

ESSENTIAL PRINCIPLES OF VIOLIN INTERPRETATION

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SUMMARY. Many people tend to consider musical tonality as a gift of nature. Of course, we cannot deny its influence; however, in the interpretation of any beginner violinist, even of the most talented ones, tonal musicality is not something that appears from the start. It perfects itself throughout a long process of development of the interpretative knowledge. During the performance of a musical piece, any musician – regardless of whether he/she is a pianist, violinist or vocal singer, uses a full and profound sound that beautifies the interpretation and gives it more musicality, more feeling, warmth and spirituality. In order to render the character of a musical piece during interpretation, it is not enough to possess only the dynamic and timbral source (though it is important, of course), but still it is necessary to find a high quality sound that would coincide with the style, character and content of that particular piece.

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The sound foundation is deeply related with the rendering of the emotional state that lasts throughout the entire piece. For example, when performing *Melancholic Serenade* de P.I. Tchaikovsky or G.F. Händel's *Aria*, different sound backgrounds persist. In *Melancholic Serenade*, the sound-related character is determined by a series of contrasting episodes, by sadness and meditation. In the second case, the sound background is rendered through profound sadness.

The sonority also depends on the nature of a composer's works. For example, if we consider J.S. Bach, then the sonority will be profound; however, the music of Mozart is characterized by a more luminous, vaporous sound that transmits warmth and energy, at the same time.

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As regards sonority in Beethoven's works, we can characterize it as being profound and full of manliness.

The sound background serves as the basis for creating the work's dynamic plan.

In the category of string instruments, the art of sonority has been well developed by the Italian, French-Belgian and Russian schools. Underlying the teaching of the best method of sonority is the systematic development of the inner hearing abilities – which is one of a musician's most valuable qualities.

We are mainly referring to that trait of the inner hearing that unveils the expressivity of a musical work's sonority, the palette of colours in which it can be interpreted. Hearing the "inner" music, imagining a certain sound anticipates its performance on the instrument and, therefore, the finding of that particular method of interpretation.

Of utmost importance in this process is teaching the little musician to have a critical attitude towards their own interpretation or, more precisely, towards every sound produced by their instrument. A lot of violin players laid a great focus on the impeccable intonation; still, they overlook other sound-related qualities that are just as important. We are referring here to those violinists that cannot think of playing off-key, but still emit a pale or forced sound. There are also other types of acoustic mistakes, such as strident, deafening and unpleasant sounds. To avoid these shortcomings which could lower the quality of the performance significantly, one must carefully listen to every note that is emitted, self-controlling oneself all through the interpretation of a cantilena, of double notes, chords or while performing various techniques. A lot of violinists laid the emphasis on sound quality only in the musical pieces. When practicing scales, studies and technical exercises, they disregard the quality of sound emission, focusing only on the technical part. The scales and exercises are performed with an *arrhythmic*, superficial sound, lacking fullness. Unfortunately, such a work approach will never be successful when it comes to developing the sound quality of the violin player.

In such cases, the teacher needs to get involved actively, correcting the mistakes as early as possible, which results in an improvement in the sound quality. In time and while perfecting the performing skills, the inner hearing and the artistic taste develop themselves and the work on the sound becomes much more profound. By hearing one's own interpretation, the violin player can ferret out and correct not just an imperfect intonation or a poor-quality sound, but also those sounds that do not correspond with the style or character of the musical piece. Hence, one acquires a much better training of the sound culture, which becomes authentic, original.

Tonal musicality

Musicality is one of the most captivating particularities of the violin sound, which largely contributes to the clarity and expressivity of the interpretation. This feature is considered as one of the most important aspects of a violinist's skills, which needs to be taught and perfected. To a violinist, the greatest accomplishment is to make the sound of their instrument resemble the timbre of the human voice. It is not just the cantilena that requires musicality, but also the violinist's technique, full of virtuosity. "The musicality of the technique" is one of the most exceptional attributes in the interpretation of the great artists. Many people tend to consider musical tonality as a gift of nature. Of course, we cannot deny its influence; however, in the interpretation of any beginner violinist, even of the most talented ones, tonal musicality is not something that appears from the start. It perfects itself throughout a long process of development of the interpretative knowledge. In time, young violinists learn the basics of sound emission. During the development and strengthening of the technical abilities – mainly in the left-hand fingers, the string vibration starts to emerge and the violin tone, along with it. From here, the perfecting of the sound quality occurs under the influence of several factors, such as the development of the sense of hearing, of the dynamic and timbral aspect of sound, the development of an emotional beginning in the interpretation, as well as of the technical skills. Of great importance is also the pupil's imitating the performance of their teacher or of great artists. The emergence of the imitational factor at a certain stage in the formation of the young musician is, in itself, an inevitable phenomenon of the teaching process. The violinists that work on a high-quality tonal musicality usually aim at reaching a good interaction between the right hand and the left hand with the purpose of making sound. The emission of the sound related to the movement of the right hand represents the acoustic material basis. It determines qualities such as the prolongation of sound, the force, character and connection between sounds and their articulation.

The movements of the left hand generate attributes like timbre, determined by vibration, which gives the sound life, warmth and soulfulness. Of major importance to the quality of sound are the perfect intonation and the power of the fingers' pressure against the string. The perfect combination and interaction between two important components such as the drawing of the bow and the vibration solves the issue of tonal musicality and expressiveness.

By influencing the sound through dynamic means and accents, by providing it with timbral qualities by means of the strings' vibration, we can render various moods, thus highlighting the originality of the musical image. Some violinists have a slightly erroneous opinion regarding vibrato, whereby it is not just a means of adornment and expressivity, which would lead to a

monotonous sound and often makes the player too emotional. In other cases, they use it too much, in order to conceal the technical shortcomings of the right-hand sound emission.

While working on phrasing in order to attain a correct interaction between the right hand and the left one, it is necessary to interrupt the vibration for a short while; at the same time, it is recommended to follow the dynamic indications provided, as well as the accents and phrasing, aiming to obtain an expressive interpretation and relying on various bowing techniques. The result of such lessons shows us that beginner violinists get a sensation of elasticity in the movements of the right hand; in the next stage, when vibrato is added to the interpretation, we will be able to notice not only an improved sound quality, but also the intensity and character of the vibration will also be defined.

Bowing Techniques

The correct apportionment of the bow across the strings represents one of the most important techniques, tightly related to means of expression like dynamic indications and phrasing. The drawing of the bow is greatly important in producing an exact sound. Any unequal acceleration of the bow motions causes a hastening of the sound, which is an interpretative error, just like the weakening of the sound, leading to a decrease in sound quality. These shortcomings are the negative consequences of an incorrect bow placement. For instance, if the violinist “saves” bow, at first, and later, striving to use the rest of the bow, draws it quickly to the end, he/she will apply tension and strain the sound, which will become amplified. Vice versa, when the violinist reaches the point of ending a stroke, he/she “chokes” because of a reckless acceleration of the bow from the beginning. Of these two mistakes, the first one is more common. According to many violinists, it is caused by the fear of “bow insufficiency”, which is unsupported, as there is always the possibility to retain the movement of the bow at the end of the stroke.

The retaining of the bow motion can also be used for the trimming of the phrase as well as for the bow change. As an example, we can use the cantilena parts from Bach’s Sonatas for solo violin. Here, the main task is to reduce the intensity of the melodic line expressively, which requires special attention when drawing the bow; more precisely, in Bach’s *Adagios*, we can often encounter wavering and very slow bow motions, which eventually create a sensation of tense interpretation. In the famous work *The School of Bowing Technique* by L. Cape, for a correct violin bowing, it is recommended to divide the length of the bow into a number of equal parts that corresponds to the number of units of measure (quarter notes, eighth notes or sixteenth notes) that results for each separate bow motion in the *legato* stroke. This task can be carried out more easily in those cases when the melodic structure,

as well as the *legato* indicated by the composer, allow us to apportion equally (*Examples 1*. The equal apportionment of the bow on half-notes and quarter notes on a 4/4 beat; 2. The equal apportionment of the bow on beats of 3/4).

The task is more difficult when, in the musical fragment, each bow motion comes with notes of different durations, in ratios of 1:2, 1:3 or 2:3 between each other. For example, in *Melancholic Serenade* and *Meditation* by P.I. Tchaikovsky, the violinist must play – on the same bow length – two eighth notes and two quarter notes. It is obvious that, when drawing the bow – on the third quarter note of the beat – the sound will increase in volume, every time. To avoid this, it is necessary to compensate the increase in bow speed – on the third quarter note of the beat – by lowering the bow pressure. The apportionment of the bow in asymmetrical phrases is even more difficult, when each separated movement of the bow comes with the most varied rhythmic patterns. The art of bow apportionment also entails the skill of using the bow parts correctly, in accordance with its attributes. We are referring to characteristics like the ease and stability at the ending segment of the bow, the snugness in passing from one string to another and in making bouncy strokes at the middle of the bow, as well as the weight and density of the bow at the bow frog. A lot of violin players find it difficult to play to the bow frog (“up bow”) and tend to avoid it. Hence, the players’ acoustic resources become minimal. Playing a cantilena in *piano* does not require a slowdown in the movement of the bow, as it usually happens. The technique of slowing down the movement and of using a small part of the bow for *piano* is justified if the fragment is played by an orchestra or by an ensemble. In solo performances, the expressivity of the melody in *piano* requires a much smoother and freer bow drawing, using the entire length of the bow. An example could be the *Violin Concerto No. 1, part I* by S. Prokofiev.

Accents

Alongside tonal musicality, the accent represents the most powerful means of expression, conferring sharpness, life and energy to the performance. The accent is that “vital vim” without which the player’s interpretation would be monotone, dim and lifeless. Undoubtedly, the art of expressive accentuation entails an advanced stage of development of the player’s skills, culture and artistic taste. The skilfulness in using accents in a correct and logical manner, giving them a certain character, in accordance with the content of the musical piece is unconceivable without mastering some actual techniques that favour the producing of the accent. Many talented violinists that conquer the audiences with performances full of life and charm use accentuation techniques simply intuitively. This enables us to examine the art of expressive accentuation as a manifestation of an entirely special gift of nature, which cannot be explained methodically.

It is obvious that the execution of the accent includes two fundamental and inseparable moments. First, there is the accent itself, meaning a more intense beginning or the attack with the bow; secondly, there is the drawing of the bow after the attack (stroke), throughout the duration of the remaining sound. The stroke – produced by applying pressure or stinging with the bow, by throwing it onto the strings or accelerating the movement – must take a short time, as compared to the entire duration of the note. The next bow drawing is characterized by a high speed of movement and by a loosened pressure on the bow. An example in this regard is the *Martelé* stroke, the simplest and most wide-spread accent in this category. The correlation – in terms of time and sound volume – between the “attack” and the next bow movement is as follows: if the general duration for the bow is of a quarter note, then this duration divides equally on the time duration, being sufficient for the attack of the beginning sound and for the subsequent time length of the remaining bow length. In this case, the first sixteenth note will have the dynamic indication of *forte* and the other three – of *piano*; this means that, by playing the accent through increased pressure, the last sixteenth must be executed right after the initial note attack. Using accents with a fast, consequent relaxation of the sound can be recommended mainly in dance music, full of grace and elegance; especially classical music. Usually, such accents are largely used in the final parts of concerts by Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Saint-Saëns, in *Gavotte* and *Bourrée* from Bach’s Partita No. 3, in *Rondo Capriccioso* by Saint-Saëns and in other musical works.

There are also other types of accents, when the sound volume after the stroke lowers so little that it is no longer a case of decrease in intensity, but of maintenance in sound volume up to the end of the accented note. Accents with a constant sound volume throughout the entire duration of the note are frequently found in works of a monumental and pathetic nature. Here are a few examples: “*Grave*” in the style of *W. F. Bach* by Fritz Kreisler, Beethoven’s *Concerto (Part 1)*, Brahms’s *Concerto (part 1)*, Glazunov’s *Concerto (part 1)*; Taneyev’s *Prelude* and *Theme & Variations* from Concert Suite and Chausson’s *Poème*, etc.

Of great importance to the quality of the accent is the string vibration, which must coincide accurately with the concomitant accent, meaning that it is produced with the attack of the note and ends with it, too. If the vibration starts after the attack of the note or ends before the completion of the accented note, the accent sounds poorly and does not produce the desired effect. A negative effect appears when the nature of vibration does not correspond with the nature of the string vibration. An exaggeratedly ample vibration or one that lacks vigour reduces the energy of the accent to a minimum. In general, we can notice that most violinists do not pay enough attention to the possibilities to execute accents correctly and especially to

the interaction between accents and string vibration, as they are not aware of how important this technique is and how much it influences the quality of interpretation.

Fade out

Fade out is a gradual decrease in sound volume down to its total disappearance and it is one of the most delicate interpretation techniques. It is usually employed in cantilenas, in trimming long-duration notes, which are marked with *fermato*. This technique is necessary almost in all the cases of trimming of phrases and motifs that are separated from the following melodic constructions by a rest or a caesura. In these cases, the player uses fade out limitedly, making use of this largely intuitive technique. Meanwhile, the capacity to reduce the bow motions to a minimum in *diminuendo* and especially the trimming of pale, inexpressive sound before rests – are the essential element in the sound-engineering culture. Using fade out when finishing a phrase in cantilenas is related to the technique of bow retention on the string. This facile technique consists of: after making a “*diminuendo*” effect, the bow is not to be lifted off the string once the rest has arrived; it remains on the string for another short while, for about a quarter-note from the note duration, thus anticipating the rest. If carried out well and with limit, then, at the next bow motion that follows after the rest, the audience will feel as if the player “takes a breath of fresh air” before starting a new phrase.

Declamation

The moments of declamation during interpretation in string instruments refer to the techniques that help players highlight the intonational expressivity of a phrase or musical motif. For this, the beginning of each note shall be slightly accentuated with the aid of the bow; hence, the pitches making up the musical phrase or the motif will not only be “sung”, but also well “pronounced”. Such a stroke combined with string vibration creates a better interpretative expressivity. It is used by F. Kreisler, M. Elman, D. Oistrakh and other great violinists. Declamation can be attained also when playing separate strokes, as well as *legato* ones. The *portato* stroke is deeply connected to the base of the declamation, but this does not mean that highlighting the notes played with the bow must always be regarded as the *portato* stroke. The accentuation of the notes in *legato* can sometimes go unnoticed, but even then it can confer the phrase a different character.

The moments of declamation undoubtedly beautify the violinist’s performance, but only if used wisely. When this technique is used all the time throughout the playing of an entire cantilena, it creates the impression of mannerism. Usually, it shows the lack of a good *legato*, meaning the playing of each note from the legato stroke - separately.

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