Violin

Buried Treasure: The Genius of Past Pedagogues

Part 1: Paul Rolland

by Katie Gustafson

For many years I have wanted to explore the work of history's great violin pedagogues. There is a treasure trove of useful ideas buried in the work of Flesch, Gingold, Auer, Galamian, Delay and others. Unfortunately, one does not always have the time to delve deeply into everything one might wish to. Some teachers specialize in the study of one particular pedagogue, like Suzuki or Rolland, but there are many others that we could benefit from studying. Because of this, I felt it might be helpful to do an article series that does brief summaries of different pedagogues, highlighting some of the most helpful elements of their work for readers to use. If any of them seem particularly helpful, resources to consult will be referenced at the end of each article. Paul Rolland will be my first feature; his wonderful work has been my most recent discovery.

Paul Rolland is best known for his emphasis on building violin technique through freedom of physical movement, and allowing the body parts to move interconnectedly. In his book, *The Teaching of Action in String Playing,* he describes his hypothesis that "movement training, designed to free the student from excessive tensions, can be introduced with an organized plan of string instruction, and that such a plan, in the long run, will result in faster learning and better performance in all facets of instruction." (p.1).

One of his critiques of conventional string teaching is that it "is usually limited to the isolated movements of the fingers, hands and arms, without much concern for the attitude of the body as a whole." He notes that this can lead to "static tensions" and "discomfort." (p.32). My own observation is that static tension is something that can hamper everything from nuanced bow techniques to left hand agility. It can be very challenging to eradicate once ingrained. With some understanding of kinesiology and physiology though, Rolland argues that one can build freedom of movement into a young student's technique from the very beginning.

He begins with the idea of balance. He says in his book, "The body must be lightly balanced so that all of its parts are free to move at any time." (p.41) He begins by building a balanced stance in his student, suggesting that a standing violinist should be able to shift weight easily between feet. A teacher can test their student's flexible stance by tugging gently on the student's scroll to see if the student can move easily with the pull. The teacher can extend the balance concept into the hold of the violin, making sure that the student can hold the violin with no hands, allowing the arms to swing and sway. To ensure that the balanced stance stays flexible while the student plays, the teacher can build some movement into a playing exercise. One example Rolland uses is to have students extend both arms out to the side (violin included) as though inviting a hug, and swing back into playing position, immediately proceeding to play two bows. (He uses two notes of an ascending scale, but open strings would also work). Each motion would take one beat of a slow four-beat measure. (Swing out, swing in, down bow, up bow. Swing out, swing in, down bow, up bow). Other movement additions might be having the student walk in place to the beat while playing a simple tune, or having a student stomp their feet on rest beats.

Rolland also makes note of how movement in the torso and upper body can interact with bowing in specific ways. To maintain a balanced body while bowing, a violinist might use either unilateral motion or bilateral motion, a concept he drew from Carl Flesch. He observes that in long, slow bow strokes it is advantageous to lean the upper body slightly in the direction the bow is going (unilateral motion). When using faster bow strokes, or a large pizzicato motion, the body better supports the motion by moving in the opposite direction as the bow arm (bilateral motion.)

All through the Rolland method, he carefully lays a foundation of natural movement as the basis for violin technique. In each technical area, he provides motion-based exercises that can encourage free-motion rather than static positioning. Many of them also serve as preparatory exercises for more advanced techniques. Here are some useful examples:

- Encouraging students to occasionally lift their chin off the chin rest and reset it allows them to release tension in the neck muscles.
- Rocking the bow back and forth across the arc of the four strings frees up the right shoulder, and prepares young players for string crossings.
- Repeatedly sinking relaxed arm weight into the bow and immediately releasing it helps the student feel the necessary motion to produce strong tone, and simultaneously builds in the instinct to release the weight at appropriate times, to avoid sustained tension in the bow fingers or right arm.
- Plucking with the left pinkie repeatedly on all four strings provides an opportunity to watch for ease of swinging in the left arm as the student moves from string to string. It also serves to build muscle strength in the pinkie.
- The "Shuttle" exercise frees up the entire left arm. In the Shuttle, students pluck the string with the pinkie in first position, then third, then in a high position, and back down to the third and first positions. This prevents the left arm from becoming "stuck" in first position orientation, and it also prepares them for shifting. (A fun variation on the shuttle exercise is to show students how to find natural harmonics, and let them slide up and down the string, enjoying the flute-like sounds.)
- Flying Pizzicato, in which the right arm makes a large circle on its way back to the string, allows young students to experience the feeling of long bow-arm movements without having to control the weight and angle of the bow. It is also a good opportunity to

practice bilateral motion, slightly leaning the body in the opposite direction that the bow arm is moving.
- Air-bowing long, slow, vertical motions away from the violin help develop flexibility in the wrist and bow fingers.

In some cases, Rolland recommends identifying what motion the body must make in order to perform a technique on the violin, and to first practice the motion without the instrument. My own observation is that when trying a new technique, students can feel timid about the newness and difficulty of it. They sometimes try to "fix" unfamiliar sounds or movements in unhelpful ways, distracting them from the issue at hand. Trying the motion out of context can free them from those distractions. One good example that Rolland provides is when the student first encounters fast, repetitive bowing. The motion for this is very much like tapping something with your right fingers. Practicing this motion away from the bow will allow the student to focus on the muscle control free of distractions. Another good example is tapping the left collarbone with the fingertips of the left hand. This tapping motion is a good simulation of wrist vibrato motion, and can be used with beginners to practice rhythms.

The benefits of Paul Rolland's strategies are varied and abundant, but a few specifics stand out to me. First, emphasizing physical movement is a particularly effective strategy for students who are easily distracted or have trouble staying engaged. Do you have a student who is a kinesthetic learner? A little spacey? Has ADHD? If so, this approach will be a winner. Think also of kids with learning disabilities like dyslexia. Assigning them physical tasks to practice gives them a path to success even if literacy is a struggle.

Second, the content in Rolland's material is easy to incorporate into other teaching methods. For the Suzuki teacher, some physical movement strategies may already be a part of your toolbox. If they are not, the kinds of exercises mentioned above would be easily incorporated, since your students are already accustomed to learning by watching and listening. Learning by feeling physically will be an easy fit. For the traditional literacy-based teacher, incorporating more physical goals into your practice routine will be a healthy compliment to your other strategies. Some movement is a nice way to break up note-reading and rhythm exercises to help students stay engaged. For the public school orchestra teacher, keeping your students physically engaged is a great classroom management strategy on top of being a valuable pedagogical tool.

Finally, Rolland's method lays the groundwork for advanced technique by introducing them early in what he calls "embryonic form." Vibrato-like tapping is used to practice rhythms. Shifting motion is used to free up the left arm. Different bowing techniques are used in rhythm combinations and on open strings. With this approach, when students eventually reach the point of using these techniques in more advanced forms, they will not feel foreign, but familiar, setting them up for success.

For more information on Paul Rolland's methods, I strongly recommend his book *The Teaching of Action in String Playing* and the companion DVD set. The book is available widely through book retailers, and is published by ASTA. The DVD set is available at www.paulrolland.net.

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