School Orchestra

Inarticulate Orchestra? Sevcik to the Rescue!

by J. David Arnott

"We now turn our attention to the problems of the right hand, which generally cause most of the trouble for the violinist."

Galamian, Principles of Violin Playing and Teaching*, p. 44*

There is no sight more gratifying than seeing our own orchestra string section playing together in the same part of the bow thus creating identical articulations (OK, so there probably are a few more gratifying things, but this is a pedagogical exercise so work with me). As a college orchestra director, I see musicians from many different music programs and of many different levels of ability. One of the few disappointing aspects of my experience is how little bowing proficiency many students have developed by college age and how these bowing deficiencies manifest themselves in orchestral articulations. Students in my orchestra are already adults and have already developed much of the technical proficiency they will have for the rest of their lives. However, we still spend a great deal of rehearsal time on right hand dexterity, namely, the ability to flex the fingers from the large knuckle to the fingertips. As music educators, we must not wait too long to begin development of the right hand technique and dexterity. Leopold Mozart, Frederick Hahn, Carl Flesch and Ivan Galamian, among many others, have all contributed to violin pedagogy, and it is interesting to see how little some aspects of violin technique have changed in 250 years. I believe, however, it is to Otakar Sevcik, a truly master pedagogue, that we must turn for the solution.

There is very little critical literature written about Sevcik, and much of what has been written seems to appear only in Czech. Many of us are familiar with the story of how Sevcik was not a great performer or composer but he still wanted to leave a violin legacy, and so he wrote out literally thousands of exercises to help students learn and develop their violin technique. Well, it works. It is not what anyone would call "fun," and there surely are no nifty songs with silly names to help alleviate boredom, but the end result is worth the effort, especially for older students who are aware of the pedagogical value of the works.

I often employ Sevcik exercises for the express purpose of correcting bad habits. For the left hand, *Opus 1* is handy for fixing intonation as well as correcting the "finger-picker-upper" who is unable to hold more than one finger down at a time. *Opus 8* is great for the smoothing of rough, too quick, or shoddy exchange of position. The double stop exercises are quite effective as well. Of course, we must consider Sheila Nelson's warnings, "…while Sevcik's thousands of mechanical exercises reducing technique to its smallest components, have gradually found their place in modern teaching as an occasional remedy for unfocused practicing; used as a *Violin Method* they can be dangerous owing to their profusion and the lack of detailed information on how to practice them." (Nelson, p. 180) Apparently everything in moderation and know what you are doing are words by which to practice!! It is to Sevcik *Opus 3, 40 Variations* that we turn to aid in the development of orchestra articulation.

> "To teach is no haphazard, hit or miss affair; it is a science, requiring absolute adherence to set principles… The idea that any teacher will do in beginning the study of the violin is fast losing its popularity. Wrong teaching, carelessness, and inattention to detail have too often resulted in the necessity of again starting from the beginning. The pupil who has been carefully advanced along proper lines from the beginning will reach his goal more surely than the unfortunate one, who finds that, after years of toil, he must return to the starting point."
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> Hahn, *Practical Violin Study*, p. v., vii

Practical applications of Sevcik bowing technique may be found throughout orchestra literature. Let's consider Mozart *Symphony Number 40*, movement one; Beethoven *Symphony Number 1*, movement one, allegro con brio; and Schubert *Symphony Number 8*, movement one. These are works that may be played by a really good high school orchestra and certainly by a college orchestra. What will separate a good performance from a mediocre performance (other than the standard issues of intonation, rhythm, and dynamics) is the quality of the articulation in various staccato passages, whether in prominent forte passages (Mozart mm. 114-123 as passed from violins to viola and celli) or as piano accompaniment (Mozart mm. 1-12 in the viola). The extended passage of sixteenth notes found in the violins at the beginning of the first movement of the Schubert *Symphony 8* calls for a similar bowing style (mm. 9-35). The first theme of the opening allegro (first violins mm13-31) of Beethoven *Symphony 1* is another example. Each of these excerpts requires similar right hand proficiency to produce the proper articulation. If these strokes are executed with a stiff wrist and no finger action, that is the equivalent of a car without shock absorbers on a dirt road! A cursory reading of Galamian (and the accompanying exceptional photographs p. 44-50) and his discussion of "springs" clearly indicates that this technique is paramount to successful string playing.

One of the best fixes to these orchestral articulation problems comes from the first four variations. The first few exercises are easily adapted to the orchestra, either by writing out specific exercises for those non-violin sections, or by executing the exercises simply as a rhythmic exercise on a single note across the string section. It is a good opportunity for violists to play some treble clef if they are at that stage, for cellists as well. It is possible to learn the bowing for numbers 1, 3, and 4 and have the orchestra use those bowing patterns in the playing of a scale! To use this effectively in the orchestra, we must do a little creative

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work for those readers of the bass clef, and by that I mean actual bass players. Though the mechanics of cello bowing are roughly that of upper strings, the mechanics of the bass bow are not. Basses must still be able to match articulation with the rest of the string family, but the basses will have to create these articulations using different motions (especially those employing German bows).

When we consider several varieties of bow strokes for which string players must be responsible, we find that almost all of them require independent motion in the hand, wrist and fingers. Legato (smooth) requires finger and wrist motion at the ends of strokes to produce smooth bow changes. Marcato (accented, stressed, marked) requires independent pressure from the right index finger to create the initial vibration of the string. Martele (hammered), a percussive on-string stroke produced by an explosive release following heavy initial pressure, and a subsequent stop of the arm and thus the sound before a subsequent stroke, is technically possible to achieve without wrist and fingers, but it will likely sound rough. Staccato (detached or separated), depending upon the degree of separation, also requires independent motion of the fingers. (An exception is some cases of flying-up-bow staccato, which is sometimes created with a stiff arm and is more often found in Paganini *Caprices* than found in orchestral writing). Sautille (a rapid detached stroke played in the middle of the bow so that the bow bounces of its own volition) and spiccato (short, off-the-string stroke) both especially require well-developed right hand ability.

The ability to negotiate all of these bow strokes relies upon proper bow hold. Mozart and Hahn give us this advice:

> "One may, at times, hold the bow with the first or second joint of the index-finger, but the stretching out of the index finger is at all times a serious error. For in that way the hand stiffens because the nerves are taut, and the bowing becomes labored and clumsy; yea, right awkward, as it must then be performed by the whole arm." (Mozart, p. 58)

> "The fingers should be held closely together with the tip or ball of the little finger resting upon the bow, and they should remain absolutely stationary but flexible. Flexibility and elasticity are requisite for proper tone production. Keep the right hand rounded with the knuckles somewhat depressed." (Hahn, p. 15)

Carl Flesch, in his treatise *The Art of Violin Playing*, expresses his preference for the Russian style of bow hold over both the Franco-Belgian and older German style bow hold. The fact of the matter is that the required technical proficiency is possible with all three methods of holding the bow. The problems arise when students hold their bows in manners that do not resemble any of the great violin schools!

Why can't we freely move the fingers of our right hand and exhibit finger dexterity without wrist or arm motion? This motion is not a natural, innate ability but an ability, which must be developed. The process is threefold.

Begin first with finger lifts, holding the right arm in front as if it held a bow, dangling the fingers straight down in a supremely relaxed manner, and then raising them so that the top joint of the fingers becomes parallel with the top of the hand, which is parallel to the floor (for great photos—see Galamian, p. 48). Once this is mastered, direct the student to "look at her/his watch," a motion that will produce the proper angle to alter the original vertical motion of the fingers to an almost horizontal motion in relationship to the floor.

The second step in this process involves weight lifting for fingers. Just as we do not, upon entering the weight room for the first time, mount 150 pounds on each side of the bench press bar, we must begin our right hand development with less than the weight of a bow. A pencil (preferably one with words on it) works just fine for this. I like pencils with words because students are better able to see that they are not spinning the pencil as they work on this exercise, as they will not be able to spin their bow. With the right arm extended in front, and the pencil parallel to the floor, raise and lower the pencil (a vertical motion) with just the fingers to demonstrate the balance and hold required for when the bow is held. As with the finger lifts from the first step, tilt the wrist as if looking at a watch to produce a more (useful) horizontal motion. I also teach my students "rocket launches," an exercise they can do without bow or instrument. With writing implement in hand held like a bow but at the very end by the eraser, lay the right arm flat on a desk with the pencil point aimed at the ceiling, and immobilizing the right wrist with the left hand, raise the pencil as an ascending rocket. The length of the third finger joint will determine the amount of "lift" possible, but an inch off the desk should be possible (I have big hands and can raise the pencil an inch and a half) It is crucial that the fingers and the big knuckle joint do all the launching for this exercise!

The third step in this process brings the bow into play. I begin with the student holding the bow at the balance point with equal weight on either side (not the bounce point) and proceed to the first Sevcik exercise and, as strength increases, gradually work the right hand from the balance point to the frog. This is certainly a developmental process and students are encouraged to spend several short practice periods each day rather than 2 hours on Saturday!

The benefit of this will be tremendous and will be noticeable in the orchestra. So—let us not allow our students to become "labored and clumsy, yea, right awkward," but let us become vigilant pedagogues, railing against unbending, inflexible, unyielding, and stiff right sides.

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