

CHAPTER 9

STRING PHRASING

9.1 Bowing

A statement such as that by Goll-Wilson (1990:9) to the effect that "the bow is to the violin what the air column is to the flute, and both need to be unrestricted" suggests that a wind player can learn much from studying the bowing patterns and/or techniques of violinists. Regarding musical sensitivity in general, and phrase playing in particular, Quantz (1966:90) states that "string players have a great advantage". There are two reasons for this: the different effects created by the up-bow and the down-bow, and the greater variety of attacks available to a string player.

9.1.1 Bowing choices

The string player is continually forced to make a choice between up-bow and down-bow. Even in passages which are marked *legato* he may have to make a number of bowing changes. This necessitates a continuous reflecting on the nature of the music and appropriate decision-making in order for the subsequent bowing patterns to best bring out the desired musical effect. In other words, the string player must delve into the very nature of the music in order to understand the phrase and its context; in order to choose the best bowings. Although this constant need to make decisions may appear to be a negative factor, and certainly is if incorrect decisions are made or if it interferes with feeling for or flow of the music, the added impetus of an extra down-bow or the added delicacy of an extra up-bow can add spice to what might become merely an attempt to play as smoothly or as evenly as possible. The cellist Anthony Pleeth (1982:69) sums up the master string player's position:

Once we understand the shape of a phrase, then *it* will guide us to the bowings needed to give it its existence; in the end it is not

should adhere to the written markings just because the composer put them there.

Brymer's example and advice is the exact opposite of that usually encountered. The usual situation, which initially instigated this dissertation, is where wind music is marked with vague too-long slurs which need to be further articulated in order to bring out the subtle inner phrases. Nevertheless Brymer is merely approaching the same problem of meaningful phrasing from the opposite direction.

Any analogy or simile can only be taken just *so far*, but in ambiguous phrasing situations the wind player should take cognisance of how a string player would approach and solve a phrasing/bowing problem. An answer that is both more immediate and more meaningful may thus be found more readily. For instance Tromlitz (1991:210) warns against playing fast passages without due articulation, and equates this to "a violinist who did not use any bowings in fast passages other than pulling it down for its full length, and shoving it back up again for just as long, each time droning out as many notes as he could with each bow-stroke".

Just as a string player needs to understand the inherent patterns of the music in order to choose the best bowing, so the wind player needs to similarly choose the best manner of phrasing. And getting a sense of the intensity of a certain down-bow attack, or the tenderness of a gentle up-bow stroke can add to the wind player's interpretation of a phrase.

9.1.2 Bow attacks

The variety of types and strengths of attacks is considerably greater on a string instrument than on a wind instrument. Not only that, but a greater degree of homogeneity is available than on wind instruments, where the type and intensity of attacks available varies greatly with range. A soft attack on a low oboe note is virtually impossible, whereas a *sforzando* attack on a low flute note is extremely difficult. Thus the wind player can often only try to emulate the string player in his playing of first notes of phrases.

But one mistaken concept must be laid to rest: The wind player's choice of 'to tongue, or not to tongue', is not simply the equivalent of a string player's choice of up-bow or down-bow. The situations are in many areas analogous, but in the following complex ways:

- * The bow meeting the string is analogous to the airstream as it strikes the edge of the flute mouth-hole (or enters the reed of a reed instrument) and produces a sound.
- * The bow in action on the string is analogous to the diaphragmatic/intercostal control of the airstream.
- * The speed with which the bow is set in action, the part of the bow used (frog or heel), the direction of the bow (up or down) and the weight given to the bow on the string at the moment of attack are analogous to the force given to the airstream (and therefore the speed thereof), the type of tongue action used and the type of embouchure used.
- * After the sound has been initiated in, for example, a *tenuto* attack, the speed and weight of the bow is analogous to the diaphragm/intercostal supporting action only, with the embouchure in an accommodating role (the tongue having done its work).
- * The subtle work done by the wrist, hand and fingers is analogous to subtle embouchure changes made (in conjunction with the support levels) during the various types of attack.
- * String dynamics in the course of a phrase are effected by the speed of the bow and the pressure on the string; wind dynamics are effected by airstream speed and pressure exerted on the airstream by the embouchure.

Wind players too often articulate in a monotonous way, and would do well to

consider the variety of effects created by both up- and down-bows at the various sections of the bow, and the bow speeds used to effect the various attacks.

9.2 A special bowing case

Blum (1986:70-71) in conversations with a string quartet asked the members how they interpreted the repeated notes in the following two string passages as notated by Beethoven:

Example 9-2a: Beethoven, *Grosse Fuge* Op. 133, mm. 26-30

Allegro
26

sempre pp

Vln. 1

Example 9-2b: Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 130, V:53-54

Adagio molto espressivo

For Ex. 9-2a Dalley (in Blum 1986:71) suggests playing "something between one note and two notes, possibly a double pulsation [...] with the vibrato, because it's hard to keep from doing too much if you make two impulses with the bow." Steinhardt, however, describes both making a "kind of swell from the first note to the second" and making "the second note an echo of the first". It is important, he

says, to "convey a sense of tremulous agitation". Other concepts mentioned by the various string quartet members include: "some sort of shading"; and "[t]here's no certainty that Beethoven meant the figure to be interpreted in the same way in every case". It was agreed that the indicated dynamic would have a distinct bearing on the method employed.

The wind player can learn from this that musicians who are used to working on levels of great subtlety consider all possibilities and do not necessarily accept the score at face value. As Steinhardt says (in Blum 1986:71): "The most important determining factor in interpretation should always be the musical context rather than simply the way in which the notes are written."

Blum (1986:71) also quotes pianist Artur Schnabel as saying, in regard to similar repeated notes in Beethoven's piano music: "Perhaps it might be helpful to take some suitable word for this pair, a monosyllable, such as Du, whose vowel takes on a soulful emphasis." That statement suggests that perhaps the wind player has the subtle means to interpret this particular effect more successfully than either a pianist or a string player - in this case by subtly articulating under the slur, and within the airstream. Not only must wind players use this subtle means of articulation, but also learn from the string player's art - as a great pianist can learn from that of the wind player.

9.3 Bowing analogies

Brymer (1979:162) is not alone in suggesting that the wind player use a "phantom bow-arm" in order to more fully understand how to slur and articulate a phrase (see Chapter 9.1.1). Flutist Alain Marion (in Goll-Wilson 1992b:9) in his masterclasses describes wind phrasing in terms of bowing patterns, using physical demonstrations as a teaching tool to provide both a visual and a kinaesthetic feeling. It is possible to 'imagine' articulating from the wrist, from the elbow or from the shoulder - each providing its own kinetic impetus.

It may not even be necessary to use physical actions at all, for Kincaid (Krell 1973:20) says that the wind player should "mentally superimpose the up and down bowing inflections". He is not suggesting that one should in any way attempt to visualise a violinist, or his bowing actions while actually performing. Rather that during practise, or as a teaching tool, it is the vital feel (sensation) of bowing patterns and strengths that gives insight into the energy levels and undulations of phrases.

As a descriptive teaching device then, bowing patterns and attacks can provide clues as to both the meaning and dynamic flow of phrases. They should also help provide insight into how to more subtly apply articulation and slurring to a phrase; more subtle than that exhibited in, for instance, the following insight-lacking and insensitive phrasing:

Example 9-3a: Griffes, Poem, mm. 268-280

This example demands more sensitivity, more shaping, more nuance (the reverse of Brymer's Brahms situation, Exx. 9-1a and 9-1b). Imagining the phrase bowed by a string player might result in the slur patterns of Ex. 9-3b; bowings (n = nobilis = down-bow; V = vilis = up-bow) are provided for the first note of each slur.

Example 9-3b: Griffes, Poem, mm. 268-280 (re-slurred and bowed by the author)

The image shows a musical score for a piece by Griffes, specifically measures 268-280. The score is written on four staves. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#), and a time signature of 2/4. It is marked 'P a tempo'. The music consists of a series of eighth and sixteenth notes, some grouped with slurs. Above the notes, there are several 'V' markings, likely indicating accents or bowing changes. A dynamic marking 'p' (piano) is placed below the first staff. The second staff continues the melodic line, with a '4' and '5' written below it, possibly indicating fingerings. The third staff shows a gradual decrease in volume, marked 'dim.' (diminuendo). The fourth staff is a smaller fragment of the music, showing a few notes and slurs.

Either the tongue, with a subtle variety of attacks (including Brymer's "gentle brush of the tongue"), or merely the breath will articulate the first note of each slur, on which the bowing changes occurs. If subtly done an enhanced, more meaningful, legato phrase will have emerged.

9.4 Summary

All instrumentalists can learn from the strengths and tendencies of other instruments. A sense of bowing patterns and intensities can add to a wind player's interpretative palette, by suggesting how phrases, by means of slurs and articulations, can be given more meaningful direction. Especially, the kinaesthetic 'feel' of actually bowing a phrase can lead to it being given the right impetus.