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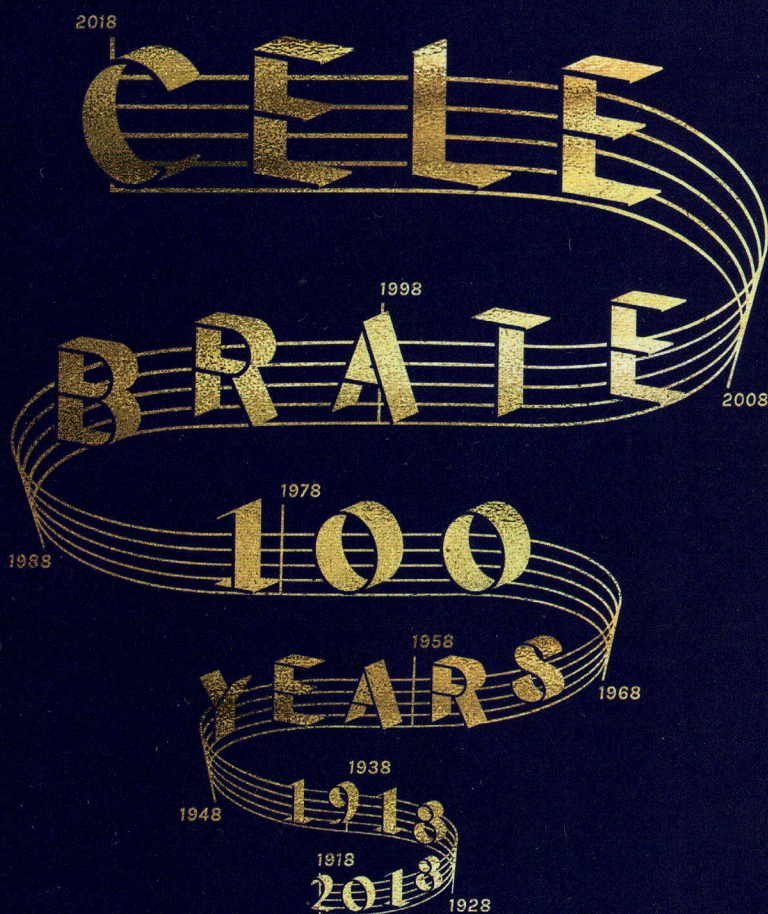
Stringendo

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2018 Manual of Syllabuses



Music Syllabuses

Theme:
Assessing students'
musical progress

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AMEB Perth conference
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Taking the mystery out of tone production

How to play the perfect staccato

by Alexander Shonert

I'm a teacher, but sometimes (and quite often) I feel like a doctor. The most important thing in being a doctor is to make a timely and correct diagnosis. I see when and where a student has a problem. Moreover, I look for the cause of this problem that prevents him or her from executing a particular technical skill or from playing a piece with sufficient expression. After I make a diagnosis, I give advice to help the student to overcome the problems in the shortest possible time.

One of the secrets of my method is using the laws of psychology. Students absorb information more quickly if they receive it associatively. During my lessons, I love telling parables. Here is one parable which shows the point of my method.

Breaking a wall: a parable for learning

Three men were given the task of breaking a heavy wall, using only one hand. The first one beat it for an hour, bruised his arm and decided to stop. The second one beat it for seven hours before finally breaking the wall, but after that he lost consciousness. The third one studied the wall for two and half hours until he found the thinnest point. He calculated the least power he would use to break the wall, and then broke it without harming himself.

My teaching method is like that of the third man. Acquiring a proper violin technique requires not only time but also efficiency. As my professor used to say, 'Playing the violin requires more work from brain than from hands.' But the most important thing is that, in helping students to gain this knowledge, I want them to use it not only in music but in other spheres of life, even if they are completely different, because the even the most perfect knowledge of technique is only the first level – we can reach spiritual perfection from playing the violin. It is a philosophy, a style of life.

Developing technique: an attitude of mind

The way you play the violin and perform on stage will ultimately be a reflection of your attitude, character and habitual lifestyle. For example, if you are primarily critical, it will show in your music. If you look forward to meeting challenges, the music will have a different flavour. Therefore, in order to reach master levels of technical and artistic perfection, your mind should be at peace with the way you live, the way you think on a daily basis.

It is not enough to know the goal you are trying to achieve. It is like building a house on solid ground



Alex's student professor of violin

versus sand: you need to know the best and relevant way to get there. Therefore, before you start anything, you need to plan an effective strategy.

There are many things that first must be understood before learning how to do it well. For example, to play fast and firm whole bow staccato requires some understanding of energy and minor physics. Once you understand it and what to expect in your body, you visualise in your mind how it would feel it experientially. Once you can visualise what staccato would feel like, you can start to teach your hands how to do it. From that point on, it would only a matter of time, before you 'catch' the movement of firm staccato.

Prolonged periods of tension will block and drain energy from the muscles and cause pain. In longer, more difficult passages, it becomes harder to maintain relaxation and prevent tension. Those who desire to achieve a solid and powerful sound on the violin must learn to relax and control the muscles, in order to bring a feeling of softness or lightness, so that energy can flow freely and firmly. My method of teaching staccato is based on yoga and the martial arts of Tai Chi.



Demonstrating staccato

Staccato: how to do it

Most students who come to me have the same problem with playing staccato: the muscles in the right hand are too tense. To check that the right hand is relaxed, hold the bow at the frog with the tip pointed at the ceiling, then let the bow slip through the hand and catch it halfway down without dropping it.

As staccato uses the same bow movement as detaché, play four consecutive down- and up-bows where you feel comfortable (usually in the upper half). The first is played holding the bow with the thumb and index finger, the second with thumb and middle finger, then thumb and ring finger and finally thumb and little finger. The change between fingers should be as smooth as possible, with a consistent tone. Vary the combination of fingers. At all times, the thumb and arm muscles must be relaxed. This builds a good bow hold and improves control.



Now change strings, relaxing the hand between movements. Add a short swell at the beginning and middle of the stroke. Use speed, not weight, and as little bow as possible. Now, play a long note for half the bow, adding two pulses in the next half. Do the same again, adding four pulses, then eight. Be strict with the timing – use a metronome.

When you are confident with this, replace the swell with a martelé stroke. Begin the movement from the

shoulder and relax the arm and elbow. Use weight, not pressure, and relax between each stroke. Think of the two/four/eight pulses as one action. If your bowing seizes up, especially on the down-bow, play a long note, feeling the difference. Incorporate the 'long bow' feel when you return to the martelé stroke. Use your hand's natural weight instead of the pressure needed to make martelé.

This YouTube clip shows my method: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e5I9_UJSwzQ&list=PLpMEd3wAGehXI3g336CAxTDMCfIP-xE7k&index=1

A method that works: teach it to others

I am glad that there are six teachers who teach my method: a professor from Madrid, a professor from the UK, a violin teacher from Oxford, England, a teacher from Russia, a teacher from Geneva and a violin teacher from Australia.

As for the students, here are some examples. A 13-year-old student from Sydney asked for my help on how to get a firm staccato. He bought my book, *Advanced violin technique*, and had five Skype lessons with me. I gave a consultation for his violin teacher in Sydney as he had asked me to help teach this student correctly. As a result, the student has got firm staccato and he played 'Hora staccato' as a soloist with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra.

Another student from the Julliard School in New York bought my book and developed a firm staccato in just four Skype lessons.

I teach not only firm staccato but also how to improve general technique of the right hand and sound production, using the most difficult strokes like firm staccato. I am especially glad that my method, the 'Shonert Technique', works for amateurs young and old.

One of my amateur students, Raoul, is a professional soldier. At 49 years old, he learned how to do a firm staccato by reading my book and having a couple of Skype lessons. He says, 'I think it's easy to do after ten to fifteen minutes while thinking about my arm.' This YouTube clip shows him playing a two-octave scale, four staccato strokes on each note. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L9hwrV_a1og&index=20&list=PLpMEd3wAGehXI3g336CAxTDMCfIP-xE7k

That's 60 staccatos in one down-bow!

Russian-born Alexander Shonert studied with Alexei Gvozdev and Mikhail Tourich. He is an honorary member of the Masaryk Academy of Arts, Prague and the author of Advanced Violin Techniques: The Shonert Technique. He offers free playing tips on his website www.shonertacademy.com