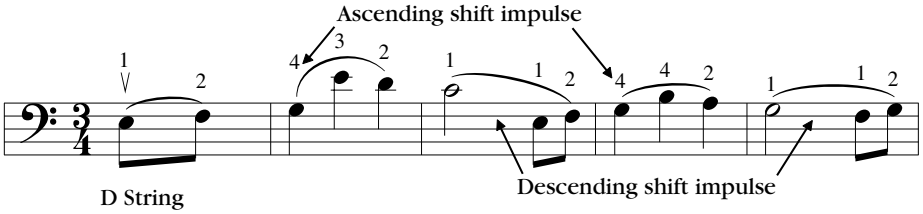
Cello

Rhythmic Technique

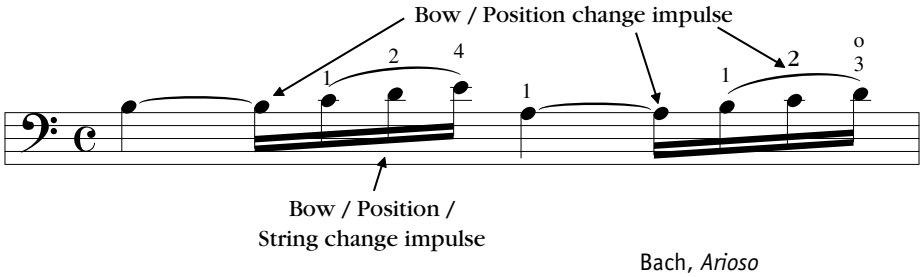
by David Carter

One often hears the phrase "he's out of his rhythm," or "she's hurrying her shots," or "the team has a good rhythm going" when sporting events are described. These references to rhythm imply (respectively) an unrhythmic action, a lack of preparation, and a series of actions linking up well. I'm sure we all have wondered why some string players look so graceful and natural while they play, and why some don't, even when they are playing accurately. I believe rhythm can be used to aid technical execution, resulting in graceful and accurate playing. Some people are more rhythmic than others, or perhaps more aware of the rhythms in their bodies and around them. I maintain that a rhythmic gesture has a greater chance of being accurate (in the case of a shift) or smooth (in the case of a bow change or string crossing). To play rhythmically one has to feel (internally) the pulse of the music, and not block that pulse out by being overly tense. (I have heard Janos Starker say many times, "You must feel the pulse in every part of your body.")

When the pulse has been established, a few simple exercises can introduce the student to the concept of rhythmic gesture. First of all, in scales (whole notes) the student plays 1 2 3 bow change, 1 2 3 bow change, 1 2 3 shift, with the "event" preparation occurring exactly on the fourth quarter. You are, in effect, giving an upbeat to the shift, bow change, etc. We all know the significance of a good upbeat! Gerhard Mantel suggests in his book *Cello Technique* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1975, page 6) that the thought of a motion sends impulses to the muscles that will be involved. Preparing for a motion rhythmically gives the motion an inherent smoothness. Imagine yourself playing tennis; you 1) see your opponent's shot sailing towards you, 2) anticipate its velocity and trajectory, 3) move to intercept the shot, and 4) plan your return while drawing back your racket. Now imagine you slip on the way to return the shot (you're on clay courts!), disrupting the rhythm. You can't draw the racket back smoothly or plan the type of return, so if the ball makes it over the net it is good luck, not good technique.



Starker, *Control Exercise for Connection of Positions*, from *An Organized Method of String Playing*



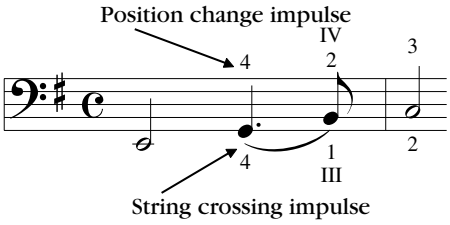
Bach, *Arioso*

Another illustration of rhythmic gesture comes from Mr. Starker's book, *An Organized Method of String Playing*. In the *Control Exercise [for] Connection of Positions*, each shift implies a quarter-note upbeat. The ascending shifts derive their upbeat from the finger going down on beat 1, while the descending shifts follow the half notes and so their upbeat comes from dividing that note in half.

Further examples from the literature show how this technique can be applied for bow changes and string crossings. For example, in Bach's *Arioso*, the third 8th note is an upbeat to the change of both bow and position; the fourth 8th note is an upbeat to bow change, position change and string crossing.

In the first measure of Brahms' *E minor Sonata*, the second half-note pulse prepares for either change of position (C string fingering) or string crossing (G string fingering).

This concept can be used flexibly,



Brahms, *Sonata in e minor*

depending on musical preferences; a given passage can be performed with different timings yet equal accuracy. For example, in the Brahms excerpt one could use the 4th quarter pulse as an upbeat to the shift. Also, it should go without saying that not all students will need such detailed and obvious examples of how to implement the idea. If the final result of rhythmic technique is smooth, accurate motion, who could ask for anything more?

David Carter is on the faculty of St. Olaf College. He is a graduate of the University of Minnesota, Indiana University, and the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana

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