

Fax to SIMON FISCHER

From IAN FLINT

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String materials

Jennifer Paterson

Basics

Simon Fischer

Peters Edition 7440, £22.95

Superstart Levels 1 and 2

M Cohen

Faber, violin part £3.95, piano part £4.95

The Essential String Method Books 1 and 2

Sheila Nelson

Boosey and Hawkes (in partnership with Guildhall School of Music and Drama), £4.99 each

Anyone fortunate enough to have been to a master class or to have had lessons from Simon Fischer – or those able to read his monthly contributions on 'Basics' in the *Strad* magazine, where he discusses a particular aspect of violin technique, will need no persuasion to buy this book. It is a violinists' bible containing '300 exercises and practice routines' in which Fischer suggests ways to practise key passages in the violin repertoire. *Strad* readers may notice that although Fischer uses fewer musical examples to illustrate a point of technique here in 'Basics', there are many more exercises than in his articles in the *Strad*.

Basics is divided into seven sections (A–G) covering Right Arm and Hand Techniques, Tone Production, Key Strokes, Left Hand, Shifting, Intonation and Vibrato, prefaced by a detailed introduction and advice on how to use the book. The surprising omissions are playing pizzicato (there is only one reference to it in relation to coordination (p 129) and harmonics (except as an aid to playing fast). This is interesting, as many beginner violin tutors introduce these techniques early on.

With well-illustrated, helpful photographs, (showing, for example, the bow hold and the positioning of the left-hand fingers for vibrato), a clearly laid-out text, excellently printed music, and a fully cross-referenced index, (though with a misprinted key – A minor, instead of E – for Elgar's sonata), this is an essential book for all violinists. Compared with an hour's lesson *Basics* is marvellous value. The blurb on the back cover says it belongs on the music stand, not in the bookshelf, but weighing in at 850 grammes (211 pages) it needs something more

robust than the usual metal stand to balance it on. However, it is Fischer's perceptive understanding of the fundamentals of violin technique exemplified in the exercises (and explained in succinct and readable English) which really make this book a must-buy.

The coincidence of two new approaches to teaching the early stages of violin playing being published within a year makes comparisons both interesting and inevitable. Cohen's *Superstart* level 1 covers 'basic skills and pieces for beginners' (the techniques of holding the violin and bow, pitch and rhythm reading) with clearly stated aims addressed both to the pupil and teacher/parent, and a book of piano accompaniments. Nelson and her team's *Essential String Method* (there are separate violin, cello and double-bass parts but no accompaniments, or teacher's handbook yet) 'offers an exciting advance in the teaching of string instruments, integrating musical awareness, creativity and technical development...the material is presented as a logical progression of musical activities'. Good. The problem here, however, is that there is no introduction and it is not immediately clear whether the book (apart from a four-page blue insert on 'holding the violin and bow, getting ready to play and positioning your left hand' and a four-page activities section) is intended for the pupil to read, or as a teacher's resource book. If the former, the pupil will have to be 'talked through' (taught to read) the clef, time signature, the crotchet and its rest, capital letters and so on – though there is no reference to this in the text.

Both methods have some excellent ideas for teaching the basic physical movements involved in playing the violin and employ humorous cartoon-figures to help illustrate these activities. Cohen has a genial American-looking professor (who shows how to hold 'your gravity-defying violin') and Nelson, pin-people (no problems with political correctness) with happy or sad expressions – according to whether their violin holds are good or bad – and both start by teaching the open strings first, using the crotchet as a pulse note. As a means of introducing the concept of long and short sounds, Nelson has come up with the idea of 'peppling' a song. By putting down pebbles, counters or buttons for each word or syllable, longer or shorter sounds can be identified. She uses 'ta' for the crotchet, 'ti-ti' for quavers and 'ma' for the crotchet rest. Cohen on the other hand suggests the same

'long' for a crotchet and 'short short' for quavers, with 'wait' for a crotchet rest. It would be much less confusing if they both used the generally known (logical) French rhythm names.

With regard to developing pitch concepts, both methods expect pupils to sing well-known songs, either to their original words or those adapted for a specific purpose, and then to play what they have sung. Nelson, however, uses solfa and hand signs. The first interval she introduces is the octave (tuning the third finger D on the A string to the open D) then soh-mi (D B) on the A string, then doh-ray, (A B). And this is where Cohen starts too, only the second interval she teaches is the octave harmonic (on the A string). The last pieces in *Superstart* are technically a little harder than those in the essential string method – they include slurs and arpeggios, but both books only use finger pattern 1 and cover much the same ground, including opportunities for playing in two parts.

For understanding (and focusing on) the week's objectives, Cohen has four 'information boxes' covering 'musical challenges', 'technical tips', 'brain teasers' and 'fact files' which are printed at an appropriate place on the page. Similarly, a 'smiling' cartoon of a violin bridge in the Nelson book, reminds players of technical points and from time to time there are check lists of pieces and activities to be ticked off, when completed. From the language content of the songs, both methods would seem to be aimed at the 7–8 year olds upward, though the humour in *Superstart* could still appeal to an 11-year-old and Cohen, with a rather more direct approach, manages to convey a sense of challenge to pupils.

In Cohen's *Superstart* level 2, her policy of introducing new playing skills through pieces from a variety of sources – well-known tunes, dances from different countries, easy classical pieces and rounds – is continued to include 6/8 time (with slurs and separated slurs for repeated notes), new rhythm patterns (dotted quavers + a semiquaver), finger patterns 2 and 3, and the scales of C and F major, G and A major (two octaves) and A and D minor. Although the repertoire is wide ranging the mood of the pieces is energetic and cheerful, with few exceptions. The accompaniments for the classical pieces are in an appropriate style but those for London's *Burning* and the like, less conventional. Be prepared.

Nelson's *Essential String Method* book 2 also continues along the lines

laid down in her book 1. The very practical approach to playing includes such basic points as learning to count, getting ready to play, 'tuning' (positioning) the left hand, and checking the bow hold, and goes hand in hand with developing the all-important musicianship skills like rhythm reading, counting while playing, learning new solfa intervals (d'-ls, sfm, and then the whole scale), which characterise this method. Most of the and pieces are purpose-built, old favourites like *Twinkle Macdonald* and *The Cuckoo* a too, and there are several opportunities for two-part playing.

To sum up. The two methods many excellent ideas for developing techniques (word rhythm distribution, harmonics and for a comfortable stance) but their approach to teaching music. Cohen's approach is more conventional in that she uses well-known songs and pieces ('the sort you to play over and over again') as a basis for introducing musical points (usually via her teaser questions, cartoon figures, fact-files). Generally her information is well-presented, the layout is easy to understand and she has a light touch. There are plenty of lively pieces in the grades 1–2 bracket, though not the variety of mood found in four beginners' books for violin and piano by K and H Colledge and Hawkes) or the theoretical material included in *Strings in the Classroom* (Oxford University Press).

Nelson, on the other hand, takes on a broader front, teaching musicianship skills and violin technique concurrently with opportunities for creative work. She uses a variety of methods to develop the inner ear, and writes her own material, or commissions songs which can provide a logical progression of musical activities for both the instrument and the voice. For string teachers with large classes of children starting from scratch, without previous experience (and maybe, in schools without dedicated music teaching), Nelson's method has much to commend it, despite the lack of clarity in presentation and the over-extended page. Teachers will, however, need to do their own homework before embarking on this method.