another angle, rhythm is the most important.

## **Rhythm gets your foot tapping**

When you sit in the audience and listen to a concert, you do not even think about intonation unless the playing is out of tune. It might happen that a phrase, which you know to be particularly tricky, is played incredibly well in tune, and so for a moment you notice the good intonation; but most of the time you notice the tuning only when it disturbs you.

Similarly, you may notice a beautiful, dark, rich tone on the G string, or a sweetness on the E string, or whatever; but when you are really transported by the music you are not aware of *sound* as such. Music is something else, an experience created by the physicality of the performer, the instrument or the sound, but at the same time beyond it.

But it is rhythm that locks the audience on to the performer. Rhythm is the quality or factor that can actually get the audience's feet tapping. If you play in tune, and with a good sound, but with poor rhythm, you cannot grip an audience the way you can if you play with many accidents of pitch or sound, but you play with infectious rhythmic vitality. It goes without saying, that you want to play in tune and with a good sound as well, but that is not the subject here.

## **The difference between playing the printed rhythms, and rhythm**

There are three aspects to rhythm:

- 1 Playing the printed note-lengths
- 2 Feeling the underlying rhythmic pulse
- 3 Making expression through rhythm

It is very common for an otherwise advanced player to be unaware that they do not play with strong, underlying rhythmic pulse. Of course, where there is a quarter note (crotchet) they play a quarter note; where there is a sixteenth note (semiquaver) they play a sixteenth note.

But to play these rhythms on top of a foundation of a regular rhythmic pulse is a completely different matter. The underlying rhythmic pulse is the base on which you stand, as a performing musician, without which your playing may constantly feel technically and musically unstable.

## **Trying to play notes in tune with a good sound**

Many string players, even if they are not very advanced, will stop playing or make a face, or react in some other way, if they play a note out of tune, or if they accidentally scratch a note; but if rhythmically they play a little too long or too short, even if they are quite an advanced player, they will often be completely unaware of it.

In other words, the focus is only on playing in tune, and with a good sound.

## **Good rhythm aids good co-ordination**

Rhythm is the 'most important' of the three for another reason. The stronger the underlying rhythmic pulse and the more exact the timing of the note values, the better the co-ordination between the two hands as they perform all their finely-timed operations in playing the violin. The more defined the precise moment when two things must happen at the same time, the better the co-ordination.

## **The mechanics of rhythm on a string instrument**

There are six technical factors that affect when a note sounds:

- 1 Playing slurred notes on one string the rhythm is created only by the left fingers. The bow has nothing to do with it:



2 Playing separate bows on one note, all the rhythm is in the right hand and none in the left fingers:



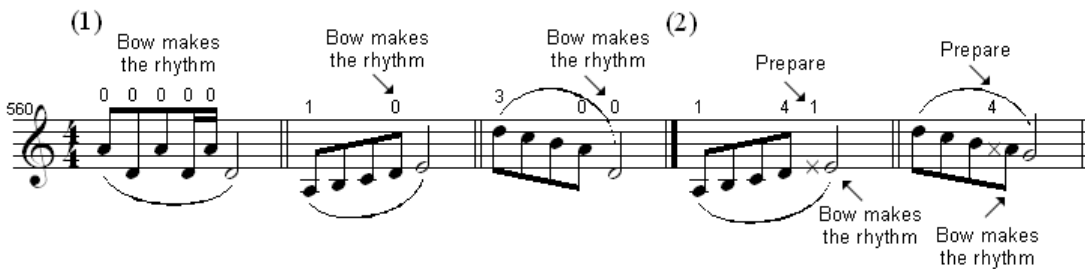
3 Playing different notes with separate bows, the rhythm is made by both hands:



A particular danger to avoid is that it is often much easier for the bow simply to stop, change direction, and go the other way, than it is for the left finger to find its place on the string. If the bow plays with more immediate rhythm than a slightly-delayed left finger, the result is the impure sound of bowing a half-stopped string.

The way to avoid this is by always leading the bow with the left hand, rather than the left hand following the bow.

4 During string crossings, all the rhythm is in the bow:



(1) All the rhythm is in the bow, none in the left fingers.

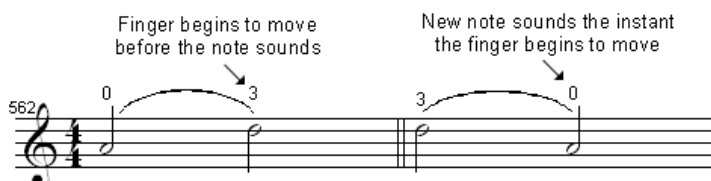
(2) A particular problem of co-ordination arises when you have to prepare a finger on the new string before touching that string with the bow. The rhythm is still all in the bow, but that is a matter of the *musical* timing.

The *technical* timing is earlier than the moment when you want the new note to sound: the left finger must be on the string and stopping it sufficiently before the bow gets there; and the bow must start moving towards the new string before the moment when it must arrive there and sound the note.

Prepare the first or fourth finger on the string and then time the sounding of the note with the bow.

5 The timing of dropping a finger is different from that of lifting a finger off the string.

- When a new note is played by dropping a finger on to the string, i.e. during slurred ascending notes, the finger starts off one or two centimetres above the string, begins to move towards the string, and then arrives on the string. The order is: 'move, new note'.
- When a new note is played by lifting a finger off the string, i.e. during slurred descending notes, the finger departs from the string and moves to a point one or two centimetres above the string. The order is: 'new note, move':



Notes played with bad rhythm due to fingers dropping too late is not so common; but fingers lifting too early, before the notes should be played, instead of lifting them at the precise moment that you want the new note to sound, is a common and frequently-heard cause of notes rushing.

Dropping fingers before you want them on the string is not something you ever have to think about, and the correct timing happens naturally; but lifting fingers too early is something to watch out for in everything that you play.

Key point The single thought that you have to keep in mind is to lift *when* the note is to sound.

- Beginning a shift at the moment that you want to arrive is a frequent cause of faulty rhythm. Timing a shift is like dropping a finger on to the string: you must start the journey towards the string before you want to arrive; and you must begin the shift before the moment when you want to arrive on the new, shifted-to note.

### **Playing expressively in time**

I often remember hearing the great Roumanian pianist Radu Lupu playing Beethoven Piano Concerto No. 1. His playing became a landmark reference point in my mind. He played with the apparent freedom of rubato that you would expect in a piece by Chopin; yet if a metronome had been on he would not have got out with it for a moment, because he was actually playing so 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 great 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?'

### **Making musical expression through rhythm**

Harpsichordists and organists tend to use far more *rubato* than pianists, and will hurry and slow down, within a simple phrase, where a pianist would play rhythmically straight. This is because on the harpsichord or organ you cannot adjust the volume of individual notes, even though a master-musician can give the impression of doing so. On these instruments you really have only pitch and rhythm to make your musical expression within a particular phrase, not tone.

As a string player, you command all the means of varying the expression or colour of an individual note that an organist or a harpsichordist lacks. Nevertheless, follow their example and, to an extent, use rhythm to shape and give meaning to a phrase (in a solo piece) in the same way that you use sound, vibrato or intonation to create the expression.

However, except in the 'big' or expressive moments, when you use time to make expression, if anyone can too-easily notice what you are doing, it will probably already be too much.

### **Rhythmic license is always the last thing to consider**

In orchestral playing you cannot ever use time to make expression on your own, since everyone in a section has to play and move together.

In solo playing, time is always the last thing to use to make musical expression or to make the musical point of a phrase. First, exhaust every other means by trying different textures and colours in the tone, different accentuation, different vibratos, or different tuning of individual notes. Then, when nothing else remains and you are still not satisfied, that may be the time to allow some freedom with the rhythm, i.e. placing a note, or moving forwards or holding back slightly.

This does not mean that you have to play 'straight' for a long time before you can allow some rubato. You may already know, after playing a phrase only once or twice, that it demands flexibility. The principle is only that using time is never the first but the last thing you consider.

### **The blended sound of a brilliant orchestral section**

It depends on the music whether or not you want this quality of sound, but one of the purest and the most beautiful sounds comes when every member of a section plays exactly the same pitches, with the same tone, and at exactly the same time. This creates a blended sound from each section that is

completely different from the sound of, say, fourteen violins all playing the same notes together, but where you can almost pick out each individual player's sound from the mix.

It is in the sound you produce, that you are allowed the most variation without spoiling the blended section sound. You can play slightly stronger or slightly weaker, within a narrow range (and one that widens and narrows according to the music you are playing), but the overall corporate section sound still remains blended and pure.

Much less variation is allowable in intonation. Again this depends on the actual notes or composer, but some variation is possible. Amongst the members of a section, there can be many extremely slight differences of opinion as to what exactly the pitch of a sharp or a flat should be, or a B, C or F, and yet the section can still play one together that blends and is acceptable overall.

It is in rhythm that no variation at all is possible. All you need is one person in a section to play slightly too early, or hold on slightly too long, or play with the slightest lack of rhythmic control, and the blended, corporate sound of the section is lost. This is why excellent rhythm is so vital in anything to do with orchestral playing - from what you demonstrate in an audition, to playing as a member of a section.