

The English School of Violin Playing

A peripatetic violin teacher from the north of England recently described her work to me. Among other difficulties she has to face is the fact that much of her week is spent teaching three children at once in lessons lasting 15 minutes. Few of the children practise between lessons or progress beyond rudimentary levels. I began to see just how privileged are those teachers at the other end of the spectrum, who give individual one-hour or even two-hour lessons (as at the specialist music schools) to students who are serious about both practice and lessons.

In many cases, as soon as a child who has started off with group lessons shows promise, he or she is taken out of the group and given more serious teaching. But none of us can afford to be complacent. It is widely acknowledged that the standard of string playing in Britain, even in the major centres, is not as advanced as in the United States, Japan, Russia, and other countries. In a recent edition of *Fédération de Concours Internationaux de Musique* (which publishes results of international competitions), 195 prize winners in 53 competitions are listed. It is significant that British players won only nine prizes. Of these, none was awarded to a violinist, and only one of the prizes was a first place.

It cannot be argued that we *do* have excellent players but tend as a nation not to like competitions. The truth is that we do not have high-standard players who would stand a chance. There is always debate about the validity of ‘competition mentality’, but whatever the pros and cons of competitions the technical excellence of many international players is difficult to ignore.

At many American schools, it is common for 17-year-olds to play concertos by Paganini, Tschaikowski, or Sibelius *at their entrance auditions*, often at a much higher standard than final-year students in London. At the Central School in Moscow, an 18-year-old able to play Paganini is nothing special; Ivan Galamian would often start his first-year Juilliard students on the first Paganini Caprice, working straight through in order to the twenty-fourth. At British music colleges, we generally have to rebuild 18-year-old students’ techniques from the beginning. So what is the path the advanced players have taken?

Repertoire from End to Beginning

To clearly illustrate the training they enjoy, I will draw up a detailed repertoire list starting at the end and working backwards, and will show how this repertoire appears when spread over the years from 11 to 17. Then I will look briefly at the teaching of technique, or rather the lack of it, in Britain. The repertoire list is not definitive since any course must be tailored to the individual, but I do know that Dorothy DeLay sticks more or less to this order, as did Galamian, Leopold Auer, Carl Flesch, Max Rostal, and other important teachers past and present.

Starting at the end, then, Brahms is one of the last concertos to be learned. Both the Tschaikowski and the Sibelius should be studied before the Brahms, and they are made easier by first playing Paganini No. 1. (Dorothy DeLay: “If you can play the Paganini, you can play anything”).

Before the Paganini, both Vieuxtemps Nos. 4 and 5 should be played and if possible, the Wieniawski No. 1 in F# minor (which some consider the most difficult concerto of all). Before these come Wieniawski No. 2 and Saint-Saëns No. 3 in B minor, both of which are also essential preparation for the Mendelssohn. (In Britain, the Mendelssohn is often taught very early, but it is much easier to play if the problems in Wieniawski and Saint-Saëns have been solved.)

Galamian's students, before playing any of the above concerti, generally had to learn the Bruch *Scottish Fantasy*, the Lalo *Symphonie Espagnole*, the Conus Concerto (unknown in Britain), and the Bruch No. 2 in D minor. The bigger Mozart concertos (Nos. 4 and 5) are also learned around this stage.

Before any of these, it is helpful to have played the Bruch No. 1 in G minor, preceded by concertos by Rode, Spohr, Haydn, Viotti, DeBeriot, and so on, as well as the Bach concertos and the easier Mozarts (Nos. 2 and 3).

Other concertos such as the Schumann, Dvorak, Elgar, Bartok, Prokofiev, Glazunov, and others can be added or substituted. However these are more properly repertoire works not so suitable as part of step-by-step training, and better played after concertos by Tchaikowski, Sibelius and the like. In the United States, the Beethoven is generally taught last of all, though recently DeLay told me that she has slightly changed her mind about this and sometimes suggests Beethoven earlier.

Why so many concertos? Why did Galamian rarely teach sonatas? Because if the big concertos have been played, especially the Romantic display concertos, then you are able to play everything, and a major sonata can be learned easily; but if you are raised mainly on short pieces, playing a concerto becomes a difficult - or insurmountable - task.

A typical international-standard 18-year-old will also have played at least two or three solo Bach and Ysayë sonatas; a couple each of Mozart, Beethoven, and Brahms sonatas; the Cesar Frank; and various concert pieces like the Saint-Saëns *Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso*, Waxman's *Carmen Fantasy*, Paganini's *La Campanella*, major recital works by Szymanowski, and so on.

The order in which the *étude* repertoire (essential training material) is learned is again pretty universal. Before playing Paganini Caprices, all the Wieniawski *L'Ecole Moderne* should be learned; before Wieniawski, at least half of the Gavinies Caprices (when DeLay saw a draft of this article, she said, "At *least* half!"); before Gavinies, all of Dont Op. 35, preceded by all of the Rode; and before these, all of the Kreutzer.

The forty or so works I have mentioned constitute a minimum background and provide the kind of training that the superb Far Eastern, American, and Eastern European players have had. I want to try to illustrate how far the average British student is from this regimen. It could be argued that what I have described is more than the minimum, so to avoid any hint of extremism let's suppose a huge compromise is made to the extent of cutting it *by half*. Anyway, not every violinist in Moscow or New York has a formidable technique and repertoire.

First, let's forget altogether about playing the most difficult concertos and then, as a further compromise let's halve the number of smaller (training) concertos to just ten. If we add to these a mere ten other works - solo Bach, sonatas and showpieces - we could end up with about 20 works as a sort of compromise basic training. Alas, even then the average British schoolchild would find the pace impossible: an 11-year-old has 21 school terms before music college (19 terms before college auditions), so this 'half-schedule' compromise still requires *one complete work to be learned each term*.

Compromising to the same extent with the study repertoire, even if half were left until later and we rule out Paganini entirely, this still works out at about one study every three weeks of every term - quite a pace to keep up non-stop for seven years, when even some of the Kreutzer studies are quite complex. To reach the very highest standard, most of these studies presumably have to be *mastered*, not just *learned*.

Technique and Artistry

Turning now to the question of teaching technique in Britain, there are few of us who are not hindered in some important respects by lack of facility. One reason for this is that many string players and teachers do not realise how straightforward it is to develop technique. Artistry, musicality, expression, communication, and suchlike constitute a sort of 'dark continent' because they cannot easily be described and defined. They are difficult to 'teach' if they are not already present naturally as talent. But the entire physical side of playing - the concrete reality of the hands and the bow and the string and how they work - is fully describable, and therefore teachable, from beginning to end.

By fully describable I mean that 'technique' is made up of 'techniques'. Violin playing is complex because even to play a simple phrase a large number of quite different techniques have to be performed one after another, at sometimes very great speed. Six ordinary notes played in a row will often require six fundamentally different ways of producing each note. For example, to play the first note the bow may have to be placed on the string and then 'bite' the beginning of the note; to play the second note the bow may have to pivot smoothly across to another string; to play the third note a finger may have to be lifted, and so on.

On their own, most of the separate techniques are very simple. It is only when we try to perform several of them at the same time that they can appear to become more difficult. To a certain extent, an 'easy' piece is easy because very few actions have to be performed at the same time; a 'difficult' piece is difficult because ten or twenty actions may have to be performed at the same time or in close succession. (The easiest 'piece' of all must therefore be just one open string played pizzicato, because it consists of only one action.)

Each technique is completely describable in terms of physical actions: every combination of actions is completely describable in terms of *proportions of one action to another*.

But in many teachers' and players' minds, the 'dark continent' of the artistic side is somehow spread over to include the physical, mechanical side - as though it, too, were something that cannot be described and all success or failure were just because 'some people are lucky and gifted and can play, and other people find it more difficult.'

While most of us do have our technical limitations, we nevertheless congratulate ourselves on our musicality. We excuse lack of facility with the argument that technique is not everything, and anyway it is better to play musically than technically. This argument can come about only if music and technique - which are one, inseparable whole - are split into two. Without wanting to side-track into an issue that perhaps deserves a separate article all to itself, I would like to go into this in some detail.

Pitch, sound and rhythm

Only three factors are involved in playing music on the violin: pitch, sound and rhythm. Playing a note consists of first choosing a pitch, then sounding it in order to hear it, and then deciding when to sound it. Playing musically is not a matter of 'putting expression into it' after learning the notes; musical expression *is created by* the pitch, the sound, and the rhythm. If the sound is not expressive and then you 'add expression', you have to change the sound; pitch-sound-rhythm and expression are inseparably one and the same thing. In the same way, vibrato (or the lack of it) is inseparable from emotional expression - vibrato *is* expression. Nor is style a separate issue; apart from the various other factors style is created through the choice of pitch, sound (stroke), rhythm, and type of vibrato.

The crucial point is that these aspects of music cannot themselves be separated from the physical instrument: where the fingers are placed on the string, and pitch; what the bow does to the string, and sound; the precise moment when the fingers touch or leave the string - or when the bow is moved - and rhythm. All these are clearly inseparable. So not only is musical

expression and pitch-sound-rhythm one and the same, but so is pitch-sound-rhythm the same as what the hands and bow do to the instrument. The music, and the physical method of making the music, are one thing. So how can you talk about music without talking about technique?

The only pure technique is in the form of raw technical exercises - finger-tapping without the bow, shifting exercises, tone production exercises on one note, and so forth. In that sense, technique can be taught separately from music. But music cannot be taught separately from technique: *the entire expression, character, atmosphere and drama of the music is the result of what the hands and fingers are doing to the instrument.*

What about a child's undeveloped playing that can still be very moving, or, on the other hand, the boring virtuoso in Carnegie Hall who makes your mind wander? When playing appears to sound musical even though it is out of tune or played unrhythmically or with a poor sound, it often means that a lot is being done with dynamic shading and pacing. There can be extra-musical reasons for a performance to be genuinely moving. It can also seem musical if the player *looks* musical.

Conversely, when a technically superb player seems 'cold' or musically uninteresting, this can also be traced back to what the hands are doing to the instrument. Instead of being transported by the playing, listeners find themselves wondering why, perhaps, the vibrato is always the same, or why the bow does not sink deeper into the string at a particular moment; the rhythm may be unnaturally metronomic, or certain leading notes may be too low to produce tension, and so on. Or they may simply wonder why they can't keep their minds on the concert.

Perhaps such a player, even though there is little he or she would find difficult to play, does not experience such-and-such an emotional quality in the first place and therefore does not create that quality in the pitch, sound and rhythm. Whatever the explanation, such a phenomenon should not be allowed to cloud the issue: a clear majority of sensitive, intelligent and musical student violinists are not given the information and training they need to be able to get around the instrument.

Progress and Practice

The repertoire list I have outlined demands and builds essential aspects of playing because it is not possible to progress through it without mastering the relevant techniques. But this only works if it is insisted that each level be *musically* mastered on the *physical* plane before moving on to the next level.

A Czechoslovakian student of mine told me how, when he was 11 and studying at the Prague Conservatoire, he was given elementary pieces (for example, the Haydn G major concerto) and was expected to play well - in time, in tune, and with a pure tone. Then, at age 12 he came to England and was given such pieces as the Mendelssohn concerto (far too difficult), which he was not expected to play well! All too typical, this is no way to climb the ladder towards true excellence.

So what is the standard here, in comparison with abroad? In fact it is improving rapidly, the average level at the London colleges being far higher now than 10 or 15 years ago. But I remember a masterclass given at one of the colleges in 1978 by a certain Russian teacher. He became increasingly more and more frustrated as each violinist played with poor tone and intonation. Finally he turned, gesticulating, to the audience, and said in pidgin English: 'Vot ees dis? De English School of Violin Playing?!' Perhaps they were all having a bad day, but that scene could easily occur today in exactly the same way.

The big stumbling block for most students is finding sufficient time to practice. No teacher can raise someone's playing to a high level in just one or two hours of lesson a week. But if

students practise three or four hours each day (always attending to the necessary principles of playing), it is possible to train themselves. Therefore the teacher's most effective use of the lesson time is to teach *how to practice*, and to practise problematic passages together in such a way that students can continue the work on their own without the teacher.

In Continental specialist schools, particularly in Eastern Europe, the school week is only four days long, each day finishing as early as one o'clock. But even in British schools that gear themselves around music, few pupils have enough time to practise - three or four hours daily is rarely possible. The teacher then has to waste precious time in lessons correcting playing that the student could clean up perfectly easily without any help whatsoever if they only had the time to do so.

Because of the lack of practice and technique, few students can learn repertoire at the rate described earlier. Even in specialist schools, many 16- and 17-year-olds still play Kreisler encore pieces and easy Sarasate rather than the *Carmen Fantasy* or *La Campanella*, with few concertos learnt (and these rarely the most difficult).

At music college auditions in London, most candidates do not present advanced works like Paganini, Tschaikowski, and Sibelius, let alone give polished performances of them. (The requirement for the end-of-first-year examination at one of the London music colleges is merely the first movement of a concerto by DeBeriot, Viotti, Spohr or Wieniawski. Viotti and DeBeriot are expected of the 5- to 10- year-olds in eastern Europe.)

The defence is usually raised that not everyone wants to be a soloist and so does not require virtuosic technique. Furthermore, the majority will not become professional players anyway and only want general enjoyment out of playing. But surely, whatever the eventual aim of any player, if they are going to put bow to string at all then they should learn the best possible way of doing it. And because some people are 'only' going to play in an orchestra, should they therefore be condemned to a lifetime of frustration and difficulty in playing the instrument?

Many factors - cultural, sociological, economical, and political - contribute to the differences in standards around the world. Nevertheless, just as British tennis players do compete at Wimbledon (and rarely make it past the first round), so in the end do British string players have to compete with the rest of the world. Serious students must be taught step-by-step repertoire; they need to work (successfully) through that repertoire at a fast pace; and they must be given sufficient time to practice.

Above all else, we should be concerned about the standard of elementary teaching, since even the compromise training I have outlined depends on a sufficiently high standard having been reached by the age of 11. Otherwise the 11- to 14-year-olds have to waste vital years learning Kayser, Handel, and Seitz before they can begin advanced work. If our future soloists, chamber musicians and orchestral players must start off in groups of three, sharing their teacher in a 15-minute lesson, it is obvious why the 11-year-olds already have a lot of catching up to do.