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*'It's a long process to
learn how to read each
other's body language,
for the sound to blend'*

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'Firm' staccato

A new technique to help violinists struggling with this difficult, joined-staccato bowing

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BORN

Irkutsk, Siberia

STUDIED WITH

Alexey Gvozdev,
Mikhail Tourich

TEACHES

All levels and ages, privately

Firm staccato is one of the most difficult bow strokes to master. Usually it requires a stiff hand and arm, and a special talent – a talent that many of us do not have. I started to learn the violin when I was six years old; but when I was 17 I moved to Novosibirsk to have lessons with Alexey Gvozdev, and I had to learn everything from the beginning. The experience was useful for me as a teacher, because it enabled me to develop my own method, which I call 'The Shonert Technique', based on martial arts and yoga. This helps my students overcome technical problems quickly and efficiently. Through this I have found my own way to execute a firm staccato using a very relaxed hand and arm, and the mind. All my students – even the adult amateurs – can play firm staccato using this technique, at all different tempos. It is very good for bow control and can help players improve all types of bow stroke.

EXERCISES

Many violinists attempting a firm staccato have the same problem: the muscles of the right hand convulse and become uncontrollable, especially on the down bow. Enabling the right hand to relax allows the muscles to work in cooperation with muscles in the right arm.

To begin, check that your bow grip is relaxed:

- Hold the bow at the frog, with the tip pointing at the ceiling.
- Now let the bow slip through your hand. Catch it around halfway up the stick. Don't drop it!

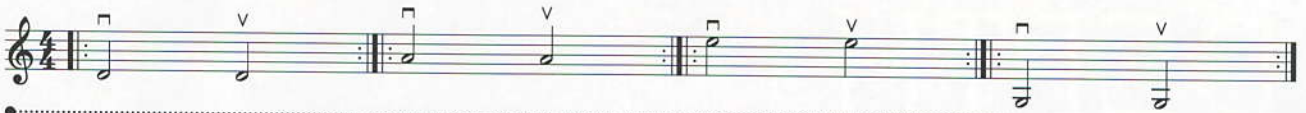
Next, play one down bow and one up, détaché, wherever in the bow you feel most comfortable (probably the middle to upper half). Do this four times, holding the bow with: (1) the thumb and index finger; (2) the thumb and middle finger; (3) the thumb and ring finger; and finally (4) the thumb and pinkie.

- Change the position of your hand as little as possible between each hold, and ensure that you are making a good and consistent sound. The bowing movement should come from the forearm, guided by the fingers.
- Now vary the finger combinations at random, always listening, monitoring your hand position, staying relaxed and keeping the bow moving as your fingers change. This is good exercise for building a good bow grip and improving bow control.

BEGIN WITH A LONG NOTE

The staccato movement uses the same movement we use when playing a long note. Play **exercise 1**, only moving to each new string once you are happy you have the correct bow movement on the previous one. The central two strings are easiest, so start with D and A, and leave the E and G until last. Play at least one up and one down for each, at a metronome speed of ♩ = 50–60.

EXERCISE 1



EXERCISE 2



EXERCISE 3



- Starting on the D string, play each minim (♩) with an even tone from the heel to the tip of the bow. Make sure your sound and speed are consistent, particularly on the bow change.
- Don't press; check that your thumb is relaxed, and that your arm weight is resting on the bow and string. For the bow change, let your hand move naturally, of its own accord.
- When you have the right movement and sound, move string but don't change your hand shape or grip.

This exercise is like meditation: after a while, you should be able to play it without any thoughts in your mind, simply focusing on the sound. This level of concentration and relaxation is very important when you play staccato and will help you to find the movement most natural to you. We can teach our hands using our minds. Violin playing is like a martial art: it's not only a technique, but also a philosophy.

COMBINING LONG NOTES WITH SWELLS

In firm staccato, the right hand can become uncontrolled and convulsed, especially on the down bow. The next exercise trains the hand to relax between movements. Again, play minims on each string, beginning with D. With the same hand position:

- Play a short swell at the start and midpoint of each stroke, using speed rather than pressure, and as little bow as possible. The movement should come from your forearm, with the same sound and feeling of relaxation before and after each swell.
- Now play a long note for the first half of the bow; in the second half, add two pulses. Practise this on an up bow and a down bow. Try to keep the same feeling in your hand and arm for the long note and the shorter notes.
- Try the same again, this time with four swells in the second half of the bow; when you are ready, progress to eight. Distribute the pulses evenly, in strict time with the metronome, and do not allow your hand to stiffen.

If you are finding this exercise difficult, or your bow movement sounds jerky or uncontrolled, set the metronome at a slower speed and work gradually up to a faster tempo.

FINAL STEPS

Once you have perfected all of this, replace the swell with a martelé. If you relax your hand and begin the movement from your shoulder, your fingers should move naturally. Think about your muscles and how they work together; relax your arm and your elbow. The first step to playing a successful staccato comes from preparing the action in the mind.

- Set your metronome to ♩ = 45, or slower if more comfortable.
- Play two martelé strokes per whole bow, listening carefully to make sure the long notes sound consistent.
- After each martelé, relax! Again, your hand position should stay the same. Use weight rather than pressure to make the sound, letting your arm hang from your shoulder.
- Increase the number of martelé strokes per bow to four, then eight, but try to think of them as one action, rather than connected bows, just like the long note. The faster the tempo, the faster you should relax your hand after each martelé movement.

The moment your arm begins to stiffen (most commonly on the down bow), play a long note. Think about the difference in feeling between the long stroke and the staccato stroke, then play the martelé again with the feeling of the long note in mind. Kreutzer no.4 can be useful here. Start on a down bow to practise up-bow staccato, and on an up bow for down-bow staccato, using a more pronounced action than you need. Try **exercise 2** before moving on to the Kreutzer itself (**exercise 3**).

Now repeat the martelé exercises using your hand's natural weight instead of the pressure needed for the martelé. This will be enough to generate a (smaller) bite, without tension. ▶

Now turn off the metronome and increase the tempo and number of staccato notes, returning to long notes whenever you need to relax the hand and regain control. Keep a constant bow

speed, and add more weight if the bow begins to bounce uncontrollably. Step by step, increase the number of staccatos until you can play them along the whole bow.

REPertoire

EXAMPLE 1 Grigoraş Dinicu's *Hora Staccato* works as a very good basic exercise for practising firm staccato

Grigoraş Dinicu *Hora Staccato*

EXAMPLE 2 Wieniawski is renowned for his use of tricky staccato passages. Try this section from his *Polonaise de concert op.4*

Henryk Wieniawski *Polonaise de concert op.4*

IN YOUR PRACTICE

Playing the violin is like a sport. If you don't practise for one, two or three days, your muscles will start to stiffen and your technique will get worse. This means you need to practise frequently and, most importantly, correctly: if you make a mistake, correct yourself immediately afterwards. If you can feel the difference between doing an action wrongly and then

doing it correctly, you will have a better understanding of what you did wrong. By practising carefully and correctly, you can learn a technique in a quarter of the time you might take otherwise. Gvozdev used to say that it should be your head that is tired at the end of a practice session, not your hands.

TIPS FOR TEACHERS

The staccato movement must come from the hand and arm, not from the fingers, which should follow. The more notes we play per bow, the more difficult it is for the hand to relax in between. If a student starts to tense, ask them to play a long

note immediately, so that they relax again. It is also important not to progress too quickly, to ensure that each stage has been learnt thoroughly before moving on to the next. ●

INTERVIEW BY PAULINE HARDING

FURTHER READING



My book, *Advanced Violin Techniques: The Shonert Technique*, gives more exercises and ideas about how to master firm staccato. Also see www.shonertacademy.com



Ivan Galamian's *Principles of Violin Playing and Teaching* gives excellent rhythmic exercises for firm staccato, although his approach is very different from mine.

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Cellist Natasha Brofsky
on sounding points