Violin

Crucial Connections

by Sally O'Reilly

When I was a young violinist, I perceived any technical assignment (scales, arpeggios, double-stops, etudes, etc.) as something tantamount to punishment. My teacher assigned them irregularly and in a haphazard way. I never knew when I would be expected to have them prepared or if, indeed, they would ever be heard. There was never any clear connection drawn between technical assignments and the pieces I was playing. Accordingly, I didn't attribute much value to them and I didn't take them seriously.

What is ironic is that at the very same time my mother had me on a structured regimen of all those things on the piano, including Hanon and Czerny, and I loved them. And so I lived in two parallel universes — one on the violin where technical progress was, at best, catch-as-catch-can, and the other on the piano, which was organized, logical, and totally integrated in the study of the instrument.

This history of mine is the reason I have been such a stickler when it comes to utilizing all of the best technical materials available to violinists in my teaching. It was the motivating force that compelled me to write *Fiddle Magic*. I wanted the very youngest students to experience the fun and sense of accomplishment that comes from focusing on one technical issue contained in a simple, four-measure example, and conquering it. Mastering technics before they are needed in pieces facilitates and accelerates the learning process in solo repertoire.

Josef Gingold was always quick to draw a parallel between technics presented by Kreutzer, Rode, Dont, and others, with passages in major literature. He knew that a student who had to tackle flying staccato in the third movement of Mendelssohn *Concerto* or Saint-Saens' *Havanaise*, without the benefit of exercises in Sevcik *Opus 2*, would be the poorer for it.

A student at *Bravo!* this summer said that his teacher had told him, regarding staccato, "You can either do it or you can't." This sort of statement really knocks the wind out of me, and frankly, it infuriates me because it places the onus totally on the student. An honest teacher would admit that he doesn't know how to teach staccato. Technics are the product of hard work, not magic.

Janos Starker told me about receiving a late-night phone call from Juilliard cello professor Harvey Shapiro asking if a student of his might play in Starker's masterclass the following day. When Starker explained that the class was full, Shapiro lamented, "Oh, I wanted you to hear this girl. She has a fabulous staccato!" Mr. Starker said to me, "Why would he think *that* would impress me? Staccato is a skill, *not* a talent!"

As teachers we can't teach talent. Talent is the gift. But it is our job and our duty to teach skills. If we don't have the knowledge to teach a certain technic, we are obligated to acquire it.

In order for my students to understand the connection between technical work and the pieces they play or hope to play, I encourage them to listen to recordings of works that contain technics addressed in their etudes.

Here are a few examples:

Bariolage — Viotti *Concerto in G*; Bach *E Major Prelude* and *Chaconne*
Left Hand Pizzicato — Ravel *Tzigane*; Paganini *24th Caprice*
Fingered Octaves and Staccato — Wieniawski *D Minor Concerto*
Thirds — Paganini *D Major Concerto*; Sarasate *Carmen Fantasy*
Octaves — Mendelssohn *Concerto*

We can all come up with our own lists of repertoire that students need to know. By associating it with their technical endeavors, students will learn to recognize the "payoffs" that result from a strong, athletic daily workout on the violin.

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