

## Improving Orchestral Performances Through Use of the Bow

**A**fter many years of adjudicating orchestras, I have found that too often insufficient attention is paid to the use of the various parts of the bow. An entire instrumental section should use the same part of the bow and not just perform in the same direction, although bow direction is overlooked at times as well. When uniformity is not adhered to, the sound becomes blurred and diffused. When preparing music for performance, teachers must help students plan how and where the bow is to be utilized to achieve proper phrasing and correct musical style. Unfortunately, in some instances teachers become so preoccupied with playing the right notes that musical content is almost forgotten. This sole concern about notes has been one of the contributing factors to the neglect of proper bow arm development, especially in the early stages of string playing.

Development of the bow arm and its resulting tone production should occur along with learning to play notes. In the beginning stages, I believe it even precedes left-hand techniques. Carl Flesch once stated that a violinist's technique is developed only in proportion to his right arm. Joseph Fuchs went so far as to say that the greatest players are those with the finest right arms.

The bow arm is the essential element in determining a string player's tone, phrasing, and style. For a string player, it serves as the voice does for a singer. To develop truly musical orchestras, teachers must emphasize the expressive use of the right arm and its ability to extract the slightest nuance or gradation. Time spent in early stages of instruction in developing an even tone, a crisp staccato, and even a light spiccato will be rewarded early with many enjoyable musical performances.

### **Sustained Tone and Dynamic Control**

In the very first lessons, long sustained tones are not desirable, because the beginner does not have the inclination, the patience, nor the muscular control necessary to produce a sufficiently even tone. Naturally, as lessons progress, tones of longer duration will be introduced. The exercises suggested in the following paragraphs apply to orchestras beyond the beginning stages, although they may be used late in beginning classes at the director's discretion.

Efforts to achieve a well-sustained tone are dependent on the structure of the bow and the arm. Because in the formative years the string player's tone tends to weaken as he approaches the

bow tip, emphasis should be placed on increased pull or strength as the bow passes the middle. Scales, of course, provide the best materials; a chorale utilizing sustained tones can be equally effective. The entire scale or chorale should be played initially at a *fortissimo* level.

The dynamic level should be varied as the orchestra progresses, so that string students become accomplished in their ability to maintain a dynamic level at any section of the bow. In addition, the orchestra may play *diminuendo* as it ascends the scale, and *crescendo* as it descends. This routine is contrary to the usual practice of student performers and helps cultivate a perceptive attitude toward dynamic control. Essentially, the function of these studies is to arouse within the students a musical awareness of dynamics and how to control them. As they become critical listeners, they begin to compensate for technical inadequacies.

Dynamics are controlled by the right hand in different ways. The contact point of the bow affects the quality of tone, and one can increase the dynamic level by playing closer to the bridge, or decrease by playing over the fingerboard. Playing over the fingerboard is particularly effective in a *sotto voce* passage, while playing closer to the bridge not only increases the dynamic level but creates a harder or more metallic sound. This technique is employed in a great many modern works such as the "Barbaric Dance" in the Bartók's *Five Pieces for Younger Orchestras*.

In order to achieve a dynamic change without altering the tone quality, students can effect a *crescendo* by increasing the speed or expenditure of the bow. In a slow sustained passage, increasing the pull or rub of the bow arm also produces the desired effect.



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The decrescendo is attained by diminishing the speed or expenditure of the bow, and in sustained passages by diminution of the pull.

### Selecting the Proper Bowing

Orchestrators of public school music editions have become so obsessed with the need for simplification that they have oversimplified to the emasculation of musical phrasing, style, and tonal concepts. Bowings that enhance a musical phrase but seemingly deviate from the norm have been avoided.

I am not only referring to use of down bow and up bow but to the application of spiccato and staccato. This practice is not only detrimental to the music but creates false obstacles in the minds of the students and directors when they are confronted with these conditions in later works. I recommend that directors examine George Bornoff's beginning studies and apply his bowing approach to the various studies that they may use in their own situation.

Selecting a bowing should not depend upon the ease with which it may be played. The first consideration should be how to achieve a desired effect; the next, what bowing will produce that effect most easily. Most string performers learn in the early stages that a measure begins with the down bow. This convention is based on the consideration that the strongest part of the bow is closest to the hand or frog, and therefore the upper part of the bow is the weakest. For this very reason students should begin a crescendo or a long sustained note—even at the beginning of a measure—on an up bow. An excellent example of the use of this bowing is the Bach "Air on the G String," arranged from the Suite in D.

Another consideration in selecting a bowing is the musical style of a particular period. The bowing selected should be the one that gives the truest picture of the music as the composer conceived it. A final consideration is utilizing the proper sections of the bow for the desired effects. Accents and attacks are attained better in the area from the frog to the middle of the bow, generally with a down bow.

### Don't Short Change Your Students

For too long a time strings and string performances have been regarded as an esoteric art, understood only by string players. Essentially a few principles are quite logical in their application and, when applied with common sense, will enable any school music director to conduct his or her orchestra with understanding and satisfaction.

Too often we become immersed in technical verbiage and obsessed with simplification of performance designed to facilitate playing. This practice, however well-intentioned, is detrimental to the student's interest, enthusiasm, and musical growth. If students are permitted from the earliest stages to perform music in its proper style and intent, they will not later find they must completely revise their musical comprehension as they mature and develop. *D*

