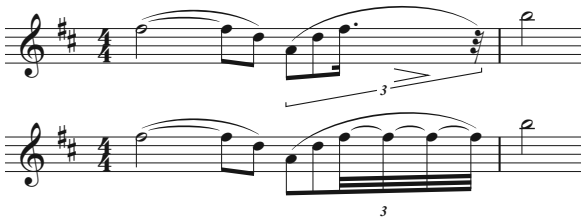
Violin

Developing a Long Musical Line

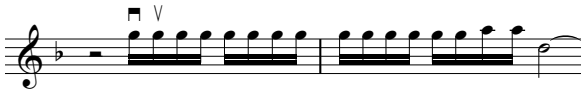
by Ian Snyder

I find it captivating to hear a musician take a musical line and make it continually flow; to feel a sense of anticipation as to where it is headed, and to enjoy the development and lyricism of the tone itself. Long musical lines are one of those "we know it when we hear it" things in life, but I find them difficult to reverse engineer. I remember a period of time when teachers and coaches often asked me for longer lines, and as much as I agreed with them in the abstract, I found it difficult to realize that aspiration on the violin. As with so many situations where we learn by teaching, I tried to observe carefully when I noticed issues with line in my students, and I have found some patterns that I believe we can address in order to develop the musical lines that we intend:

Watch for hidden moments of lost bow speed: Many problems I see with long lines are actually problems with legato bowing. I notice problems with diminished (or absent!) bow speed most commonly before bow changes. Perhaps we perceive the articulation of the last note before the bow change and subconsciously lose interest in its development, or perhaps we have some anxiety about the impending bow change itself. In either case, the effect is somewhat like the top illustration:

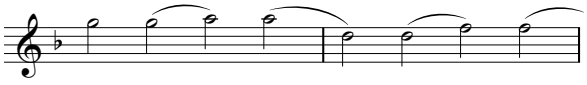


I tell students to keep the bow moving *through* the final note and to listen that the tone continues, as in the bottom illustration. I find that simply by making them aware and by demonstrating what I am looking for, they catch on quickly. In one instance where a student and I hit a roadblock in the opening of Sibelius Concerto, I asked her to subdivide the measure with separate bows so that she could hear the last note occupy its full value:



and when she returned to playing legato it was sustained and connected.

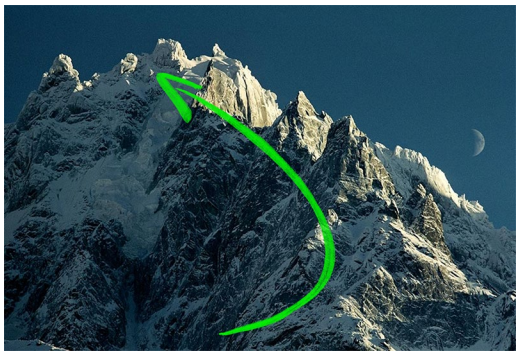
Keep vibrato going between all notes, especially at the end of slurs: To some extent this is self-explanatory, and I would venture to add that for students who already have a well-developed vibrato there is no real substitute for simply willing it to happen and concentrating very hard on doing so. However, since the difficulty lies in the *transition* from one note to the next, I do ask students to practice in overlap bows in order to expose that transition to the ear:



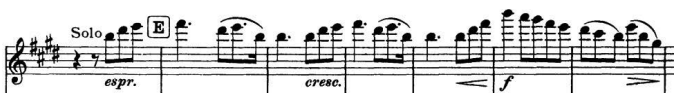
Ensure that pulse is supporting the line: It occurs to me that we desire that both our musical lines and our pulse convey a sense of evenness and flow, and so I think it is wise to regard them as intertwined. Frankly, half the time, an awkward musical line is really a rhythmic issue in disguise. Consider how you perceive the musical energy when a musician falls into either extreme: to my ear, dragging robs us of flow, and rushing can really let the air out of the bag. I find that metronome work in small subdivisions helps with the sustain-related goals I described earlier, while metronome work in big beats helps inspire an organic flow overall.

My teacher from graduate school, Ivan Straus, was fond of "aegogic expression," asking for shorter note values to flow slightly forward, and for longer note values to be slightly held. I think he would be the first to warn that this kind of rhythmic meddling is the chili pepper in the sauce—a little bit goes a long way! With younger students, it may be wise not to overcomplicate their concept of rhythm, but I find I can make awkward lines more organic by at least ensuring they don't drag moving notes and don't rush long ones. I do entrust advanced students with this concept, provided they understand it has to be implemented intentionally and in fine grains. I find demonstrating helpful so that I can show exactly what I mean rather than getting caught in a semantic snarl.

Remember that a long line is not the same thing as perfectly smooth gradations in decibels: Look at this mountain range:



and notice your eye following around the curve to the top. The curve has a clear and even gentle direction, and yet it is made up of individual peaks, each of which is actually rather jagged. I remember struggling with long musical lines that also contained separate bows, such as the concertmaster solo in Brahms 1:

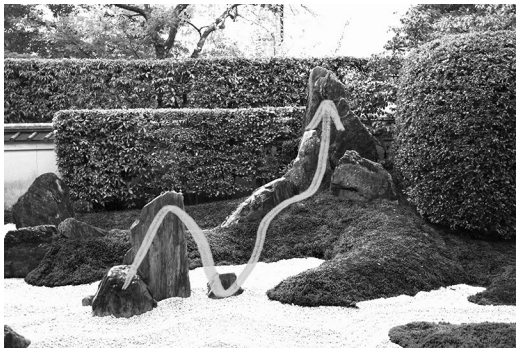


I would carefully gradate the increase in volume in the separate eighth notes, almost trying to emulate a slur. I would wind up instead with a tight tone and breathless phrasing. I had a breakthrough when I pondered what it would be like to create this phrase on a piano—each note would decay and yet I could create the *perception* of a long line by creating a constellation of articulations that progressed in the direction of the phrase. Thank goodness we

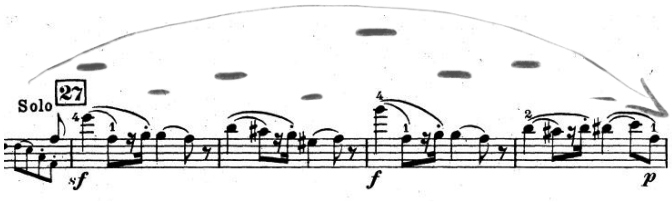
string players can sustain, but I did find I could get the phrase I wanted by giving each note its own initiation of bow speed, almost like an *extremely* mild and broad sforzando that *progressed upwards* to the F♯ and then later to the B. If you search on YouTube for the Vienna Phil's performance (timestamp 23:45) you'll notice that concertmaster Volkhard Steude spends more bow on the first sixteenth note value of each eighth note. It takes experimentation to become subtle enough not to create a note-y phrase, but the result conveys a better sense of direction than by trying to be literally "linear."

Consider giving heterogeneous constellations of emphasis in order to convey a sense of long line in shorter phrases: Contemplate this arrangement of boulders in Zuiho Temple in Kyoto:

The eye is drawn convincingly from bottom left, upwards and to the right, and yet if you observe the height of the individual boulders, they go up and down on their way toward the climax:



Similarly well-considered emphases can give an exciting sense of progression in a phrase that is not a textbook Wagner-opera long line. In the second theme from Mendelssohn Concerto 3rd movement:



there are fairly clear emphases on the strong beats of each measure, and the downbeats carry the most emphasis of all, and yet by thoughtfully progressing them, we can lead the ear forward through the phrase rather than treating it like a Sousa march.

It occurs to me that in many ways this only scratches the surface of what it means to cultivate any type of musical line, but I hope it invites some thought down a pathway that allows us to observe the details that influence a sense of connection and direction in phrases, in our students' playing and in our own.

Ian Snyder teaches privately in Southwest Minneapolis and has served on the faculty of the University of Minnesota Bravo! Institute for Keyboard and Strings. He has performed with the Minnesota Orchestra and Minnesota Opera, as well as a variety of freelance projects, including a recording for Prince. As a teacher, he is particularly interested in developing natural physical motions in playing, enhancing students' awareness of tone, and in integrating musical style from the earliest levels.