Clinic: Exploring Advanced Techniques in Lower Positions

presented by Sally O'Reilly
reported by Faith Farr

Sally O'Reilly is professor of violin at the University of Minnesota and a composer of technical studies for strings. Her teaching materials are published by Kjos. Her presentation at the MNSOTA Clinic was based on her Fiddle Magic *book. Sally's 12-year-old student Li Cheng demonstrated the techniques and finished with a performance of the Dancla* Air Varie Op. 89 #5, *which included long bows with LH pizz on the open string, harmonics, ricochet and chords.*

Sally O'Reilly explained that she first began writing technical etudes when she was teaching at the Manhattan School. Colleagues realized that she had a knack for solving problems, and often Sally's solutions were sketched on a napkin. When she realized she had quite a collection, she put them into a book, first published as *String Power*, and now available as *Fiddle Magic*.

Fiddle Magic provides bow techniques that link into Sevcik *Op. 2*. *Op 2 #3* is about string crossings—getting rid of ghosts. *Op. 8* is the shifting book; the notes are so easy that is of no value unless you do it perfectly.

Sally emphasized the importance of giving students a structure for their technique—you can't learn everything from pieces. Flesch will develop fingered octaves; the first page of the Wieniawski concerto will not. If students have done the advanced techniques in an easy way, even if it is rudimentary, they won't be in a panic when they encounter the technique in a piece. If students attack a technique such as staccato early, then their attempts at Paganini *E Minor* won't be musically disappointing.

For pizzicato, use the fleshy part of the index finger for greater resonance. You don't want the percussiveness of the fingernail. Anchor the thumb, but not at the end of the fingerboard; the best sound comes when the pizz finger is near the middle of the string. For normal speed pizz, use the "trigger" technique of the finger; for fast pizz, use the "woodpecker" technique. For slow pizz rolled chords, anchor your finger on the side of the fingerboard and strum with your thumb on a diagonal away from you.

To prepare for 4-note chords, practice open string double stops: 1/3 of the bow for G and D rolling to 2/3 of the bow for A and E. To avoid crunching the A and E, position your arm weight on the upper strings first, then reach over to the G and D. Use gravity because it's free; no muscles; be lazy. The great players are great because of what they don't do—nothing is extraneous; only the minimal effort for the effect needed.

Learn solid 3-note chords with an easy DM chord: open D – open A – 1 on the E string. Set the bow firmly on the A string (the middle string of the chord); set the bow at the frog and draw the bow quite fast. You must start at the frog and hang the arm weight. If you start at the balance point, you will have to mash the string. Instead, start at the frog and hang the arm weight. It must not sound like a beaver chewing on the violin! A 3-note chord must not be too near the bridge; the string is more flexible near the fingerboard.

Prepare for the bariolage at the end of the Mendelssohn Concerto with simple slurs across 4 open strings, starting both up bow and down bow. Pull and push the right arm weight across the strings with a smooth bow. Practice triplets on a 3-string chord; speed up to eighth notes on a 4-string chord. As your speed increases, if you use flat hair and accent the beginning of the down and up bows, you will be bouncing if you bow stick will do it.

Martele is the foundation for staccato. Bite–release; like a hard consonant; use lots of bow and spit the sound.

The earliest up bow staccato can be practiced on a scale in the upper half of the bow: half note legato down bow and 2 quarters staccato up bow. Make sure both up bows match; if you bite the first one, the other is likely to bite. Staccato is release, not addition, of weight; the weight is already in the string; the hand releases quickly and immediately sets again. Gradually add speed and more notes to the up bow staccato.

Advanced up bow staccato is on the out-side of the hair with the wood away from you. Gingold would lift fingers 2 and 4 off the stick and drive with finger 3. Staccato works best in the upper part of the bow. If it stops in the lower part, it's because the weight came out—be brave enough to keep the weight in. Down bow staccato is on the inside of the hair, with the wood toward you. Keep your wrist low, with the heel of the hand towards the floor. Down bow staccato works best in the lower half of the bow; keep the weight in to continue to the upper part of the bow. Staccato is a skill like vibrato—anyone can develop it. But even if it comes easily at first, don't stop developing it!

For ricochet, drop your bow onto the string, and draw it down bow slowly for many bounces. If you hit the first note and let the bow do what it wants to do, it will bounce. To gain control, practice two bounces then an up bow lift off the string. Then three bounces and a lift. The best spot is above the balance point.

Artificial harmonics help develop left hand technique. Start with a stopped note, then release the full finger weight to achieve the harmonic. This teaches the finger how firm or light it needs to be. Artificial harmonics must be precisely in tune; fingers must be helicopters not gliders. Work on pitch is done above the string!

Learn left hand pizz by practicing all open strings with all fingers. Use 1st position for fingers 4 and 3; use 3rd position for fingers 2 and 1 because of the string height. LH pizz should sound without hitting the other strings. Learn more advanced LH pizz by silently setting fingers 1, 2, 3, 4, then LH pizz the sounds of 3, 2, 1, 0. For LH pizz on lower strings, you must have a high left hand to be over, then under. For an open string, go up.

Faith Farr is an active free-lance cellist and a founding member of the Minnesota Sinfonia. With Brian Wicklund, she co-authored American Fiddle Method for Cello *and* American Fiddle Method for Viola, *published by Mel Bay.* ❧