Violin

Advanced Technics for Young Players

by Sally O'Reilly

When I was a young faculty member at Manhattan School of Music, I had many gifted students at the preparatory level. I was determined to give them the solid, thorough technical foundation I missed during my early training. I set out to utilize Maia Bang, Wohlfahrt, Sevcik, and Hrimaly, maximizing the benefits of their early application.

The results were dependable and encouraging. I was producing problem-free young violinists who had a clear grasp of fundamentals and could put them to good use as needed. The great pedagogues of the 19th and 20th centuries left us a wealth of technical material for the purpose of advancing a high level of string playing. From Flesch to Galamian, from Popper to Starker, extraordinary instrumental thinkers have taken pains to set down with methodical precision their ideas for building strong, healthy string players.

However, over time, as my students progressed to more advanced level solos, I discovered that something was missing from this otherwise idyllic technical landscape. For example, Seitz *Concerto No. 2 in D Major* brings us face to face with up-bow staccato in the coda of the first movement, and this piece is still in first position! An examination of Wohlfahrt's first book of etudes reveals nothing that addresses preparatory staccato. In Dancla's *Air Varie in G*, we encounter harmonics, three note chords, left hand pizzicato, and ricochet. Here are four more special technics for which the standard etude books provide no remedies. I reasoned that if these technics are required in early repertoire, there ought to be preparatory exercises to develop these abilities before the student encounters them in a more demanding musical context.

This realization compelled me to begin writing studies for my own students that laid the groundwork for virtuoso technic in the earliest stages of study. I made the exercises never more than 8 measures long because experience had taught me that a concept can be grasped as easily in 4 measures as in 64. With children, concentration is always an issue, so brevity and focus are natural partners. Students thrive on material that permits them to feel a real sense of accomplishment in a short period of time. After a few years of problem solving for my students and brainstorming with my colleagues, I wrote the book of etudes that Kjos now publishes, *Fiddle Magic*.

As I take my young students through their steady diet of etudes, I encourage them to identify examples of special technics for inclusion in a daily routine of maintenance. The wonderful Polish pedagogue Tadeusz Wronski once said to me, "Just think — if every day a person practiced one minute each of pizzicato and left hand pizzicato, harmonics and harmonic double-stops, ricochet, up-bow and down-bow staccato, and all the other special tricks that frighten us when we have to play them in pieces, at the end of a year he would have practiced each technic more than six hours! But if you wait to deal with a technic when piece requires it, six hours of practice won't save you."

The philosophy is a simple one. Let young string students have fun discovering the wonderful acrobatics a bow can do and the exotic sounds their instruments can make before they become inhibited. Students who are encouraged to experiment are more likely to develop facility than students who are limited to the narrow confines of existing methods. When students master special technics in a non-musical context, their response to the technic when encountered in a musical context is one of recognition, familiarity and comfort.

Using the technic grid at the beginning of *Fiddle Magic*, let's examine some examples of basic exercises which develop a progressive foundation for a few of the advanced technics mentioned earlier.

Pizzicato can be found in much of the solo and orchestral literature written for young musicians. All too often it can be wimpy and unprojected or overplayed and metallic in quality. We should emphasize the importance of plucking the string with the fleshy pad of the index finger, taking care to avoid contact between the string and fingernail. For best results, students must be instructed to keep their fingernails short.

In the second exercise, which demands greater speed, students can learn to play pizzicato without bracing the hand with the thumb against the fingerboard. The best results are achieved by bracing the first joint of the index finger with the thumb and using a vertical, pecking motion. This allows the student to play the kind of rapid pizzicato that is found in the *Scherzo* of Tchaikovsky's *Symphony No. 4*.

Although **left hand pizzicato** appears less frequently in orchestral literature, it is a standard virtuosic device in violin solo repertoire. Works such as the Paganini *24th Caprice*, Bazzini's *Rond des Lutins*, and Ravel's *Tzigane* utilize this technic to great dramatic effect. A good introductory exercise should begin with 4th finger pizzicato on all strings and should continue with the other fingers. First and second fingers will be best executed initially by placing the left hand in third position. To strengthen the fingers, each finger should be placed audibly on the E string. Then the fingers (beginning with the 4th finger) should be pulled with a downward motion to sound the note of the finger below. This can be repeated on lower strings, but the plucking motion must be modified to avoid plucking additional strings. Once the left hand is strong enough to produce a big sound in the pizzicato sequence, the bow may be added to initiate the sequence. The bow should approach the string at the tip with flat hair. A quickly bounced up-bow will produce a sound similar to the subsequent pizzicatos.

Sustaining a pitch with the bow while playing an **accompanimental pizzicato** figure with the left hand requires development of coordination and independence. In order for a student to feel comfortable in passages that use this technic, I recommend these exercises. First the bow sustains an open upper string and the left hand plays a lower open string pizzicato with the 4th finger. At the next level of difficulty, the right arm sustains two lower open strings while the left hand fingers a pitch with

Originally published in MNSOTA's *String Notes* — Spring 2007 (Vol. 9, No. 3)

the 1st finger on an upper string and plays it pizzicato with the 4th finger. The final exercise employs a bowed double-stop on upper strings with first finger playing the top note. The 4th finger plays a single open string pizzicato. This can be modified so that only the F♯ is bowed and the A and D strings are plucked together with 4th finger.

Students love **ricochet** bowings. A good ricochet is easy to achieve because the bow is concave and resists adhering to the string. To begin, students should allow the bow to fall freely onto the string in the middle using totally flat hair. At the same time the bow should be drawn slowly to the tip. This results in a large number of ricochets. Students should repeat the study on all strings, noting the different response of the bow with each string level. Be sure that the student lifts the 4th finger from the bow, allowing the bow to drop onto the string, and then replaces the 4th finger on the up-bow to regain control. This can be done over a period of time so that the number of bounces can increase from two to three, etc., and young players can become sensitive to their bows' responses. It may be wise to review "pinky" exercises at this point because a controlled ricochet is totally dependent on a strong, flexible 4th finger.

To limit the number of ricochets, I recommend 2 short down-bows. When control is achieved, add a short up-bow after the down-bows. Practice this 3-note pattern on all strings. Follow the same process with a triplet, adding an up-bow when the triplet is under control.

Marcato (bite-release) is the parent stroke of staccato. Be sure to stress that the bite or preparation of the next note occurs at the end of the release. Once this stroke is mastered, **staccato** can be introduced in small increments. This exercise should be played in the upper half of the bow. The right elbow should be slightly elevated to maintain leverage on the string. Stress the concept that the first staccato must be prepared with a good bite because it is the prototype for all the other staccatos in the up-bow series. These strokes are not scoops into the string. Rather they are quick releases of pressure on the string. Practice on all strings. Once mastered, this bowing can be used in a myriad of elementary and intermediate works.

My early experiences with teaching **harmonics** were baffling. I found that students had difficulty placing their fingers lightly on the strings. They were accustomed to placing their fingers firmly for clear articulation, so the delicacy of touch necessary to produce clear harmonics eluded many of them. I wrote an exercise to address this problem and it has always worked beautifully. It allows the student to place the finger firmly on the string first and release the pressure to the surface of the string until the harmonic sounds. Once this is accomplished, the student may proceed to the next exercise in which the finger is simply placed lightly on the harmonic node. At this point the student has much more control over the amount of finger contact required to produce a clear harmonic.

Bariolage (arpeggiated chord) is very common throughout both solo and orchestral literature. It requires total freedom of right arm movement. The bow crosses three or four strings on one uninterrupted bow and frequently continues for many measures. I chose to introduce bariolage in an easy exercise on three strings. Emphasis should be placed on smooth, un-notched string crossings. The tempo should be increased gradually for brilliance. The same technic can then be applied on four strings. The student should feel the right hand moving up and down in a crescent-like motion.

The next step in the utilization of bariolage is **sautille**, which is required in many works including both Mendelssohn and Sibelius concerti. The hair should be flat, the bow on the string above the middle, and both down and up bows should be accented. The result will be a bouncing bow.

Chords can be one of the most dramatic and powerful technical devices string players use, or they can sound like a beaver chewing on the violin. We must learn to use the proper combination of vertical and horizontal in order to produce resonant chords. Students can perfect their production of ringing chords by starting with the most basic exercise in which the student approaches one string from the air and then plays two strings from the same angle. This develops awareness of string levels. Next, a calisthenics-like exercise teaches students to pull right arm weight freely across strings to produce maximum volume of singing tone by playing a lower string and adding the upper string. A slightly more advanced exercise uses double stops on three strings by playing two lower strings (G and D) on a down-bow and transferring the arm weight to two upper strings (D and A) and back again on an up-bow.

Preparatory **four-note chords** should be practiced using whole down-bows. Allot no more than ⅓ of the down-bow to the lower two strings, leaving ⅔ of the bow for the upper strings. I have students stop the bow when they make contact with the upper two strings to see how much bow they really have saved for the most important part of most chords. After mastering the right arm motion, left hand notes can be added.

Unbroken **three-note chords** can sound crude and forced if the right hand is inflexible. It is helpful to have the student place the bow on the A string at the frog, near the fingerboard, with flat hair. The full weight of the arm should be in the string. The student will be able to see that the bow hair conforms to the curvature of the D-A-E string combination. There must be no pressure between the thumb and second finger of the right hand. With a completely relaxed hand and arm, draw the bow quickly in a straight down-bow, releasing the weight. A ringing three-note chord will result. Now the student can apply this principle in the Dancla *Air in G* and later in the Bruch *Concerto*.

I firmly believe that all of these technics can be mastered at an early stage of musical and instrumental development so that they become "old friends" rather than dreaded obstacles. We need to demystify string technic by creating basic exercises that solve problems and eliminate the necessity for technical "quantum leaps."

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