Violin Sonata No. 3 in F Major by G. F. Handel

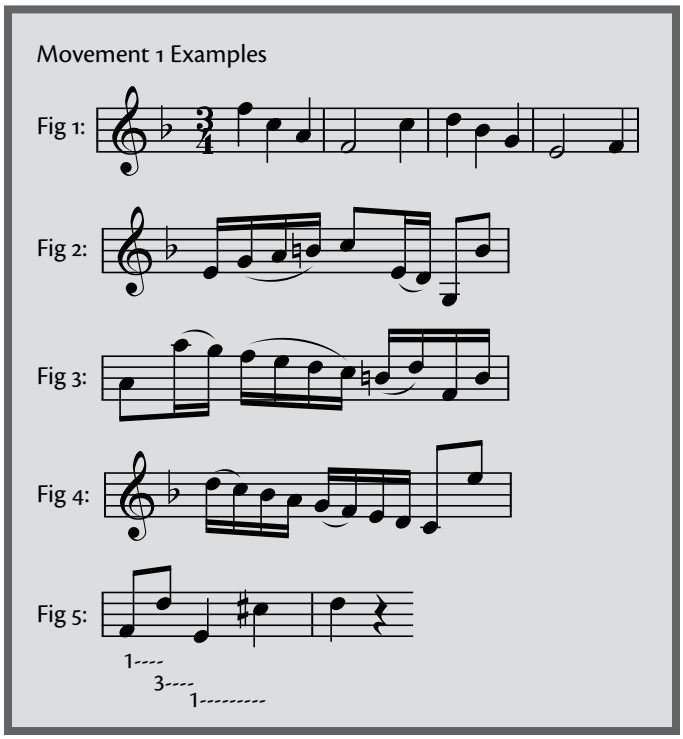
A Technical Approach

by Tasha Clearman

The violin sonatas by G. F. Handel are foundational compositions in the violin repertoire. They play an integral part in the training of many fine violinists, and yet, they can also hold their own on any recital program given by the best performers. These sonatas were composed with a brilliancy that has allowed them to remain in the standard literature for nearly three centuries, and will keep them there for years to come. This article will investigate the first three movements of Sonata No. 3 in F Major from a pedagogical standpoint, and will discuss how it could be broken down into sections for the purposes of practice.

Movement 1

Beautiful sound is the most prominent component that must be mastered in the first movement. The sound must be free and resonant with a solid core, despite the slow tempo. This sound is best achieved by using whole bows with seamless changes of direction. The bow speed should remain consistent throughout the bow, and the right hand should transition smoothly between the frog and the tip. A little more weight will be needed as the bow gets closer to the tip to maintain the sound quality, but the speed can remain consistent. A good preparatory study is to practice a scale with unequal beat divisions, while still using a whole bow on each note, so that the sound quality does not change when the bow speed increases. For example, play a scale with a quarter-note on the down-bow and a dotted half-note on the up-bow, while using a whole bow on each note. The goal is for both notes to sound equal in volume, so a lighter bow pressure would be necessary on the quarter-note. Other rhythmic variations could be designed to provide equal practice on both up-bows and down-bows. Practice each exercise with a metronome to achieve the greatest benefit. This bow technique is applicable throughout the first movement.



In Figs. 1 (mm 1*) and 2 (mm 7), equal amounts of bow must be used on notes of unequal length. The first beat of Fig. 2 is especially problematic because the first sixteenth-note must travel the same distance as the following three sixteenth-notes combined. The bow pressure must compensate so that lighter weight accompanies the faster bow speed, and so that the faster speed does not suddenly create an increase in volume. In other instances, the bow pressure should change somewhat throughout the phrase to create shaping and provide musical direction.

For string crossings, the right arm should anticipate the upcoming string change by starting to move toward the next string on the note before the string change. This movement minimizes the amount of motion needed, and creates the smoothest crossing possible, so that the musical line is least disturbed. In instances such as the final beat of Fig. 3 (mm 6), the wrist can rise up to reach a single note on a lower string, and then immediately return to the original string to articulate the most efficient string change. Other times, a greater degree of arm motion is necessary, as in the last beat of Fig. 4 (mm 17), where three strings must be crossed without sounding the string in the middle. In this case, the elbow begins to arc downwards on the lowest note, and then the wrist follows through during the bow change. By having already taken care of the large muscle movement, only the small muscle movement must take place during the bow change. This procedure creates the best environment for a silent string change.

The first movement is also excellent for vibrato study. The slow tempo provides a good opportunity to work on continuous vibrato. Since these sonatas were written in the early eighteenth century, an extremely wide vibrato should usually be avoided, although a gentler vibrato can be used to warm the notes, so long as the purity of the sound is not clouded. String crossings can cause trouble for the continuity of the vibrato, since the left hand may unintentionally anticipate the upcoming movement in the right hand. This problem may be alleviated by holding the previous finger down until the next note is played as demonstrated in Fig. 5 (mm 34).

Shifting can cause complications with regard to vibrato. While a good fingering should eliminate unnecessary shifts, some shifting is inevitable, when tone color and shaping are taken into account. However, shifting should not cause gaps in the vibrato. Anticipating a shift might cause the left hand to stop vibrating before the previous note has concluded, and uncertainty of the shift may prevent vibrato from starting at the beginning of the next note. First, the shifts themselves must be well planned and accurate. The performer must know what the starting position is, what the new position will be, and how they will get there. This procedure must be practiced so that the performer can be in mental control of every shift, especially during performance. Once the shifts have been practiced so that they are solid, then the focus can return to vibrato. The left hand must continue to vibrate until the very end of the note before the

* G. F. Handel, Seven Sonatas for Violin and Basso continuo, ed. Karl Rohrig (Munchen: G. Henle Verlag, 1999). All examples are taken from this edition unless otherwise noted.

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shift, and begin immediately once it has arrived on the note after the shift. Choosing smaller shifts, which travel shorter distances and consequently take less time, will facilitate the development of continuous vibrato. The vibrato itself should be subdued so that it matches the character and dynamics of the movement. Since the piece is slow and not especially animated, a slower and narrower vibrato is appropriate. The most effective vibrato for this character will originate in the wrist.

Movement 2

The second movement is a complete contrast to the first movement, musically as well as technically, because of its faster tempo. The first difficulty to overcome is the first note (Fig 6). It is tempting to start this pick-up too high in the bow, in which case it will most likely be too long and out of tempo with the rest of the movement. It is best to begin with the bow slightly above the middle of the bow, so that the pick-up note carries the bow just slightly below the middle. This placement will allow the sixteenth-notes to be played in the middle of the bow, where they can be played most fluently.

The sixteenth-notes themselves are problematic, since they demand proficient finger dexterity. In many instances, these passages can be facilitated by leaving key fingers down to act as "anchor fingers." (Fig. 7 mm 1–2 and Fig. 8 mm 13–14.) In both instances, one finger can be left down to prevent extraneous finger motion. This will make the passagework easier as well as faster.

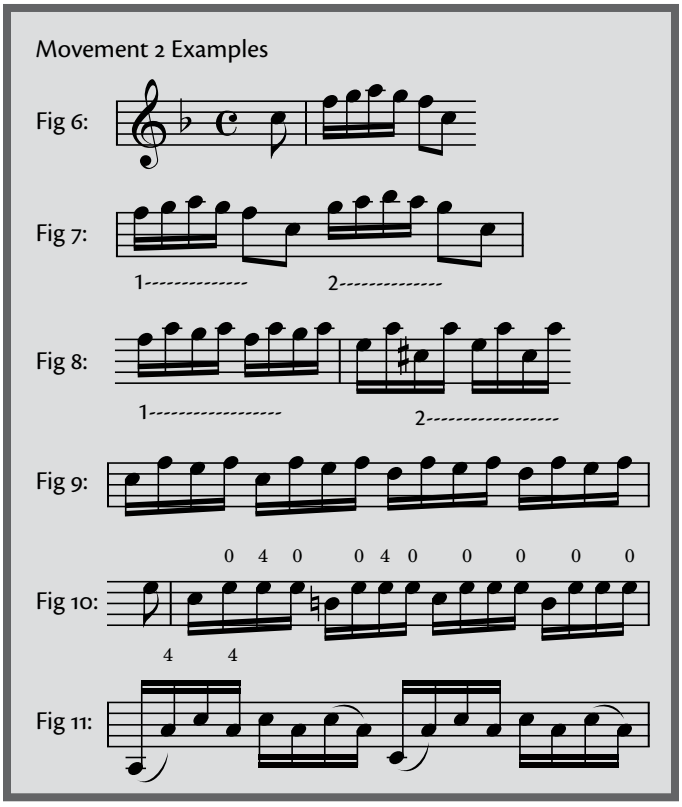
For articulation throughout the movement, the eighth-notes should use more bow than the sixteenth-notes, so that the sound can be full and resonant. The eighth-notes should receive less bow pressure, since the bow travels faster, whereas the sixteenth-notes should be compact, with a more focused bow pressure. The bow should not come to a full stop on the eighth-notes, but should be articulated with a release of pressure, so that the notes will have the impression of being short without being clipped or pressed.

The trickiest technique of this movement involves the repeated string crossings in the second section. In Fig. 9 (mm 9), the elbow should move to the E string position on the second note and stay there, while the wrist reaches up to the A string for the first sixteenth-note in each group. In Fig. 10 (mm 21), the elbow should be centered between the A and E strings, as if playing double stops. The wrist should oscillate between the two, so that only one string is ever heard. This passage will be most easily articulated in the upper half of the bow. A good preliminary practice technique is to practice this passage, as well as the similar passage two bars later, as if they were double stops, in which the notes are played together in groups of two. This will solidify intonation accuracy as well. It would also be helpful to study Kreutzer No. 13 to work on string crossings. (Fig. 11 mm 83.) In this etude, the slurs ensure that the string crossings occur in the upper part of the bow, which is excellent.

Despite the quick tempo, vibrato should still be developed in this movement. Even the sixteenth-notes can be embellished with the addition of vibrato. The best way to work on vibrato, in this movement, is to practice very slowly, while vibrating on every note. Vibrato should be maintained, as the tempo gradually increases, so that when performance tempo is achieved, the left hand is conditioned to vibrate on every note.

Movement 3

The third movement is the slowest movement in this sonata, and the foremost difficulty is to produce a full, resonant sound despite the slow bow speed. The opening measure is one of the most difficult, and many different bowings have been devised to combat the difficulty of the long slurs in the largo tempo. In Suzuki Book



6, (Fig. 12 mm 1**), the problem of slow, sustained bow speed is somewhat eliminated by taking more bows. This bowing makes it easier to achieve a solid tone quality, but the greater number of bow changes demand that the player be able to perform them smoothly and silently. In Fig. 13 (mm 1), from the Henle edition, incorporates one less bow change, but it requires better bow control, since the tone must be sustained with less bow speed. Other bowings have been developed, but the choice must be made between more bow changes or the sustainability of the sound.

Musical interpretations should ultimately influence the choice of bowing. Fig. 14 (mm 1***), the Carl Fischer edition, suggests bowings with different beat durations to allow extra bow on the two notes at the top of the phrase. Throughout this movement, the Carl Fischer edition crafts the bowings to highlight the dynamics and musical line by using more bow changes during the peaks of phrases, while the Henle edition tends to prefer more equal bow divisions. In Fig. 15 (mm 3 ***), from the Carl Fischer edition, a separate bow is taken on the first eighth-note in each group to ensure that it receives the musical emphasis, while in Fig. 16 (mm 3), from the Henle edition, the emphasis is indicated without a bow change. In the latter case, a faster bow speed, with more pressure on the first eighth-note and less on the next three, creates a similar emphasis. Regardless of the bowing choice, unequal bow distribution is practically inevitable, and the performer must practice this movement using a wide variety of bow speeds to shape the phrases beautifully.

Unlike the opening of the first movement, where bow speed often remains fairly constant, the third movement requires frequent use of unequal bow speeds to bring out the musical line. In the Carl Fischer bowing, the bow must travel the same distance on the first eighth-note as it does on the next three eighth-notes combined. This may cause the first eighth-note to be overplayed and may be

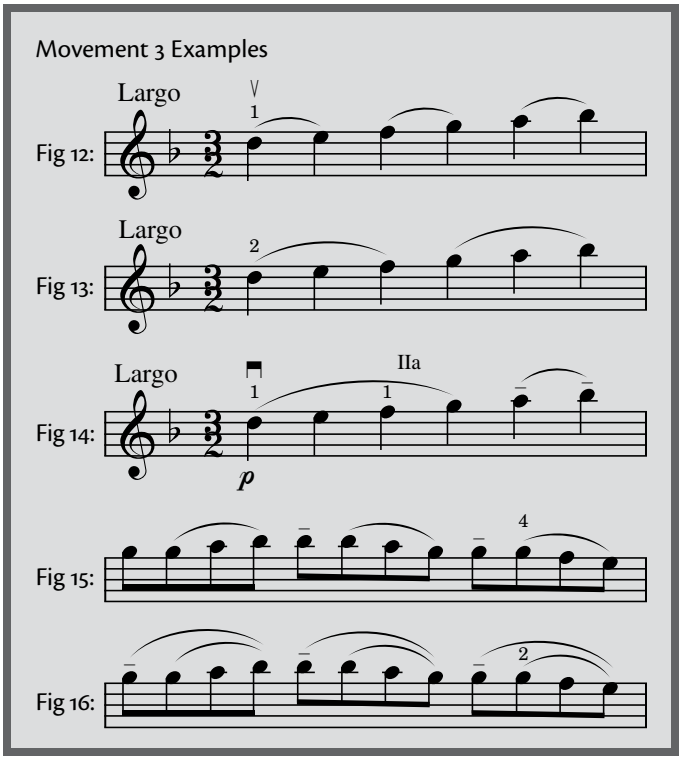
more difficult to perform convincingly than the Henle edition, even with the longer slurs. Whereas the Carl Fischer edition employs different bow speeds because of the unequal bowings, the Henle edition uses different bow speeds to bring out the musically prominent notes within a single bow. Both could work, although the Carl Fischer edition tends to be much more obvious, and may elicit a more Romantic interpretation than would have been authentic to the time period in which the piece was written.

This movement also provides an excellent chance to explore variations in contact point. Since bow distribution and speed must be controlled so carefully due to the slow tempo, there is not a lot of room to exaggerate these aspects to create dynamic contrast. Consequently, variations in contact point become a crucial aid. On long slurs where a crescendo is desired, the bow should gradually move closer to the bridge to increase the dynamic. For a decrescendo, the opposite should be employed. Bow pressure can also be used, but at this tempo, the sound can easily begin to sound forced, if the pressure becomes too strong for the bow speed. If bow pressure is combined with contact point, a wide array of dynamics is easily accessible.

Vibrato should be used to shape the phrases as well. Softer dynamics should be complemented by a narrower vibrato. The vibrato can then become wider and narrower in proportion to the dynamics. The performer should strive to attain a continuous vibrato that sounds the same from finger to finger. One way to develop continuous vibrato is to practice a scale slowly, while vibrating on every note. In order to teach the fingers to vibrate consistently even when changing fingers, in is helpful to leave the previous finger down while continuing to vibrate with it, until the next finger has landed and is vibrating on its own. Then the previous finger can be released. This can be done with a descending scale as well, if the new finger is set and vibrating below the old finger before the old finger is released. This teaches the left hand to keep vibrating even though the fingers are changing.

The shifts in this slow movement should receive consideration. The left hand should not move too fast while shifting, but should move at a speed that coordinates with the speed of the piece. If the hand movement is too fast, the speed of the shift will disturb the visual image that should accompany the largo character of this movement. That said, the slower shifts should still be articulated silently, since expressive shifting should be reserved for works in the Romantic Era.

The first Kreutzer Study is a good preparation for this movement. The long slurs are excellent practice for bow control and sustained tone, while the passages with faster moving notes can provide practice with continuous vibrato. There are many opportunities to practice slow, smooth shifting.



Tasha Clearman been teaching privately for about seven years and recently finished her degree at the University of Minnesota, studying with Sally O'Reilly. This article is part of her thesis on the technical breakdown of several Handel Violin Sonatas.

**G. F. Handel, Sonata No. 3, ed. Shinichi Suzuki, (Miami, FL: Summy-Birchard Inc, 1978).

*** G. F. Handel, Six Sonatas for Violin and Piano, ed. Leopold Auer (New York: Carl Fischer, 1919).