

Laurence Shapiro

The Violin Student in Search of Himself

INTRODUCTION

“How can I keep my bow from bouncing?”

“My vibrato gets tight all of a sudden.”

“My stomach gets tied in knots.”

“Suddenly I can’t use the lower part of the bow.”

“My legs start shaking.”

“My heart beats so fast, I can’t control anything.”

“What can I do to control my nerves in performance?”

We have all heard these questions and complaints many times. We have all attempted, haltingly, to answer them. Yet we realize that there is an intrinsic irony in trying to solve performance problems for someone else when we have not yet solved them completely for ourselves.

In an attempt to define the causes of this universal, the practice-performing dichotomy, I shall start with some broader thoughts, not directly related to violin playing or, in fact, to music at all, but pertaining to the preliminaries for any creative endeavor. In the second section of this chapter I shall examine, in a general way, the actual phenomenon of playing the violin; and in the third section I shall focus on specific technical or mental-technical problems. The closing section will deal with the lifeblood of creativity—communication.

We are the children of emptiness. In less than one hundred years all our comforters have been taken from us. “God is dead,” cried Nietzsche. God, like Mark Twain, must have surprised to hear this. But the death of God-in-Man as a viable life force has certainly become an overwhelming reality.

“Family is dead,” we might also cry out. A seemingly entropic law pulls our nuclei apart with mindless, savage force, and sets us adrift in psychic space.

“Peace is dead,” we must also acknowledge. In the United States, particularly, we blow like Brownian tumbleweeds across the land, scattering seeds on often alien soils.

Finally and most devastatingly, we are alienated and even estranged from ourselves. In T. S. Elliot’s tragically accurate visions of a half-century ago, we are “hollow men” inhabiting a waste land. Our heads are indeed “filled with straw.” This existential malaise casts a powerful pall over our spiritual landscape and wafts easily into the soul of every individual who does not have the resources to fill himself with other than “straw.”

The hollow man is totally outer-directed and totally reflecting, for like the lifeless Moon, his light does not come from within. He is out of touch with himself, does not know he is out of touch with himself, has no idea of who he is, and spends his times running in place like Alice, feeling either vaguely uneasy or quietly desperate through all his grey life.

Although the preceding paragraphs are certainly bleak and despairing, they describe only a partial reality, for they represent merely the thick priming of our contemporary canvas. How we overlay that prime coat, what colors and textures we paint on it, will determine whether or not we can ultimately transform it into something rich and meaningful.

SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR GETTING IN TOUCH WITH ONESELF

I. Macrocosmic Approaches:

Twenty-four hundred years have passed since Socrates summarized his restless, ultimately fatal search with two words, “Know thyself.” No one before or since has dug a deeper philosophical foundation, though amazing structures have certainly been built upon it. Yet this terse motto, which is at the root of every human problem, is little practiced and less understood.

Granted to “know thyself” is a difficult task—no doubt, the *most* difficult one. Granted, it is unquestionably a lifelong task. Granted, too, that the pursuit is a frustrating one, that the moments of success are rare and fleeting, but the instant of *self-discovery* is so transcendent, beautiful, and charged with meaning that we come to realize that the most difficult task is also the only task worthy of the name.

In every sentient human being there exists an essential dichotomy, a primitive destructive force or being, bending all its energies toward frustrating the part of the self that is attempting to succeed. It does not matter whether we think of it as Dr. Doolittle’s Pushmi-Pullyu, as the Satan of the fundamentalist Christian, as the Part in the Child of Transactional Analysis, as the Engram of the Scientologist, or as the guilt trip of the Freudian analyst. The fact remains that we have all been victimized by it and frustrated in our efforts to reach the highest possible levels of creativity and happiness.

Main is a complex creature, indeed, truly the “ghost in the machine.” To know himself he must first know the machine intimately and treat it with great deference, for that is the only way he can come to know the elusive “ghost”—himself.

The Violinist as Athlete

On the first level is the basic well-being of the machine—the body. Playing the violin is a highly demanding physical endeavor, and like an athlete, the violinist must constantly be “in training.” The endurance required of the large muscles and the exquisite precision asked of the small muscles demand that we give utmost respect to the care and feeding of the body. The commonplaces of health must be scrupulously observed. I recommend that the violinist eat healthfully, take vitamins, get plenty of rest, and exercise regularly. One must not defile the body and senses with uppers, downers, or sidewaysers. Drugs, alcohol and sugar in excessive amounts, and smoking serve no constructive purpose.

The practice of Yoga has been going on for about six thousand years. The word itself means “union.” There are many different kinds of Yoga, each a separate way of life, though each can be practiced in conjunction with every other. Yoga does not claim to be a religion, though on its most mystical levels the union is one with God. The practice of simply Hatha Yoga—Yoga exercises—is a wonderful companion for any spiritual or religious pursuit, since it occupies itself with union on the first level—the level of this discussion, union with self.

On a totally physical level, Yoga exercises represent a fine fulfillment of the “violinist as athlete” concept. All Yoga positions, even the most elementary, are designed for two purposes: to stretch a portion of the body, and to remove tension. Surely limberness and relaxation are the two most sought-after physical goals of the violinist; the acquiring of these qualities alone would make the investment of fifteen or twenty minutes each morning very worthwhile.

When Yoga breathing is added to the practicing of the Asanahs (positions), a deeper level is reached. The concept of drawing in Prahna (life force) from the air while inhaling, and of the expelling impurities and tensions when exhaling, is a powerful piece of imager. The physiological benefits of deep, slow Yogic breathing—enrichment of the blood, greater stretch, and increased heart and lung capacity—

combine with the concept described above to produce a blissful feeling of well-being and inner peace that can linger for hours.

Since breathing is synonymous with life itself, this deep reflective use of breathing should be used throughout the day, not only in conjunction with the Asanahs. It is an invaluable aid to centering oneself before and during performance—of music or of any other demanding task.

An Actor Prepares

The theories of Konstantin Stanislavski and their realization by the Moscow Art Theatre represent the finest systematic transformation, from self-examination into art, in existence. Acting and musical performance are closely related. They are both re-creative arts, they both occur in time as well as space, and they both have the potential for reaching the most profound depths of human consciousness and the most transcendent and ecstatic moments of human experience. We musicians would be much poorer, indeed, if we failed to recognize the elements they have in common.

Stanislavski's "Method" exercises will produce a heightened awareness of one's body, an increased ability to concentrate and to *live in the moment*, and a profound knowledge of and intimacy with aspects of oneself of which one was not previously aware. Many people take acting classes simply to become freer physically and emotionally. They find acting much less expensive and much more effective than analysis. It seems to me almost imperative that musicians read Stanislavski and practice his exercises; they might also be well advised to take acting classes.

When I was a young college student, I came across a modest little book that changed my life, *Zen in the Art of Archery* by Eugen Herrigel. Its important message is the essential unity of man with his "thing," whether it be archery, flower arranging, inkbrush painting, or playing the violin. For the archer the moment comes when he, the bow, the arrow, the target, and the space between them become one. For the musician, after long contemplation of this mystical union, the moment can come when he, the instrument, the music, the sound, and the audience become one. I frequently find myself saying to a student, "You and your instrument must together become an instrument, a vehicle through which the music passes, like light through a stained-glass window."

II. "Doin' What Comes Naturally"

I have had the good fortune to know and to study with a number of fine musicians. One of the greatest a man who has profoundly influenced me, is Raphael Bronstein. Bronstein speaks about music and violin playing in almost metaphysical terms, in paradoxical aphorisms. All of them, however, derive from one basic insight: *The same is not the same!* In this section I shall discuss some of the manifestations of this essential paradox, first in the physical realm and then in the aural one.

The Wrongness of What Comes Naturally: The Body

What can it mean, "The same is not the same"? It means that although a person perceives himself as doing one thing, in fact something quite different is really happening. Through an understanding of this principle and its application, many playing problems can be overcome.

There is one other physical fact that we recognize: *The human body is not designed for playing the violin!* It is much better designed for playing the cello, or the piano, or the clarinet, or the dumber, or

tennis. Once we accept this unfortunate truth, it is possible to come to terms with the body and ultimately create for it an illusion of naturalness.

With knowledge of these two correlative principles—Bronstein’s paradox and the unsuitableness of the human body—half the battle is won, and we may, with intelligence and foresight, solve the physical problems involved.

Bow direction is perhaps the most widely recognized example of “The same is not the same.” It is well known that if the right arm travels “straight”—that is, in a way that feels “natural”—then the bow travels crookedly, the tip starting (on down-bow) behind the ear and ending over the fingerboard. The solution to this paradox is obvious: Cause the hand to travel a crooked path and the bow will travel straight.

I must at this point add a cautionary note: It is generally a *quite subtle* modification that must be made. The precise modification depends, of course, on the length of the player’s arm and on the position of the instrument. Adjusting the position of the instrument can, in fact, have a dramatically beneficial effect on bow direction. Many students, however, employ the corrective forward pumping motion both too soon and too much, to the point where the tip of the bow is angled toward the bridge; in this position the more pressure that is applied the harsher and more choked the tone will be.

From this simple example it may be seen that paradox-solving is a very tricky business. Each student must see himself as an individual and a unique physical person, and must be treated as such by his teacher.

Place your left hand on the nearest flat surface, palm down, in a totally relaxed position. You will immediately see why everyone, from beginners to professionals, has difficulty playing well in tune. So, with respect to intonation also, the body is not designed for playing the violin. The hand is innocent of such refinements as half-steps and whole-steps. The ring finger in particular lies impotent, lacking the independence of the others and located much too close for a whole-step. The fourth finger is much shorter than the others and emerges from the hand at the “wrong” angle. When one adds to these difficulties the fact that the interval size shrinks as one ascends, and the fact that new variables are introduced on each string, it is no wonder that perfect intonation is the rarest musical flower of all.

Yet there is a simple principle that will produce fine, resonant intonation in most contexts. Like all simple principles it is easier said than done. But if the student can train his mind to observe it scrupulously, his hand will respond with dramatically improved intonation. The principle: *large whole-step relationships and small half-step relationships*. The word “relationships” includes notes played on adjacent strings. The half-step relationships are therefore half-steps, tritones, and minor sixths; the whole-step relationships are whole-steps, perfect fourths, and major sixths.

Once in a studio class, when I was going on at some length about the importance of developing extensions between all combinations of fingers, a student challenged me with, “Why do we have a practice extensions, anyway?” I thought a moment and suddenly knew the answer. “So that we can play in tune in first position,” I answered her.

As the Yogis say, “The body seeks comfort.” That is the body’s mistake, perhaps the greatest example of the wrongness of “doin’ what comes naturally.” As the auto mechanic on a television commercial says, “You can pay me now [for an oil filter] or you can pay me later [for a major engine repair].” Analogously, what we call “comfort” in youth is really laziness, which we “pay for later” with stiffness in middle and old age. I would much prefer to “pay now” with a little daily “discomfort” (Yoga exercises) in order to keep the spine and limbs young and supple throughout a long life.

Similarly, the hand seeks comfort. Like a violin string, it seeks to go back where it came from. That is why it must be stretched out every day, gently but firmly. Only then can it reasonably be called upon to produce perfect intonation in the most difficult place—in first position.

Now it is only fair to point out that the violin is not made for playing the body! As one crosses the strings from E to G one realizes again that “The same is not the same.” With the same bow pressure the volume diminishes, for the A-string is not as brilliant as the E, the D is much duller than the A, and the G, though as loud or louder than the D, is nevertheless much darker in color. In addition there is the illusion problem: The listener automatically perceives a descending line as getting softer, even if it doesn’t, so that double compensation must often be made.

In descending scale wise motion there is yet another problem: The same finger pressure on a less-resonant finger (4 after 1, or 3 after 0) will itself cause a considerable rupture in the line. Not only the bow must compensate, but the finger as well.

These are only two of the many reasons for practicing scales. Ultimately we find they contain almost all the problems to be encountered in the repertoire.

Before leaving this section I would like to make a final suggestion. The first rule of beautiful tone production is: *The comfort of the bow arm is of paramount importance.* Since the arm is not comfortable either scraping alongside the body or hoisted up above the shoulder, it is strongly suggested that the student develop the technique of “playing the bow with the violin”—bringing the extreme strings (G and E) close to the bow. The platform of the violin can easily be flattened or tilted with a subtle motion of the back and/or shoulder, thus radically diminishing the vertical distance the bow arm must travel.

The Rightness of What Comes Naturally: The Sound

Last year several of my students banded together and had a T shirt made for me. I was very touched by the gesture, and was particularly pleased by what they had selected, for it is certainly one of the most important tenets of my teaching. On the front is printed:

PLAY OFF YOUR SOUND SHAPIROISM NUMBER 1001

Play off your sound. The words themselves have a lovely ring, as does their application. But what, exactly, does this slogan mean?

Sound is one of the most basic, primitive, and pervasive of all realities. The entire universe and everything in it are in a constant and eternal state of vibration—a kind of cosmic hum. Even the Bible agrees, for “In the beginning was the word.” (Perhaps that is why during rare ecstatic moments—often while alone-one feels something close to a religious experience, binding him to the sound, sound that his is both producing and being immersed in.)

Sound is an overwhelming reality, a constant stream of majestic power waiting to be tapped, waiting to envelop the player in himself. *But most players never hear themselves!* That is not a glib statement tossed out for its shock value; it is a fact.

While you are playing, have someone turn off the light suddenly. Continue playing and listen. What you hear will probably amaze you. For the first time you will have no way to throw up barriers between yourself and the sound. With the too-powerful sense of sight removed, you will no longer be able to worry about position, bow direction, elbows, thumbs, feet, sheet music, or any other visual

distractions. You will know the black velvet embracing you and the sound. You will hear an immediate and marked improvement in beauty of tone, vibrato, intonation, and phrasing.

Now it becomes clear that there are really two quite polarized approaches to violin playing. The first directed by the left side of the brain, which processes information serially and linearly and is highly rational. It trains the body, bit by bit, to do everything necessary to produce a beautiful, appropriate, and in-tune sound. It works from the body to the sound.

The second approach is directed by the right side of the brain, which is intuitive, primitive, and non-rational. It consists of imagining the sound first, playing off that image, and allowing the body to find the means to reproduce that sound. It works from the sound to the body.

Practice in the dark. If you can't make the room dark during the day, close your eyes. Let your senses overlap, so that in a synesthetic raps you suddenly feel you are *touching the sound* with your fingertips. Then listen.

III. MICROCOSMIC APPROACHES: SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR GETTING IN TOUCH WITH ONE'S BODY—MIND AND ITS INSTRUMENTAL EXTENSION

Earlier I suggested the image of the violinist and his instrument together becoming an instrument. But this cannot happen until certain specific awarenesses have been programmed in the brain. The reader may immediately assume that this is fancy language for plain old practicing. Such is not the case, for nonspecific, inattentive, lackadaisical, or low-energy practicing will yield relatively little return for one's time. Practicing which is not existential—that is, which is not grounded in the moment-to-moment concentration, with great sensory awareness, and with knowledge of the ways in which the mind and the body learn best.

Music minus One

The great Brazilian cellist Aldo Parisot once said jokingly that someone should invent a cutaway cello, similar to a cutaway guitar, so that the body of the instrument would not hinder shifting. Yet Parisot deals with an instrument that is fairly comfortable to play. It is firmly rooted in the floor, and one need not fear dropping it.

But what of the poor violinist? What is his floor? Obviously it is his own body, particularly his upper chest and his head. Only when the instrument is supported firmly, without the aid of the hand, can one comfortably proceed to more complex matters, such as shifting. A shoulder pad of some kind may definitely be employed, for the “support system” must be established with a minimum of back-muscle involvement. (“Chest pad” would be a much more accurate and useful description of this object.)

A simple way to encourage the mind to focus on this firm platform, or “support system,” is to remove the left thumb from the instrument! You will immediately be forced to support the instrument with your body and a heavy head. With the thumb removed temporarily, many problems can be alleviated: Clenching the instrument is no longer possible, shifting becomes fluid and all jerks are eliminated, and a much more specific knowledge of the fingerboard is gained. And with the reluctant thumb gone, the elbow comes around naturally when necessary, eliminating the barrier to shifting posed by the body of the instrument.

Most important of all, you become aware of the true source of support for the instrument and learn how that support can give freedom to the hand. Ten or fifteen minutes daily should be devoted to practicing without using the thumb.

The Ice Cream Scoop

If I had to describe in a brief phrase the essential characteristics of a fine position—which was beautiful, utile, and strong—I would say, *straight forearms and round hands*. Actually the achievement of one often suffices to produce the other, though both should be pursued as worth goals.

To achieve straight forearms (without bent wrists), I suggest spending several minutes daily before a mirror observing the improvements brought about by two exercises: To bring the left hand into line, hold the thumb fairly high and straight up. To solve the bent-wrist problem of the right hand, practice an athletic follow-through by the forearm on up-bow, so that the back of the wrists ends up somewhere near the nose.

Concerning round hands, the problem is not so easily disposed of, for the hands must not only be round but also be strong in the round shape. The naturalness of the round hand shape can be demonstrated by making fists, relaxing them, and sticking a violin into one and a bow into the other. But we do not play the violin with our fists, and the round strength must be developed in the individual fingers of both hands.

People crush paper, squeeze handballs, and do bizarre things with rubber bands in an effort to gain the needed strength. But these devices build only a generalized power in the hands, suitable perhaps for protecting oneself from bone-crushing well-wishers in the greenroom, but not for such tasks as trilling thirds or playing pianissimo string skips at the frog.

I have found only one device that builds round strength. It can be bought at the supermarket for a dollar, comes in a plastic or metal in a variety of attractive colors, and can even be used for festive occasions. It is the ice cream scoop, a modest gadget perfectly designed for developing round strength in the third and fourth fingers of each hand. Oppose the third and fourth fingers, individually or together, with the thumb; then squeeze. Remember to keep the fingers round. It is also useful to carry one's case with these two fingers, lifting it up and down while walking. Alternate hands frequently to avoid strain.

The Development of Extensions

A ballet dancer, a gymnast, or a football player would never dream of performing without a long and carefully graded limbering and stretching of the body. Yet we think nothing of picking up the violin and subjecting the hand to violent abuse, forcing it to stretch when it is not ready. Furthermore, almost all methods dealing with extending the hand go about it backwards, with possibly severe consequences, by starting low and ending high. In fact, they unwisely start in first position, where the intervals are the widest, and on the lowest string, where the stretch demands are even more dangerous. Since extensions are a fact of a violinist's life, and since playing in tune in first position is a worthy goal of such a life, extensions must be developed, of course. But that process must be done gently, gradually, and with common sense. I have formulated a set of simple exercises that safely develop a considerable extending ability and that have the added benefit of sharpening the ear.

Select a pair of fingers—let us say, 3 and 4—and work with a double-stop that would be ludicrously large in first position—in this case a major seventh. Work only on the A- and E-strings, where the extensions are the smallest. Don't even attempt to play the interval in first position but go immediately to the corresponding pitches one octave above first position. You will be pleasantly surprised to find that the interval is quite feasible up there. By "inch-worming" down slowly from this position:

M7—m7 M7—m7 M7—m7 M7—m7, etc.
 D-C#—D-C C#-C—C#-B C-B—C-B(flat) B-B(flat)—B-A

you will soon develop a fine feeling of rubbery strength between these two fingers. Repeat each interval at least once, so that the descent will be as slow as possible.

Whenever you practice extensions, vibrate continuously; if you can vibrate, you are not dangerously extended. Do not descend to the point of actual pain. Tomorrow is another day, and perhaps you will go one half-step farther then. Someday you might even get all the way down to first position. If the M7—m7 is too large for you initially, begin with one half-step smaller, with m7—M6. The principle remains the same, and you will gain the same facility. The other intervals I use are:

Finger Pair	Interval
2-3	M7—m7
1-2	M9—m9
2-4	M9—m9
1-3	m10—M9
1-4	A11—P11

Give each vibrating intervals two long, sustained bow strokes, for the descent must be very gradual if you are to realize the full benefits of the exercise and avoid strain. In addition, it is important to develop the extension from the thumb, which is invaluable in high positions.

Mastering Passages by Redirecting the Mind

Music occurs in time. One note leads to another in an orderly, linear sequence. Therefore, the preliminary procedure toward ultimate mastery must be performed on this most primitive level, that of, connecting one note to the next. I shall use the Presto from Bach's Sonata in G minor for the examples. Ex. 1 presents the first step, which should be played beginning both down- and up-bow.



Ex. 1

The second procedure involves a diversion in the form of speed, but speed only in the right hand. Play the same passage giving each note four rapid spiccato (or détaché) strokes (as in Ex. 2). This playing will accomplish a variety of goals: (1) The torpid fingers will speak with springs, since the correct moment for lifting or dropping has suddenly become a very brief one. (2) You begin to locate the two elements that make the passage problematical—shifts and string-crossings (or skips). (3) While the mind is diverted to

the precision requirements of the bow, the left hand continues to learn the notes—but at a very slow melodic speed.

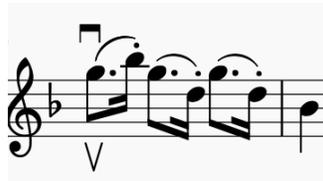


Ex. 2

Next, repeat the passage in precisely the same fashion but starting up-bow. You will instantly feel much less in control, and you will have to concentrate even more on precise coordination. You will be learning to an even greater degree the location of string-crossings and shifts. And the left hand will continue, in its unhurried pace, to learn the notes.

The next step is to increase the melodic speed gradually. First increase it by 33 percent by reducing the number of strokes per note from four to three; then increase it another 50 percent by going from three strokes to two. Play each reduction beginning down-bow and then up-bow. At each step the concentration demands for coordination of the bow become greater. And off in a mental corner, the fingers keep on learning the notes.

The third procedure introduces the element of speed into the left hand, but in a way that the brain can deal with—on every other note, using dotted rhythms. First the passage is treated with a dotted eighth-sixteenth pattern, as in Ex. 3; then with a Hungarian style sixteenth-dotted eighth pattern, shown in Ex. 4.



Ex. 3



Ex. 4

Examining this bowing, it is *not* to be played like that in Ex. 5, which cannot be cleanly articulated. Remember to begin each treatment both down- and up-bow.



Ex. 5

Finally you are ready for the fourth procedure—building up the continuous speed of the passage with a metronome. My method is to select the tempo I wish to reach, go one marking beyond it, and count back nine markings. I then play it once at that very slow speed, twice at the next, three times at the next, and so on, until ultimately I play it ten times at one marking beyond the ideal tempo.

The sequence involves a minimum of 67 playings of a given passage. That may seem terribly time-consuming, but it is the closest thing to a shortcut we have in our craft. A player may pirouette through a passage ten thousand times, but if he is too fast, sloppy, or inattentive (all of which he probably will be), he will never truly know it. But if he uses the method outlined above, he will possess it permanently.

Memorization

The most destructive phrase among musicians must be “Let’s take it from the top.” The “top” is generally polished until it gleams, but rare is the performance that radiates such a golden sheen throughout. Many a soloist, quartet, or orchestra staggers headlong from the brilliant clearing of the “top” into an unfamiliar forest of form and content.

“Backwards chaining” is one of the few psychological theories that must have been demonstrated to be effective in practice. As an aid to both sophisticated learning and memory, it is unsurpassed. Nothing else can give the player such a feeling of security and comfort, for unlike the “take-it-from-the-topper,” the “backwards chained” is going into ever *more* familiar territory.

Like the procedures described in the last section, all that is required is patience and concentration. The technique is ridiculously simple: Begin by playing the last measure; then play the last two measures; follow this, not surprisingly, with a playing of the last three measures, etc. (Do not attempt to do an entire movement in this way, unless you have several days at your disposal. Work with the last section, then the next to last section, etc.) Again, it may be pointed out that this arduous, time-consuming procedure is, in fact, a kind of shortcut, for once you learn and memorize the piece in this way, it is yours for life.

A Helping Hand

Mr. Bronstein used to say, “The hands must be like acrobats: They work in complete harmony, yet each is perfectly independent.” I suspect that Mr. Bronstein was describing a Platonic ideal to be sought after, not a reality. Obviously there are many times when the hands must act in opposition (e.g., in a rapid, slurred passage to be played pianissimo, the fingers of the left hand will speak like a machine-gun bullets, while the right hand floats across the string, like cotton candy).

But out two halves are rather tightly strung together, and each has enormous sympathy for the other. In many cases a problem in one hand can be minimized or eliminated by sympathetic behavior in the other. I shall cite only two examples, though many more could be called forth.

Let us say, for the first case, that a rapid slurred passage with a sudden ascending shift in the middle is causing problems. You play the passage over and over, but you continue to have great difficulty around the shift. The notes before and after it remain jerky, fuzzy, and out of tune. With a sudden increase of the bow speed in the vicinity of the shift, the jerkiness in the left hand will disappear, the shift will reach far enough, and the notes that follow will be clear and in tune.

In the second case a note must be sustained powerfully and dramatically. You cannot prevent yourself from using excessive bow speed, paradoxically thwarting the very goals you set out to achieve. But if you employ an intense vibrato after the initial attack, the bow will instantly stick to the string like glue, and you will achieve the necessary sustaining.

These two examples involve real problems in one hand that can be solved by sympathetic behavior in the other. But there is another large category of apparent problems, in which the problem actually does reside in the other hand. How often has a student crunched the bow with excessive pressure, in an attempt to produce a loud clear tone, when in fact the problem is really insufficient finger pressure in the left hand! How often has a slide to a harmonic failed to arrive because the bow is no longer on the string!

If a technical problem appears to be troubling you in one hand, try looking at the other before assigning culpability.

Isolation

For Plato the so-called free man was actually a total slave—to his passions, appetites, and illusions. The *truly* free man was highly self-disciplined, self-denying, and self-knowing. This paradox is as urgent a messenger truth today as it was for Plato. It is, in fact, largely through paradox that we find true meaning in our lives.

Our goal as musicians is to create a community of one, a many-faceted system that functions in perfect inner harmony. In the studio, through the use of an organic vehicle such as “playing off your sound,” it may well come into being. Even in performance the magic might sometimes happen.

But the true artist is first a craftsman. Like Stanislavski’s actor he “prepares,” “builds his character,” does his Method exercises. Only then does he go on stage—secure in the knowledge that he has done all he can to prepare himself—and act. And sometimes he is touched by a divine spark, and he becomes the character.

Here is the paradox: *Self-union can only be achieved by building each separate part in isolation.* It cannot be willed into being; the more you try to force it to happen, the deeper it will hide. Each element must be worked on as separately as is possible.

That would seem to be a joyless endeavor, but for a wonderful phenomenon: As one aspect of playing is improved, it infects the others, so that the process of creating a union with oneself, of developing a harmonious whole system, is constantly being accelerated.

If you are working on intonation, don’t worry about bow direction; if tonal clarity, with each finger in the center of its pad, is your goal, don’t concern yourself with bow distribution; if a sustained ribbon of sound from frog to tip is your target, don’t fret about vibrato. Practice in isolation: the union will take care of itself. Both extremes must be included in daily practice, however: Each day should close with one or two full-energy performance run-throughs, so that you do not get squeezed down into tiny, inhibiting, analytical box.

Why practice so diligently, anyway? In this era of moral relativism and so-called situational ethics, it seems almost inappropriate to bring such integrity to one's work. The answer can only come from within the self.

For Maimonides it was simple: Each man has inside him a moral imperative toward perfection.

For St. Thomas Aquinas it was also obvious: We are all vessels—of different sizes, to be sure—but vessels nonetheless, which must be filled.

For Pablo Casals the answer was perhaps most eloquent, and certainly most relevant to us. After he had passed his ninetieth birthday he was asked, “Don Pablo, you have been acknowledged as the world's greatest cellist for well over sixty years now; why do you continue to practice three hours every day?”

The little man replied, “Because I feel I am making progress.”

IV. COMMUNICATION

So far this chapter has concentrated on ways to achieve communication with oneself. But we live among people, and now it is time to consider ways of reaching out to others.

Student—Teacher

To the student: You are a member of the questioning generations. You have every right to be cynical, critical, and discouraged by much of the world around you. But when you put yourself in the hands of a violin teacher, you must suspend all judgmental attitudes. The ancient craftsman relationship of master and apprentice must be embraced, as you give yourself wholeheartedly and completely the ideas of your teacher. To do otherwise is only to steal from yourself. Like an uncritical sponge, you must soak up every drop of technical insight and musical wisdom. Later on, when you have finished this part of your studies, you may look back with more discrimination and carefully discard what is not right for you.

To the teacher: Let us assume that the student has fulfilled his part of the bargain: He has brought to the relationship sufficient intelligence, acceptable tools, a receptive attitude, and good will. The responsibility is now yours: You must find the means to communicate with him.

Pedagogy is composed of one part speech craft and nine parts repetition. You must be artful enough to find the language spoken to your student and his body, and then you must be willing to repeat yourself, ad nauseam, until you have gotten through to him.

The repetition part is clear enough—but what of the linguistic one? You must be able to willing to express the same concept many different ways, until one rings a bell with a particular student, and he is able to achieve the specific goal you are both striving for.

In the area of student-teacher communication then, given an atmosphere of goodwill, it may be said that there are no failures on the part of the student, only those of the teacher—and none of us is immune to such a failure occasionally.

Composer—Performer

Gustav Mahler was the greatest conductor of his time, particularly for the operas of Wagner. He drove himself and his orchestra pitilessly in his striving for excellence. The musicians resented this man, who treated them simply as extensions of himself—a self for whom he had no consideration—in his reaching out for perfection. But his performances were memorable, for he sought, in the words of Bruno

Walter, “to re-create the moment of creation.” What an awesome assignment, and yet how rich the rewards for even partial success!

Creative artists are touched by the hand of Plato’s “divine madness.” Thus they live on a much deeper level of human consciousness than do most people. Their moments of ecstasy are transcendent, their moment of despair unbearably desolate. The blueprint they entrust to us is endowed with these larger-than-life qualities.

We must immerse ourselves in the composer, in his time, in his life. We must seek to crawl inside him, to become him. We must fall in love with the soul mirrored in his music. With perfect fidelity to the blueprint, we must seek, in every way possible, to divine his intentions—to “re-create the moment of creation.” That is our mission as performers. To the extent that we succeed, our lives and the lives of our listeners are deepened, ennobled, and enriched forever.

Performer—Audience

The composer sets down the symbols; the performer actualizes them; but only when the audience receives them is the experience completed, only then is the longing of the blueprint fulfilled. Yet the tragic irony of the performer’s life is that the presence of the audience makes him “nervous” and prevents him from delivering the message of beauty—a message he knows so well in the practice room.

The nimble mind must be stilled. Time must stop. All outer-directed strands of the self must be recalled, and the player must achieve a state of exclusive communion with himself. This is the great paradox of music: *The only way to communicate with an audience is to withdraw from it entirely.*

Nerves cannot be banished with an effort of will, but they can be crowded out of the consciousness so completely that their message never reaches the brain, and therefore cannot be transferred to any part of the body. In the prototype for this technique, the Lamaze method of natural childbirth, pain is not banished, but it is so completely crowded out of the consciousness by breathing exercises and focusing of the eyes, that its message never reaches the brain.

In filling the brain so completely an existential dimension enters, for when the self is that firmly centered, there is no room for the twin time-devils—Past and Future. One is totally grounded in the moment.

David Oistrakh was once asked whether everything he did on stage was planned. “Every whisper,” was the answer. Every bow-speed pattern was completely choreographed in advance. Completely filling his mind with moment-to-moment technical assignments, Oistrakh was an outstanding exemplar of this approach.

Richard Burton’s memorable *Hamlet* of about twelve years ago, which was generated entirely by oval-technical means—pitch, volume, and duration—is another remarkable example. No building of the character was employed, no emotional memory was engaged in, yet audiences were consistently moved by Burton’s performance.

The great contemporary pedagogue Dorothy Delay is primarily an exponent of Technical Programming. The numbers outstanding young artists she has produced are a living testimony to the efficacy of this approach.

Taken together, these three examples make clear the often illusory nature of a great performance. For with this approach it matters not what emotions or personal fulfillment the performer feels (or does not feel). The only thing that matters is how the audience is affected.

There exists in each of us a primitive turbulence, a mass of often undefined emotions, which we spend much of our psychic energy in repressing. The Method seeks to free that trapped power and make

constructive use of it by channeling it into performance. The fascinating thing about this approach is that the emotion tapped need not correspond to the emotions called for in a given musical movement or dramatic scene! All that is needed is to release some emotion—any emotion—whichever one seems to be the essential you at the moment. It can be anger, hatred, or even frustration. If you can develop the courage to face it and then tap into it, you and your audience are in store for a powerful, exhausting experience.

The only drawback to this approach is that it is so terrible draining. On a long concert tour or an extended theatrical run, it is not practical or safe. That is why Peter Brooke's Broadway production of *Marat/Sade* had several alternating casts, so that the actors could recover from the exhausting experience of spilling their emotional guts on stage every night. Even so, a number of them suffered nervous collapses during and after the long run of the play. Your emotional store is more powerful than you imagine. Tap into it with great care.

When my brothers were little boys and the time came to go to bed, my father would say to them, "Kiss your father as though you love him." Of course, they proceeded to embrace him with great warmth, for the gentle humor of the suggestion very effectively focused their feelings. The use of the fantasy phrase "as though" (you love him) brought home to them that, in fact, they did.

Often I say to my students, "Play the music as though it were beautiful." They chuckle at the irony of the phrase, but suddenly realize that they have been figuratively giving the music only a perfunctory peck on the cheek—earnestly executing the notes instead of basking in their beauty, playing on the violin instead of in the violin, playing at the music instead of margin with it. I believe that artists who make us smile and feel warm inside—artists like Fritz Kreisler, Joseph Szigeti, and Josef Gingold—are inspired by the pure love of the music. Their primary motivating force is to play it "as though it were beautiful."

Filling the brain with this lovely, humanistic phrase is such a simplistic-sounding way of centering the self that many students have a difficult time taking it seriously. Yet for me it is the most effective path to creative solipsism. By surrendering myself totally to the realization that the music I am playing is really very beautiful, I find myself falling in love with it anew each moment. Then I can most easily reach that rare state where music, sound, instrument, and I become one—and that One is all that exists.