

OLD TIME FIDDLING

PLAYING HABITS, LEARNING CONTEXT AND EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO THE VIOLIN

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I feel that my involvement in old-time fiddling has proven extremely beneficial for both my playing and sense of musicianship in general. In order to justify this assertion, I would like to examine a few aspects of old-time fiddling and make a few short comments. These comments will be based on my short old-time fiddling experience and some general views on skill development and the acquisition of knowledge. I am aware of course that by no means are they valid among all practitioners of old-time fiddle, but I think they describe certain tendencies, strong enough to be ascribed to the very nature of this musical tradition and its performance.



Just after I heard Bruce Molsky playing live for the first time. London, 2002.

Playing the ‘wrong’ way

Old-time fiddlers very often adopt ‘unorthodox’ ways of playing the violin. ‘Unorthodox’ here will refer to approaches that on one hand do not satisfy the technical demands of what we can generally call ‘classical technique’ and on the other do not go beyond certain objective physical limitations. Playing the violin behind the back for example is indeed something possible (as several great performers have showed us) but it is no longer an unorthodox way of playing in the sense explained here.

There are two striking habits that appear among a considerable number of old-time fiddlers: their tendency to hold the fiddle against their chest rather than the classical way, and their tendency to hold the bow in all sort of weird ways, often gripping it away from the frog. For a classically trained violinist the image of someone playing this way is alien. However, these habits among old-time fiddlers should not be seen as restricting or simply wrong. I believe they are deeply meaningful and rooted in legitimate stylistic and musical aspirations.

But why hold the fiddle against the chest? Since the biggest part of old-time fiddle repertoire requires playing only in the first position, shifting positions in old-time fiddling is not very common. There is even a tune called ‘Quince Dillons high D tune’ obviously named after the fact that the fiddler needs to shift in order to play a high D note on the E string. At the same time, it is widely held that holding the violin the classical way allows for easier changing of positions. And this is obviously true. But many folk fiddlers around the world do not really need classical techniques in order to be fair to their beloved musical traditions.

So one basic reason for why old-time fiddlers often hold the violin against their chest is simply because... they do not have to hold it otherwise. Consequently, there is absolutely no point in criticizing and commenting on old-time fiddlers’ technique from a classical point of view. On the contrary, I believe that holding the violin against the chest in this tradition is an excellent manifestation of economy playing. It is a theory-free habit, which

crystallizes through time and the need to play favorite tunes. And of course the idea of economy of physical effort is of great importance in learning an instrument.

Holding the fiddle against the chest also allows performers to have optimum visual contact with their fellow musicians and the environment, something which not only enhances musical communication but also creates a healthier, more intimate and organic relationship with what is going on around them. In addition, it enables them to have a good look at their instruments while playing, something which helps in monitoring technical elements like bowing, etc. (In classical music sometimes there is a stigma that if you have to look at your hands while you're playing then you're incompetent).

Finally, it accommodates and develops the ability to sing while playing. This is a very interesting skill developed by some old time fiddlers, which may not seem useful for people involved in other musical traditions. For me it is a further sign of a wide ability to receive and respond to musical or non-musical stimuli and information while playing. Ask violin players to say a short phrase or answer a short question while playing something simple. I believe that in most cases their playing will collapse in a second.

It is a fact that a lot of old-time fiddlers have a wide capacity for incoming information during performance. This is not because they are talented or gifted. It's simply because they operate within a musical tradition that encourages and calls for elements of communication and interaction during performance. Other musicians I have played with have such a narrow perception capacity, that they are unable to realize even on an elemental level what is going on around them musically and socially.

Being able to perceive, process and –even more so– to respond to information coming from outside is being able to interact musically and socially. It is an enviable performing quality and a big part of the whole musicianship discussion. I find it very interesting, and worth investigating and developing.

As far as the variety of bow grips among old time fiddlers are concerned, they seemed to me very strange at the beginning, but in many cases these bow grips did not confine their musical goals in any crucial way. I think personalized bow grips largely originate in the

need of old-time fiddlers to produce a percussive feel and effect with their bows, and to convey the dance feeling to their audiences. From that point of view, they constitute the bodily expression of a purely musical need rather than the implementation of a predetermined technical demand.

It is exactly this genuine and organic process that explains the development of a remarkably relaxed hand by some old-time fiddlers. I have come across old-time fiddlers whose right hand kinaesthetic quality would be envied by the average classical performer. And of course, the importance of a relaxed right hand while playing the violin cannot be overestimated.

There is also another broader implication that arises from this question of ‘unorthodoxy’. It can be compressed into these words by Christopher Small: *A fish is not aware of the water, since it knows nothing of any other medium*. In order to comprehend the nature of a certain principle, we must familiarize ourselves with the ‘different, ‘wrong’ or the ‘unorthodox’.

This is where I think the importance of the ‘unorthodox’ in old-time fiddling lies: The ways these people play represent a different source of empirical knowledge, experience and information, with which we have to acquaint ourselves and understand, in order to have that ‘binocular vision’ that the anthropologist Gregory Bateson has described as necessary for an all-embracing image of our world. Our two perspectives then come into a single, more reliable perspective according to Bateson’s principle that ‘two descriptions are better than one’.

I have found a nice formulation of this concept on the web by Sylvia S. Tognetti in the section of her work on Gregory Bateson titled ‘The value of diversity’: *Double descriptions are key to understanding relationships because these result from patterns of interaction that consist of stimulus, response and reinforcement, and provide a context for understanding behavior*. I find this comment valid enough within a musical context. It explains why acquaintance with diversity is a key idea that can prove useful while learning how to play an instrument.

Herbert Whone also suggests a similar concept in his book 'The simplicity of playing the violin' that can be applied in the learning process; it is the idea of understanding a thing by its opposite. The student is encouraged to consciously adopt an unorthodox approach in order to comprehend and achieve what is considered as 'correct' or 'desirable'.

This is in strong contrast with the incrimination of the 'wrong way' often present in violin methods and teaching approaches. Let's take an example: I have met violin teachers who would happily place mines on the fingerboard on the 'out of tune' areas if they could, in order to prevent their students from experimenting. I think this is often the conceptual background of a 'fixed' performing attitude, which is reflected on the body language and, eventually, sound of the musician. Not to mention the fact that acquaintance with the audible relationship between random frequencies (and not just between 'right' frequencies) sharpens hearing and the ability to differentiate between in tune and out of tune.

Therefore, I would insist that in order to foster a free musical mind and body, a violin teacher should encourage students –according to the above idea– to freely explore the fingerboard, in order to familiarize themselves with the feel, the traps and the sounds of it. This kind of process can enable musicians to defend any performing or technical aspects of their playing, as opposed to slavishly following a purely dictated system.

Classical violin technique has of course its own rules and principles. They are the quintessence of human experience and laws of physics, and have good reasons to exist. (We should not forget of course that even within this framework of generally accepted rules there are different violin schools, like the Russian or the Franco-Belgian. There are even different bowing techniques in 'authentic' performances of early music, e.g. baroque, which involve different hand positions from the traditional classical/romantic way of playing). At the same time, they are also style-defining and therefore necessary only for those who are after the instrument's maximum technical capabilities or certain sound qualities. These sound qualities are not necessarily 'better' than others and they certainly do not constitute a musical article of faith. Holding the violin the classical way

is not really a prerequisite for playing or enjoying, since obviously not everyone is interested in learning how to play Paganini's caprices.

The mosaic of individual approaches in old-time fiddling serves different musical ambitions, intentions and tastes. It represents a sizable reality in our musical world which cannot be ignored, and rightfully claims its stolen space of meaning and value next to everything else. It is not a threat to 'orthodox' violin technique, but explains it further, enriches it and probably questions it from time to time. In my mind, watching people adopting all weird approaches to playing the violin is charming on its own. Above all, it satisfies my strong instinctive need to see all the possible ways people do what I do, keeping my eyes and my ears thirsty.

Bow grip and bowing mentality

I believe the most interesting and striking element of old time fiddling is bowing. It is in this aspect of fiddle playing that the diversity, richness, and playful spirit of the tradition are compressed into. Bowing was the first thing that caught my attention the first time I discovered old time fiddling. I would like to discuss two aspects of old time bowing.

First, it is the diversity and character of bow grips. Old time fiddlers very often develop bow grips that are insulting to the average classical grip. However, I think they often have valid reasons for adopting these bow holds. As open minded musicians, we should make an effort to understand these habits before we rush into condemning them. Like many musicians around the world many fiddlers have managed to come up with personalized ways of playing their instruments, achieving however a high level of playability, skill and musicianship.

Second, it is what I think of as the overall mentality of old time bowing. I had stopped playing for a few years before I met self-taught old time fiddler Lucas Paisley from North Carolina. I was amazed at the overall kinesthetic quality of his bowing. His bowing mentality involved minimum amount of 'technique' but tons of musicianship and effortless groove. Lucas really encouraged me to start playing again. Many old time fiddlers offer a great example of musicians who learn how to play music in a purely

organic way by developing their performing attitude and skills as an integral part of the actual playing experience without approaching them as a ‘requirement’.

I am not a relativist when it comes to bow grip. I believe there are bad bow grips by definition. Beginners should be encouraged to get used to the classical bow hold or any of its legitimate variations. Given the mechanics of the modern bow construction, the classical bow hold is the way to go if we want to be able to produce a wide range of sounds. It all boils down to what we want to achieve. If we know what we want, then there are more or less effective ways of achieving the goals we’ve set. For example, if we wish to incorporate the rhythm chop into our playing, then holding the bow away from the frog is not really helpful, because we won’t be able to get that nice bite we needed for a good rhythm chop.

However, we often see old time fiddlers holding the bow away from frog. Why? Because they obviously feel they don’t need the full length of their bow. Many fiddlers are unconsciously aware of that and tend to hold their modern bows away from the frog thus shortening it somehow. If we look back in time we will see that it was the musical needs of each given time that dictated the advancements in instrument and bow construction. For example, bows during the Baroque period were shorter. Longer bows were developed to facilitate the need for playing longer notes like in singing. The same applies to posture and kinesthetics. 19th century violinists were generally playing with a lowered elbow and as a natural consequence their wrist was bent. Today however you can very often spot the classically trained violinist by noticing his raised elbow, a habit that naturally leads to a flatter wrist. Obviously, what used to be valid someday may seem unorthodox today and vice versa.

Bows used during the Baroque period were significantly different than modern bows. They were shorter and the distance between hair and stick was also larger. Yehudi Menuhin in his book ‘The Violin’ testifies that when he played with a baroque bow he noticed it ‘produced a natural accent’. He adds that with modern bows ‘*one would have to apply pressure on the bow stick with the index finger*’ to get that same accent. It is really worth mentioning the parallels in violin playing between the old time and Baroque

traditions. As dancing is central in both traditions we come across common characteristics in style and instrument set up: holding the violin against the chest, flatter bridge, heavy ornamentation, open tunings, drones, accents, shorter bows, rare use of higher positions, more articulated playing, rare vibrato, melody repetition. In both traditions a distinct and steady pulse is supposed to invite people to dance.

The mosaic and diversity of bow holds bears witness to the ingenuity of aspiring musicians who are looking for ways to play their favorite music. And when they do succeed in that direction, that is not a proof of their technical skills, but rather of their deep musical understanding.

As with many other traditions around the world whose practitioners learn by interacting in their musical communities it appears that old time fiddlers share a bowing mentality that grows naturally through their need to play music. They internalize a way, or mentality, of playing that serves their honest musical needs. Bowing comes up more as a musical rather than a technical issue. In my experience, most old time fiddlers are not constantly aware of the different ways they are using their bow. I have asked old time fiddlers to describe their bowing patterns, but in most cases they had to think a lot before they could do that. I think this is the organic outcome of bypassing bowing as a ‘technical prerequisite’ during the learning process. It is an example of what we can call the ‘straight at the music approach’.

In my opinion the ‘straight at the music approach’ may well constitute a beneficial practice even for classical musicians who very often suffer from dictated and over-analytical approaches in their training and interpretation. It may well bring them closer to the spirit of the music under study and help them discover a wealth of hidden musical potential. The devaluation of the ‘technical prerequisites’ concept may well be the key to accelerating progress. We can see that same principle from the opposite angle: The reason that a classical violinist cannot simply cross into the bowing of an old time fiddler is not really technical. It is mental or musical if you like. Strictly speaking the average classical violinist is not missing the necessary technical skills to play old time music. What he/she is missing is the mentality of using the bow to produce dance music and that

has less to do with the concept of technique, at least in the sense most people understand it.

Matt Glaser in his book 'Jazz violin' mentions that Grappelli once told him *'the bow must go up and down'*. Glaser pointedly mentions that this is an indication of the total absence of artifice in Grapelli's approach. I always liked statements like Grappelli's that intend to simplify things. In my eyes old-time fiddle bowing -and I suspect bowing in general- is all about thinking in 3 dimensions. Moving randomly in 3D is my favorite way of visualizing bowing. The 3D visualization brings us closer to the world of rhythm and is probably how we can impress the 3D motion of a dancer on our playing. It is a liberating conceptualization that can unlock our right hand potential. Thinking in circles is another way of seeing it. Rayna Gellert (Fiddler Magazine, Summer 2003 issue) discussing bowing mentions that when she is teaching she encourages people to *'think little circles. Just keep that image in your head and don't think too hard about it. Just have that image with you'*.

Thinking in 3D is especially useful in old-time music due to the percussive and rhythmic nature of the music. It helps in bringing out the percussive nature of old time music more effectively. Fiddle sticks and modern chopping are two examples of attempts in the history of fiddling to turn the fiddle into a rhythm machine. Adding that third dimension into our minds and hands will improve the mechanics of our playing. In his instructional video Bruce Molsky is very clear on that. When he is discussing the tune *Saddle up the Grey* he talks about playing the low open G like a drum beat: *'Boom! You have to practice getting your bow so that you are not pulling it smooth. You want to get a little snap into those things and make them sound like drum beats'*.

The means being the ends

Christopher Small comments on the way Western classical musicians tend to learn in his book 'Music Society and Education', contrasting this to the nature of informal musical training by saying that *'one works hard not to gain mastery over his instrument (in fact the very idea of mastery is alien to a musician who regards his instrument as a loved*

colleague in the creative work) but to increase the fluency, expressiveness and naturalness of his playing, and this he does, not through technical exercises but through constant playing and exposure to musical experience within the framework of his society'. The contexts in which old-time fiddlers play music define that precious social framework.

I find the dissociation between 'practising' and 'playing' an instrument false, dangerous and fabricated. It often thrives on grounds of expediency and antagonism ignoring the very nature of music. Deliberate practice defines an exchange relationship in which the more the musician 'gives' the more he 'receives' in terms of technical skills and musicianship. This should definitely remind us of the basic pattern in our lives according to which everything can be bought at a certain price. Deliberate practice is the currency with which we buy progress and technical skills. It is not always innocent and legitimate. It can exist as a by-product of an antagonistic environment, which demands from musicians to focus extensively on the final product. Subordination of the process to the canonized goal is the core philosophical principle of deliberate musical practice.

This absence of a strong notion of deliberate practice introduces broader implications. This is because 'deliberate practice' is ideally taking place in a remote and quiet place under socially sterilized conditions. On the other hand, the 'playing' experience of old-time fiddlers is associated with what usually non-musicians perceive as music: enjoyment and social interaction. There are numerous musicians who have never interacted musically with others except maybe with their music stands. This is how music is divested of all its primary elements like enjoyment and sociability, in the name of hard work and undistracted practice.

A good example that illustrates that distorted approach is the concept of scales. Scales are widely considered as a must during the practicing process, despite the fact they are generally the nightmare of students who are asked to play them in an inapplicable way. There is really no point in executing scales without practicing their application in some real musical context or recognizing their function in a given piece of music. Asking someone to execute scales for two hours in a musical and social vacuum is a purely

mechanistic occupation which provides results of questionable value at an unaffordable and inadvisable price. Richard Addison in his 1988 article 'A new look at musical improvisation in education' in the 'British Journal of Music Education' stresses that '*as an example of how time-honored pedagogical practices contribute to premature rigidity of conception we need look no further than the scales and exercises which countless pupils of all ages are required to practise unthinkingly*'.

By developing their performing attitude as an integral part of the actual musical act old-time fiddlers develop skills and attitudes which seem more difficult to achieve when seen as a 'requirement' and are consciously sought. Old-time fiddlers often develop skills that may seem unnecessary for the average performer, but I still think they are valuable and indicative of a healthy performing attitude. A real social context is the privileged field of sharing and offering. This is where you can really build your identity as a musician, and this is where you feel a musician. Social and musical interaction not only can accelerate the learning process but can result in a more organic quality of playing which –in my mind– is not often found among classical violinists. This quality is the natural product of the fact that old-time fiddlers have a social role in store for their music.

Old-time fiddlers show us that enjoyment is not incompatible with learning and progress. They show us that the nature of the learning process is complex, contradictory and non-linear. Being aware of its complexity is the only way to be simple.

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