

RIGHT- AND LEFT-HAND TOUCH

Understand the use of touch in your playing and you'll be well on your way to finding the best approach for non-classical styles, explains **JULIE LYONN LIEBERMAN**

Those of us who are immersed in non-classical genres can always tell a novice from a veteran immediately. There are two clues: inappropriate use of vibrato in genres that do not call for it; and a bow that remains glued to the string without fluctuation in speed or pressure, producing only the singing tone typical of classical repertory. Since vibrato invites right-hand continuity, the two tendencies often walk hand in hand.

Most alternative string styles require a tempestuous relationship between the bow and the string as well as between left-hand pressure and the string. While there are a few classical bowings that require changes in pressure – such as martelé and spiccato – these effects generally occur on marching rhythms – crotchets (♩), quavers (♪) and semiquavers (♫). The left and right hands are coordinated in unison, evoking a uniform sound from the instrument. Compare this with a wide mixture of rhythms and effects within a given

musical phrase, in other forms of music.

Accents are placed in surprising places within the bar, and varied types of movement on and off the string in either hand create tonal and textural variations. In fact, the timing of the rich alternation between inferred pitches and accented notes within many world styles helps shape each genre's unique groove.

Pressure, whether it comes from the left hand or the right hand, should be applied as a conscious decision rather than driven by a reflex – no matter what the style. Think of the range of possibilities that will emerge when you develop the ability to vary touch as you desire. The notes of some phrases may ring out like a flock of birds all flying at the same pace and spiralling in concert, while in other phrases you will be able to define notes individually to help move that musical phrase into contrasting emotional and genre-specific environments.

Think of the range of possibilities that will emerge when you develop the ability to vary touch as you desire

[1]



LEFT-HAND EXERCISES RIGHT-HAND EXERCISES EXERCISES ON MELODIC PHRASES

LEFT-HAND EXERCISES

Imagine that your strings are trampolines and practise lightly bouncing each left-hand finger up and down on random pitches. This will enable you to begin to explore a range of pressure, from a light presence of the finger on the string to pressing the fingertip down on to the surface of the fingerboard. Notice how your bow arm acts as a mirror and naturally lightens in pressure. While trying this exercise, classical players tend to inadvertently bounce their fingers with a downward emphasis. Try it that way first to explore its resulting sound and feel, but then emphasise the upward motion on each bounce, as if the string is pushing your fingertip back up to sit on its released surface. You should notice an immediate difference in your sound quality and physical experience.

Now challenge yourself to play a scale using quick, light bounces of the left-hand fingers, never firmly touching the fingerboard, while allowing the bow hand to mirror this motion. This exercise will help you create what we call 'ghost notes' in jazz violin technique: a melodic line that contains notes that are implied rather than sounded out fully (example 1).

[2]

[3]

[4]

[5a]

[5b]

[5c]

[5d]

[5e]

[5f]

[5g]

[5h]

[5i]

[5j]

RIGHT-HAND EXERCISES

Next, focus on your bow hand. Using an open string, create 'smiles' with the bow. If you picture the shape the mouth makes when it smiles and let your bow describe that shape, your bow will start from a slightly lifted position. You will then graduate pressure into the string as you move the bow, and then release back up off the string towards the end of the note. Try this on a crotchet rhythm, moving from the frog through three quarters of the bow and back again (example 2).

Now apply 'bowed smiles' to notes that are syncopated, allowing your finger pressure to mirror the motion of the bow (example 3).

You can also try creating 'mini-smiles' by using continuous down bows or continuous up bows (example 4).

Experiment with these permutations:

- 1 Start with the bow on the string and 'smile' up off it as you draw the bow.
- 2 Start in the air and, using a brush-stroke landing (moving the bow horizontally as you lower it to the string to create an unaccented launch for the note), leave the bow on the string to complete the bow-stroke.
- 3 Start on the string, lighten bow pressure to almost depart from contact mid-bow, and then return to full contact.

For full control and contrast, compare the above with using a long bow that stops and starts on each crotchet but doesn't increase pressure during the initiation of motion, the follow-through or the pause.

Examples 5a–i show simple ways of mastering the use of inflections (accents). Practise applying light accents across each of the basic rhythms. Try not to create a quick jerk by contracting the musculature of your right arm; instead, focus on a sensation akin to the breast stroke in swimming: initiate a downward pull from the forearm. Focus on your right palm as if drawing it through water. It's best to practise this exercise with a metronome.

For a bigger challenge, repeat the exercise above staggering your entrances (example 5j). Using a metronome, start on the 'and' of one, the 'and' of two, and so on.

Rhythmically speaking, notated pitches aren't always fulfilled in alternative string styles. Certain notes within the phrase may be ghosted midway, or even milliseconds before completion by lightening bow or finger pressure or both. In this manner, the full time value is inferred but not satisfied, and a slice of silence completes the time length. This can be achieved by gradually lightening your touch or through a sudden on-the-string stop or lift-off. For instance, Latin phrasing calls for dramatically curt starts and stops, whereas swing violin invites a subtler motion, more like a duck gliding through water as its hidden feet paddle madly. »

[6]



[7]



[8]



EXERCISES ON MELODIC PHRASES

Example 6 shows the opening to the tune *Guataca City* by Paquito D'Rivera. Try playing this musical phrase as follows:

- 1 Use a classical singing tone with vibrato.
- 2 Repeat the phrase without vibrato, maintaining an even-tempered speed and pressure with the bow.
- 3 Without vibrato, practise cheating each note of its full time value. Stop the bow without increasing bow pressure.
- 4 Repeat step 3 initiating each note with a bite (demi-martelé).
- 5 Repeat step 3 while applying the 'trampoline fingers' approach described earlier.

Example 7 is the opening to the traditional Swedish tune *Schankheden*, as performed by the contemporary Swedish group Swåp. Let's use the opening of this tune to apply some genre-specific variations in bow pressure and speed.

Rather than sustaining the opening note, pull the bow quickly after initiating motion at the frog with a good strong bite (demi-martelé). Immediately follow this quick pull with a graduated lift-off. The bow will rise off the string like an aeroplane taking off and then circle back around to play the second note of the melody on a regular down bow. While the classical player, without further instructions, would tend to accent the down-beat and play the up-beat smoothly, notice how there is emphasis on the up bow to bring out the syncopated up-beat in this tune.

Pull the bow on the high A at a normal tempo and then increase bow speed with a slight increase in pressure to end the note as if your bow is slipping on a banana peel.

When Michael Doucet teaches the tune *Jolie Blonde* on his *Learn to Play Real Cajun Fiddle* video, he illustrates several approaches to phrasing the opening of the tune. Although the opening could be played legato, Doucet demonstrates a technique that's also used in old-time fiddling and bluegrass to kick off the tune. At the frog, initiate the 'smile' bowing we practised earlier to create a bite and lift-off on each note. Let gravity do most of the work for you (example 8).

Listening is the most important tool you can use to further your exploration of this topic. By studying recordings you will observe how various performers sculpt their sound through carefully timed changes in bow speed as well as bow and finger pressure and release. There are a number of software programs you can use to slow audio down without changing the pitch. Peak, Transcriber and Slow Jam are just a few examples. As you listen to specific artists, try to experience how they use their left- and right-hand touch to help guide changes in your own playing technique. ■

SUGGESTED LISTENING

Darol Anger

Heritage

Six Degrees B0007106EQ

Darol Anger, Michael Doucet, Rashad

Eggleston, Bruce Molsky

Fiddlers 4

Compass Records B000060P8H

Jeremy Kittel

Jazz Violin

www.jeremykittel.com

Natalie MacMaster

My Roots are Showing

Greentrax CDTRAX163 or Rounder 617033

Nordic Roots

Volume Two

NorthSide Records 6040

EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS

Learn to Play Cajun Fiddle (VHS), **Michael Doucet,**

Homespun Tapes, www.homespuntapes.com

Techniques for the Contemporary String Player,

Parts One and Two (DVD), **Julie Lyonn**

Lieberman, Hal Leonard Corporation