



# VIOLIN

## Making Your Violin Sing Expression in Violin and Singing—Part 3

by Katie Gustafson and Nicole Warner

In the first two installments of our series on connections between singing and violin playing, vocalist Nicole Warner and I delved into the subjects of body awareness and breathing. Both of these areas have proved highly useful to me when working with young string players, and have informed my understanding of the foundations of musical playing. In this final issue, I would like to explore how good singing can help develop an instrumentalist's musicality.

My curiosity about the natural musicality of singing was piqued long before I began taking voice lessons with Nicole. When I was in college, I played a wedding alongside a friend of mine who is an excellent soprano soloist. The family had asked for Schubert's *Ave Maria* during communion, and my friend asked me to double the melody alongside her for added color. I agreed to try it, and did my best to follow her phrasing and breaths. I was surprised by the result: I found that following her phrasing felt very different from the way I would have played it alone on violin.

Since then I have followed up with an experiment. I recorded myself playing the tune of the *Ave Maria* on violin, and then recorded myself singing the same tune. I tried to play and sing with expressiveness, but also allowed myself to do so in whatever way seemed natural to the instrument. When I played the recordings back, I noticed the difference again. In the violin recording, I found myself placing slight emphasis on beats, and supporting the emphasis with vibrato. When singing, the natural inclination was to smooth over the beats, and instead emphasize changes in the melody's contour.

My conclusion is this: because a violinist must mechanically change bow directions throughout the melody (most often on beats), the beats tend to receive more emphasis to the ear. In comparison, a vocalist is always conscious of airflow, and emphasizing beats would be a waste of valuable breath. Instead, the airflow would be steady while passing through beats, but

would increase or decrease slightly when finding different pitches. These changes in airflow cause natural crescendos and decrescendos, and a phrase shape is born.

It is, of course, possible for a violinist to create the same effect—de-emphasizing the beats and creating longer phrase shapes in the melody—but the airflow issue with the voice seems to cause those crescendos and decrescendos more automatically. It is because of this that singing melodies makes such an excellent tool for exploring phrasing and musicality. Singing the *Ave Maria* made me think about the phrasing in a different way, and might influence how I choose to interpret it the next time I am asked to play it.

Dr. Jill Dawe, associate professor of piano at Augsburg College, has come to a similar conclusion. In a recent e-mail conversation, she said, "I can say from my own experience over many years of performing and teaching I have found singing to be very helpful, even essential, to good piano playing."

She went on to say that one of her inspirations in this teaching style was none other than Frederick Chopin, referring to a title by Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger called *Chopin as Pianist and Teacher, as Seen Through the Eyes of his Pupils*. In her words, the book "highlights Chopin's conception that fine singing should be the pianist's model. Chopin, who was himself an avid opera-goer, believed his students would learn more about playing the piano from listening to singers than from anything else. The book recounts a lesson of Mme Rubio, who was told, "You must sing if you wish to play." He meant it literally; he had her take voice lessons that she might become a better pianist (p. 45).

Here is why. First, according to Dr. Dawe, "when singing, pianists must choose a tempo and rubato that fits the voice and sounds natural." With the mechanics of the instrument out of the way, the student can observe the sound of the melody on its own.

Second, "singing while playing requires a pianist to breathe at the ends of phrases.

This breathing, if musical, can help the pianist shape a phrase that mimics the natural singing phrase of the human voice, and in doing so 'make the piano sing.'" If you have followed the first two articles in this series, you may remember that we discussed many other benefits of breathing while playing. Breathing while playing improves mental focus and increases relaxation. This can help with many aspects of a student's playing beyond phrasing.

Third, "singing a melody of a work in progress can help a student really hear it, and makes sure that intervals and nuances are heard precisely/specifically." This concept of singing for ear training is a natural extension of the Suzuki method, which focuses more on listening.

Finally, "hearing how a student sings a phrase can provide a teacher with interesting insight about how the student hears music internally." When I first starting playing violin, my teacher had me work on rhythm lines in every lesson. She asked me to play the rhythm on an open string while tapping my toe and counting out loud. I once asked her why I needed to count out loud, and she replied that it was the only way she could tell what was happening in my brain while I played. If I made a mistake, she could tell by my counting why the mistake had happened. Having your student sing a phrase can give you a similar opportunity to find out what is happening in your student's brain, and help them make adjustments.

If we accept this premise, that singing will help our instrumental melodies "sing," then only one question remains: how can we put this into action? An important first step as teachers is to try it on our own. If you are a singing novice, pick out a simple melody like *All through the Night* or another easy folk tune. Intermediate singers might try *Ave Maria* or *Ashoken Farewell*. More confident singers can try something from your own violin repertoire, like a Bach Partita, or something else you are currently working on.

Once you have found a melody to try, sing through it several times, using good breathing technique. Breathe low into your diaphragm, and let your airflow support the melody as it rises and falls. Observe what phrase shapes feel most natural, and where you need to breathe. Then, try to reproduce these effects on the violin, continuing to breathe into your diaphragm as if you were singing. (Singing while playing might prove difficult, since a violinist's jaw is otherwise occupied. However, you could try humming.)

Next, try it out with your students. Start by equipping them with some good foundations for singing: sit or stand at your full height with a strong, relaxed body. Help them breathe low and slow into their diaphragm a few times before starting to sing. Next, try singing a melodious part of their repertoire together. If the student feels shy about singing, offer to let them hum it first, and offer to do so along with them.

Have your student make observations about the style of the melody. You may want to ask them about a specific aspect of the musicality, (mood, articulation, phrasing) or if you have older students, you may want to see what they notice on their own. Younger students might need a little more prompting. For example, if you want to focus on articulation, help them out by brainstorming different words that describe articulation, i.e. legato, staccato, détaché, or even smooth, choppy, flowing, marching, etc. That way, when they sing their melody, they will feel equipped with a few possible descriptors.

Once you have made observations, decide together which aspects of your singing you would like to translate to the violin. Be ready to equip them with whatever mechanics are necessary to achieve the style you are looking for (bow weight, bow distribution, bow speed, etc.).

One final thought: the human voice is

an internal part of the body. When singing, I often find that I have a deeper and more personal connection to the notes because they are coming from within me. Virtually all humans use their voices to express emotion either verbally or gutturally. Singing may well pave the way for many students to connect to their music on a more basic, intuitive level.

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