Cello

Bouncing Around Thoughts on Spiccato and Sautillé

by David Holmes

In May, at the Suzuki national conference, I was fortunate enough to be involved in a panel with several other cello teachers who presented on spiccato and sautillé. I thought I would share some ideas from my presentation and from some of the other distinguished teachers, who included Carey Cheney from Utah, Susan Gagnon from Ontario and Alisia Randisi-Hooker from Tennessee.

It was helpful to be knocked out of my comfort zone on the topic of teaching spiccato and sautillé as I prepared for the presentation. My ideas on this topic crystallized as I delved more deeply into the bouncing bow strokes during my own practice and in my students' cello lessons. First, though, some definitions:

1. Spiccato is the active bouncing (lifting and dropping) of the bow and involves tempi from slow to medium fast. Spiccato can be started from near the frog to the middle of the bow, depending on the musical demands, but it most often originates from the balance point. Spiccato is very common in music of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven.
2. Sautillé is a very fast bow stroke that involves keeping the hair on the string while the arm initiates tiny rebound bow strokes that sound—but are not truly—bouncy. Sautillé is initiated from around the middle of the bow to slightly past the middle. It is used mostly for virtuoso showpieces, like the Van Goens *Scherzo*, the *Elfentanz* of Popper, and the Elgar *Concerto* second movement.

Introducing the bouncing bow to students using ricochet

The first off-the-string activity that I like to have students do is one that Christopher Bunting mentions in his book *Essay on the Craft of Cello Playing*, which is the ricochet. These can be called "dribbles" or the "skipping stone." First, the student throws a down-bow on the string from the middle, finding the best spot for the bow to ricochet successfully toward the tip. Ricochet is instinctive to us as teachers but can be confounding to young students. Experimentation is encouraged to find the parameters that create a successful ricochet. As students learn more control and refinement they can try up-bow ricochets, and try controlling the number of bounces in a ricochet stroke. Compare tilted bow hair ricochet with flat bow hair ricochet. Notice how much bouncier flat hair is than tilted hair. With ricochet, as with all bouncy strokes, flexible fingers and a "teeter-totter" feel between the fulcrum thumb and the front and back of the bow hand are worth exploring.

Speaking of the back of the bow hand, as I prepared for my presentation, one concept that kept recurring to me is how important it is for fingers 3 and 4 to be actively involved in spiccato and sautillé. Playing with a bow hold utilizing only fingers 1, 3 and thumb can help achieve balance in a bow hand that otherwise wants to creep up the bow, leaving the thumb in cahoots with the 3rd—or even worse—the 4th finger. This 1, 3, thumb bow hold can solve many bow hand imbalances and affect the ease of arm movement, too.

Steps to spiccato

As for teaching spiccato, I was inspired a number of years ago by a video I saw of Suzuki himself teaching spiccato to some violin teachers. He did a number of up-bow and down-bow circles, gradually shaping those into a spiccato stroke. Sometimes the circles were larger, and sometimes they were smaller. Gradually the circles evolve into the back and forth arm motion of a spiccato. I happily adapted his ideas for cello and have found it very useful. I like the experimental nature of Suzuki's approach, as the student explores the natural bounce of the bow at the balance point with circle bows. Students learn that spiccato involves the whole arm and that the shoulder hinge opens and closes on spiccato.

As skill increases, a student can delve into the various spiccato "shapes" available to a cello player and how they sound different. For instance, there is the more arc or smile-shaped brush stroke, where the bow stays close to the string and the arm motions are larger: ⌣. These spiccato strokes range from rounded (like the smile shape) to more angular or v-shaped: V. This range of spiccato strokes each yields its own articulation to be used according to the musical demands of a given piece. The possibilities are endless, really.

Another approach to spiccato

Another method of developing spiccato is to start with the bow *on the string* and initiating a crisp clear sound by lifting the bow off quickly followed by landing back on the string. So, instead of the smile shape, this spiccato has a frown shape: ⌢. This yields a crisp and easy to control spiccato that starts from the string and in a sense, bounces up and back down on each note.

Starting with simple left hand activities as a student develops some spiccato control is the way to go. Perhaps a one-octave scale with multiple bounces on each note, or—in the Suzuki books—maybe 4 spiccato notes on each note of *Twinkle*. *Perpetual Motion* with spiccato is a landmark accomplishment. Once young cellists are in orchestra and chamber music, there are many more opportunities to develop more advanced spiccato skills, especially in music from the classical period.

The road to sautillé

Scherzo in Suzuki book 3 is a gateway drug to sautillé. I introduce what I call "ribits" or what I call "BONGO" at the end of book 2. (BONGO is buy one note get one free.)

1. I ask the student to move to the middle of the bow and we work on opening the forearm, but without locking the shoulder.
2. I start with slower, bigger ribits, which involve the whole arm, and gradually, over several weeks, make the ribits smaller and smaller. *Twinkle* and *Perpetual Motion* can be utilized for this

stage.

3. I emphasize the spring action of the elbow joint, as it goes down-bow and up-bow with just one pulse of the arm.
4. I try to be vigilant about releasing tension of all sorts, including the neck, shoulders, hips, back, legs and feet.

Sautillé has been a struggle for me over the years, but through perseverance and practice I have managed to bring my sautillé from a letter grade of D- up to maybe a B+. Somehow, though, I got through three music degrees in cello performance without ever really working on sautillé. Leading up to my presentation, I asked some Minnesota cello teachers for their ideas on sautillé. One of them said to me, and I quote, "Sautillé sucks," and at some level I had a hard time disagreeing with her. So, I asked the audience in attendance during the presentation:

1. How many of you feel that sautillé has been a struggle for you as a player? Of the perhaps 200 people in attendance most raised their hands.
2. How many of you feel you were taught well how to do sautillé? In answer to this question only about 5 people raised their hands.

What I got from their answers is that sautillé is a misunderstood and under developed bow skill in general.

More on balance in the bow hand

As mentioned before, the "AHA" moment for me these last few months has been the awareness of how important it is for the back of the hand (pinky and ring finger) to be involved in the balance of the bow in general and in spiccato and sautillé specifically. I have had this revelation a number of times over the years and then I forget and then I re-remember, etc. So, I suppose this "aha" moment was really an "AHAHAHA" moment for me. Anyway, the back of the hand must balance out the tendency for fingers 1, 2 and thumb to dominate. Evolution has designed this natural imbalance in our hands. With cello playing, though, there should be a democracy in the right hand, not a dictatorship. Toward this goal, I spend time on collé type finger exercises that create a more balanced hand with my students. Exercises for developing strength, control and flexibility in the bow hand are infinite. Here are some short, simple examples:

1. Pinky pushups: the bow is held horizontally in the air, and the tip is slowly lifted and lowered by using only the pinky, which is on top of the bow, like a violin player. The top of the hand should stay flat and unmoving as the pinky does its thing. Start with few repetitions and build up. The pinky is naturally a weak finger, so be careful not to over do it.
2. Collé is a complex finger activity that involves a unified lifting and dropping of the all five fingers without tension or change in the basic bow hold. I start with a pencil or a straw and carefully monitor this skill. It takes a number of weeks but is a very important skill.

Sautillé: more than one way

From my own observations, I would say this: there are a number of ways to do the sautillé stroke, which invites the question, which way do we teach to our students? I often opt to teach things the way I play or the way I feel them, but experimenting with alternative approaches can be helpful depending on the student. I have noticed at least 3 sautillé types which, as with all bow strokes, involve the whole arm but with slightly different results:

1. The loose hand clockwise circle sautillé: this type is discussed in several YouTube cello teacher videos and seems to be the most popular mode of teaching sautillé. Warmup: without the bow, throw your hand in continuous clockwise circles. The arm is still boss, the hand follows its lead.
2. The forearm sautillé: suspended elbow, this stroke is produced by the tiny "ribit" motion initiated by the forearm. It can be helpful to have the tip slightly higher than the parallel to the bridge position.
3. The slightly skewed bowstroke sautillé: this motion involves the whole arm as the upper arm, elbow and hand reach "away and back" for the ribit effect.

Happy experimenting!

David Holmes is a former faculty member at the Augsburg College Suzuki Program and has been a guest clinician at over 40 Suzuki institutes in 9 states. He has presented lectures on group class teaching and on spiccato and sautillé at the SAA national conference. David was an adjunct faculty member at St. Cloud State University for two years, where he taught cello and performed with the St. Cloud State University Piano Trio. An active performer and free lance cellist in the Twin Cities, David is cellist in the Northern Lights String Quartet, is an artist member of Thursday Musical, and has been principal cellist of the Minnetonka and Bloomington Symphonies as well as a member of the Minnesota Opera Orchestra. He teaches out of his home in St. Louis Park.