



Viola

Spiccato

by Annette Caruthers

Spiccato is a stumbling block for many students, though surely not all. In an objective view of the students in my studio (around 30) I see that the ones with the most natural and comfortable position and posture are the ones who learn spiccato most easily. Care taken with position in the very beginning stages of instruction really pays off.

The bow hand should be comfortable; the thumb curved, not placed into the bow too far (not touching the fingers holding from the other side), and matched from the opposite side by the second finger. This forms a pivot-point allowing for a trade-off between first finger and fourth in balancing the bow. The fourth finger must be curved and placed on the inside edge of the top of the bow. If any part of the bow hold locks, many techniques will be difficult or impossible. The third finger is active, along with the second, in giving a slight sidewise motion to the bow when needed. This is important in spiccato. First finger mostly lies on top of the bow, somewhat curved on the outside of the bow. It helps keep the bow *on* the string in the upper half, becoming passive for spiccato, and must not grip the bow.

To begin spiccato, I first have students try *collé* — small short, sharp “bites” that require a finger action and release. If this goes well, we try making them faster, transforming to arcs as we speed up. Many students will make this transition very easily and enjoy the “miracle” they are able to perform. I have them experiment with various points along the bow to find the best place to use for each speed, and how tight to have the bow hair (tighter hair tends to bounce a bit too high for evenness). They love finding this out on their own, and remember it better if they discover it than if I tell them. I

also have them watch to see how high the bow bounces, whether or not it is always the same height (uneven heights will produce uneven spiccato), whether it works best having the bow hair flat or tilted (flat works better), and what distance from the bridge gives them the tone they want.

Some students have more difficulty. Try feeling their bow hand and arm for tension. Have them imagine holding a marshmallow or stick of butter instead of the bow and making it move. Check the balance in the bow hold — can they lift the first finger off the bow? What happens when they do? Near the frog, it should be possible to have the first finger completely off the bow, and near the tip the fourth finger can be lifted off. Can they make the bow move sideways by using their second and third fingers? Only a small movement is needed. I find the ability of the third finger to move is crucial. Practicing “spiders” moving up and down the bow using a great bow hold encourages freedom in the bow hold.

Another approach is to play on the string using short strokes on an open string, gradually increasing the speed, and watching to see when the bow seems to want to bounce. Many students are more successful with this than with the *collé* approach. Almost all will need to practice a variety of tempos and several points on the bow to become successful.

A handful of students have learned spiccato only after learning *ricochet*. The *ricochet* seems to show them how to allow the bow to bounce. I have them alternate between *ricochet* and spiccato for a while, and sense what the bow does when it bounces on its own. We do this on open strings, and when the *ricochet* seems to go well, I have them memorize the “Lone Ranger”

passage from the *William Tell Overture* by Rossini. I start the passage on the open D string, with the left hand in third position for the first fingered “G” and work it out from there. They love doing it and this adds enjoyment to the process. The passage can be adapted for varying numbers of bounces and for spiccato when they are ready.

Often students will be able to show a nice spiccato on an open string but not be able to make it work on actual music. I check their arm levels as they cross strings, and have them try the musical passage *on* the string. Many times the left hand has not learned the notes correctly yet and the bowing is fine when the left hand can keep up. If arm levels are holding the player back, I have them stop just before each string crossing, adjust their position, then go on. Or have them play a short section and stop just after the string crossing, to be sure they can get through that transition, then go on. I am constantly asking them to analyze and “feel” what is happening — the instrument tells us what is needed by the results it gives back, if we know how to listen and analyze the results.

Position and posture are key elements here, as well as the student’s active participation in sensing what the bow and their bodies are doing. An enjoyment of the process as it develops motivates the student. Good luck!

Annette Caruthers teaches viola and violin in Minneapolis and St. Louis Park. She is a former member of the Minnesota Orchestra and currently serves as principal violist with many organizations including the Minnesota Opera Orchestra and the Plymouth Music Series. †