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Kerker-Busey

**A Comparative Study of
the Development of the Left
Hand Technic of the Violin**

Music

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1913

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A COMPARITIVE STUDY OF THE DEVELOPMENT
OF THE LEFT HAND TECHNIC OF THE VIOLIN

BY

VERNA KERKER-BUSEY

THESIS

FOR THE

DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF MUSIC

SCHOOL OF MUSIC

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

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I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER MY SUPERVISION BY

Verna Kerker - Busey

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BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING THIS PART OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE

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In Charge of Major Work

Head of Department

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A Comparative Study
of the
Development of the Left Hand Technique
of the
Violin.

The elements of violin-playing and the mediaeval fiddle seem to have been in existence as early as the thirteenth century. The models we now use have scarcely changed at all since the time of Stradivari, who lived from 1680 to 1730, and his models differed from those in use a century earlier only in the design of certain details. The present day model, it seems, appeared, about the sixteenth century, concurrently with the violin players beginning to shake off the denomination of the lute. Although it is difficult to gain much idea of the way the violin was played before the end of the sixteenth century, because on the scores the instruments by which the different parts are to be played are not specified, it is obvious that the violins had merely to support and double the soprano voice. The parts must, therefore, have been extremely simple. The first music we find published without words is the Balletti of Gastoldi and Thomas Morley printed toward the end of the sixteenth century, and even these are entirely vocal in character.

Left hand technique for the violin seems to have made almost no progress until Gabrieli took into consideration the quality of the different instruments. From then on it was generally accepted as a leading instrument of the orchestra and its technique made considerable progress.

George Lehmann in his treatise on the art of violin play-

ing gives the following definition of the technique of the left hand:-

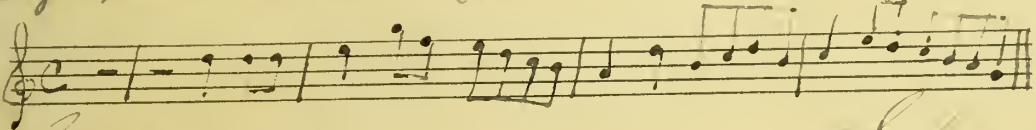
1. The utmost precision in raising and lowering the fingers.
2. The muscular strength necessary to carry the player unwearied through ordinary or uncommon difficulties.
3. The skill required in velocity, peculiar note succession, and awkward note combinations.

Of those three underlying principles of technique, it is possible that the second is the most important. Whether or not the violin players of the earlier centuries used great finger pressure, realized the necessity of it, or whether they had the muscular strength to exert, we have no way of determining, but by referring to the opinions advanced by musical authorities that up to and including the sixteenth century all violin music was purely vocal in character and never exceeded one lined A, and by investigating the scores of the Corelli Sonates (1653-1713), where we find that not once does the rhythm exceed eighth notes, and not one scale or arpeggio passage exceeding or even approaching an octave occurs -- we may say that the strength demands were not what they are today where we in Spohr, for example, in five hundred measures chosen at random, find twenty-nine hundred and fifty seven notes, thirteen scale and eighteen arpeggio passages of more than two octaves. In the comparison of the rhythmic differentiation of the several great violin composers, although Mozart has used, in the five hundred chosen measures, more notes than any of the others, we may account for that by the fact that his works have less peculiar note succession and awkward note combinations than those of our more recent composers. He, too, uses less frequently extended scale and arpeggio passages than our more modern composers. He uses in the five hundred chosen measures

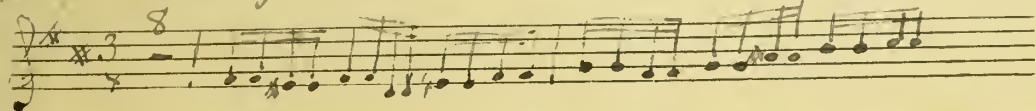
of his Concerto in A Major, only one extended scale passage and three extended arpeggio passages, while Brahms in the five hundred chosen measures of his Concerto Opus 78, uses five scale passages of more than two octaves and ten arpeggio passages of more than two octaves, and Spohr in his Ninth Concerto uses thirteen scale passages and eighteen arpeggio passages.

The following is an excerpt taken from the violin part of the first movement of a Symphonia by G. Allegri, who lived in the sixteenth century, and the second is taken from Schubert's Unfinished Symphony.

Symphonia G. Allegri

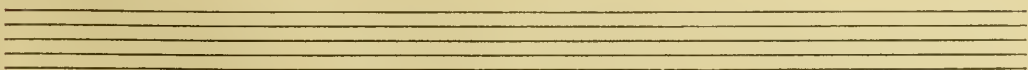
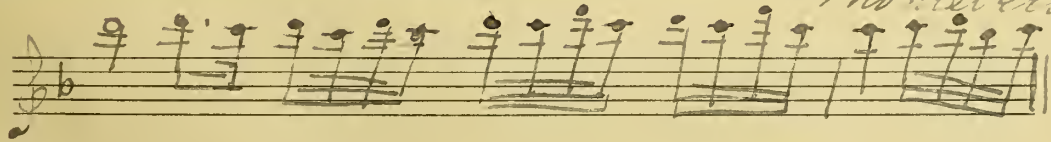


Symphony Schubert



In considering ornamentation, high positions, and shifting, we must again be guided by the opinions of musical authorities. Gabrieli, of the sixteenth century, was the first to use the higher positions and he never exceeded the third, while, but a few years later, in a score of Claudio Monteverde, are passages going up to the fifth position.

Monteverde



Tartini, of the beginning of the seventeenth century, al-

though his technique was limited in comparison to that of some of his contemporaries-- he does not exceed the third position and his double stops are extremely simple--- excelled particularly in the use of trills and double trills. This is an important item, because a trill is really the root of all technical requirements, strength, precision, and agility. It follows, then, that all violinists who have a really beautiful trill have a good general technique, and a trill which lacks quality, accuracy, and brilliancy is usually accompanied by an inaccurate or low order of general technique.

Whether all of our modern composers use more trills and ornamental figures than did the older composers, is hard to determine, because now it is a custom to write all ornamental figures in full, rather than simply to use the sign.

The one great barrier to the technical development of Tarlini's time was the holding of the violin on the right side of the string holder. The really high development of modern technique was not made possible until the time of Geminian's School, 1680-1761, when, for the first time, the holding of the violin on the left side of the string holder was recommended. Scores show that Geminian's compositions go up to the seventh position.

A shift in violin playing is a change of the hand's position on the finger board. In the first position the note stopped by the first finger is one semitone or one tone, as the scale may require, above the open string. Whenever this position is quitted the player is said to be "on the shift," and the term is applied to a change of position in either direction, the player being said to shift up or down as the case may be. Practically the commonest and easiest method of shifting is to advance by intervals of a third.

Unnecessary shifting should always be avoided--that is, all passages should be played with as few alterations in the position of the left hand as possible. To carry out this rule demands a thorough acquaintance of the finger-board, for a player who is at home in certain positions only, will be driven to shift in passages which ought to be executed without its aid.

Another rule is that the shift should be effected quietly and firmly. In order to do this it must be effected, not by a sudden or jerky motion proceeding from the shoulder, but by rapidly altering the grasp of the thumb and fingers, the thumb moving lightly in advance and guiding the fingers into the required position. The position of the hand and arm should be disturbed only so far as is absolutely necessary.

Theoretically every single note lying within the compass of a position can be produced within that position, but practically the choice of position for the rendering of a given phrase or passage is made:

1. On grounds of absolute mechanical necessity.
2. Of convenience.
3. To satisfy the requirements of good phrasing, or of a special musical character.

I. Absolute necessity:-

(a) Many double stops formed by the notes within the compass of the first or any other position cannot be executed within that position.

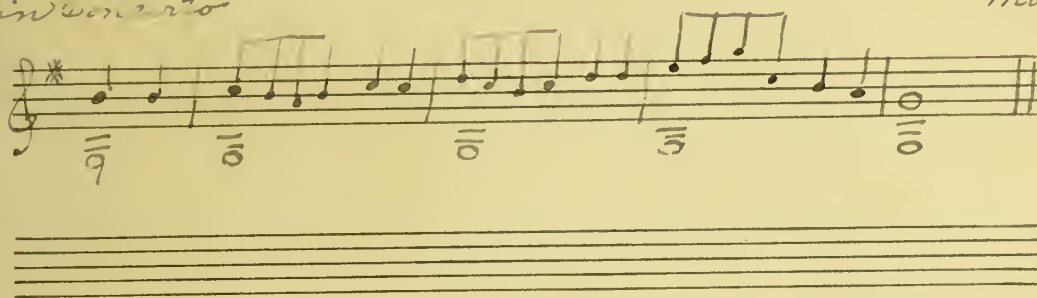
(b) Double stops formed by notes which lie in one position on non-contiguous strings cannot be played in that position, but must be played in a position where the notes lie on strings that

can be sounded together.

There is a passage in a Mozart Violin Concerto where in order to sound the open G. string at the same time the upper part is being played, necessitates an ascent to the seventh position on the third string.

Violin concerto

Mozart-



II. Convenience.

Many passages, especially those in which notes of widely different range succeed each other rapidly, would be impracticable but for the use of the higher positions, even for those notes which might, theoretically speaking, be taken in lower positions.

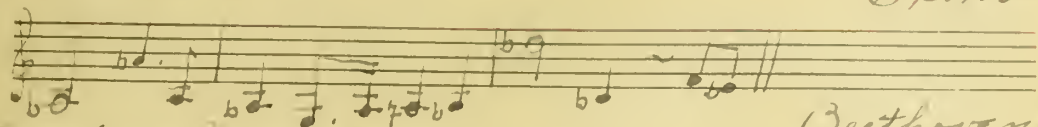
III. The taste and characteristic rendering of many phrases and passages require a careful choice of position based on the distinct and contrasting qualities of sound of the four different strings. Where sameness of sound is required, the change from one string to another will, if possible, be avoided; where contrast is wanted, different strings must be used, even in cases where one string could give all the notes.

In the following passage from the Beethoven-Kreutzer Sonata, although the entire phrase lies in the compass of the first position, it must, in order to sound as cantabile as possible, be played entirely on the second string. Likewise, the following passage from Sphor's Scena Cantate Concerto must be played on the sonorous fourth

string, or it would entirely lose its character.

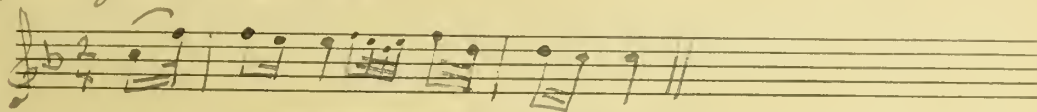
Scena Cantata Concerto

Spohr



Spreitzer Sonata

Beethoven



In other instances the meaning of a passage is made intelligible only by its being played in the proper position.

In the following passage from Bach's Preludium in E the whole lower part is played entirely on the second string in the higher positions, otherwise the necessary contrast to the pedal note E, which is strongly given by the open string, cannot be properly marked.



Bach's Preludium in E.

1. Part 13 and 14

A complete command of the finger-board in all positions is one of the chief technical requirements of the art of Violin playing and the choice of position on which a truly musical, tasteful and characteristic rendering of every composition depends, is one of the main tests of a violinist's taste and judgment.

The early violinists, because of the simple vocal character of the music, did not have much occasion to use the shift. Tartini, of the beginning of the seventeenth century, did not exceed the third position; Geminian, of the latter part of the seventeenth and early

part of the eighteenth century, went to the seventh position; while a passage found in a work of Torquinio Merula (before 1639) proves that they were familiar with the alteration of the first, second and third positions.

In considering double stops, octaves, and tenths, authorities and investigation again prove that those of a more difficult nature have been in use extensively only during the more recent age, and most of them have been written with the obvious intention of enabling the player to exhibit prodigious ability in that direction. Simple double stops, however, are of particular value to the student for intonation difficulties, while fingered octaves and tenths hinder rather than aid the general technic. Even now it is questionable whether with the slight need we have of them, any chance should be taken of injuring the general technique. Mozart, in the five hundred chosen measures from his Concerto in A Major, uses no octaves or tenths, while Brahms in his Concerto Op.78 has thirty-one measures, and one passage of seven successive measures of octaves and tenths.

We cannot, however, speak of a modern violin technique as a purely modern development, because, the development of the technique of any instrument goes hand in hand with the perfecting of its mechanical structure and, as was stated before, the violin has undergone no structural alteration for more than three hundred years. There are but few points of modern technique that some of the old masters did not attempt, but owing to the complicated nature of modern music, it is evident that the execution of great difficulties is more often demanded.

In the following table of comparison I have taken compositions of Mozart and Brahms, two composers who were not violinists;

and Spohr and Viextemps, two who were violin specialists. I have chosen five hundred measures from each in the following manner:

From each I have taken one hundred fifty measures from the first movement by using the first three measures of every line. Occasionally when a line had only two measures, I used four from the next. I used the same plan to select one hundred and fifty measures from the last movement of each Concerto, but began from the end of the movement instead of the beginning. I chose seventy-seven consecutive measures from the second movement, thirty-two from the beginning of the last movement, and ninety-one from the end of the first movement, except in the Mozart Concerto in the comparison of which, because of the lack of number of measures in the first movement, I was forced to use the Minuetto. I have also taken into consideration the tempi marks.

Mozart Concerto V in A Major.	Brahms Concerto. Opus 78.	Spohr Concerto IX.	Viextemps Concerto Op.31.
Rhythmic differentiation			
number of notes in 500 measures.			
4047	3599	3856	3428

Extensive scale passages of
two or more octaves.

1	5	13	2
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Extensive arpeggio passages of
two or more octaves.

3	10	18	8
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Number of times indicated
ornamental figures are used.

49

45

119

53

Number of notes above

two lined E.

112

212

152

342

Number of measures in which

double stops occur.

33

122

96

71

Number of measures which contain

octaves and tenths.

0

31

21

27





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