

IN THE STUDIO

REVISITING COLLÉ

By Karen Ritscher

Recently, I was having a lovely Saturday evening dinner at the New York City West Side restaurant, Niko's with my friend and esteemed colleague, Greg Fulkerson. Mr. Fulkerson is one of the most intelligent and thoughtful people I know, as well as being a brilliant violinist and deep musician. I was grateful that since it was just the two of us, we could indulgently shop-talk about string playing and teaching, without boring or offending any of our other friends or spouses. We were happily discussing the amount of finger leading vs. reactivity to various strokes on violin and viola. At some point in our discussion, one of us made the deliberately dramatic observation that "although teaching collé is one of the most useful learning tools we have, there are almost no practical applications!" Then, upon reflection over several weeks, I began to question the veracity of that statement and have since realized that actually there are many more useful outcomes from working with collé than one can consider in a short discussion.

Like most violin-violita techniques, collé for the viola is essentially the same as for the violin, but some of its lessons may be even more important for violists in particular. The difference of articulation for violin and viola seems to be the

amount and speed of initiation of strokes and the amount of follow-through. Viola requires quicker, lighter springing fingers and particularly on the C string, a more vertical pinch. One needs to be able to instantaneously wrap the bow around the string and then, like a startled bird, fly away! Not only is collé helpful for clean attacks and clean projection in viola playing, it is also valuable for developing a warm and "gluey" tone.

To review, the word *collé* comes from the French for *glue*. Collé is a finger-initiated stroke. On the down-bow, the fingers move curved to elongated and on the up-bow, elongated to curved. Ivan Galamian in *Principles of Violin Playing* defines collé: "the bow is placed on the strings from the air and at the moment of contact the string is lightly but sharply pinched. Simultaneously with the pinch, the note is attacked, after the instantaneous sounding of the note the bow is immediately slightly lifted off the string in preparation for the next stroke.... It is in action, although not in sound, not unlike the plucking of the string, making as it were, a pizzicato with the bow." (74-75) While violinists emphasize beginning and ending the stroke from the air, the same stroke for viola can easily start from the string as long as their knuckles are active and ready to spring. For all accented strokes on

either instrument, one feels pressure on the bow before the arm moves. For accented strokes on the viola, one needs to let the fingers react more to the arm "grabbing," as opposed to arm following finger initiation. This makes a huge difference in the roundness and clarity of the sound in short strokes, as well as legato playing.

Often in the initial execution of collé, my viola students are able to find the bite of the attack, but are unable to let the tone ring as the bow "escapes" the resistance of the string. Because of the thickness and slower reactions of viola strings, particularly the G and C, the violist needs to have more ballistic or quicker knuckle reaction to the bite.

A teaching technique that I have used to encourage waking up the fingers is the following:

1. Place the bow on the string in the middle, with relaxed arm weight and the fingers alive and "ready." Let the arm feel the resistance of the string. Using the fingers only, do a quick up-bow, but then immediately move the arm down-bow. This motion results in a dotted rhythm: sixteenth followed by dotted-quarter.
2. Do the same thing with the fingers moving down-bow (elongating to the right) while the bow moves up-bow.

3. Then only *pretend* you will play a dotted rhythm, but instead let the bow spring down-bow with a “pop.”
4. Do the same on the up-bow. As an aside- when I was a student of Karen Tuttle’s, I asked her generally about articulating; she answered, “there is no such thing as articulation, only the breath.” However, like Primrose and other violists, she did emphasize having a reactive spring in the base joint knuckles.

Another exercise that we have found useful for developing clarity and ring is the following exercise that we call the “burp” exercise:

1. Engage bow on string.
2. Let the fingers catch the string, sensitive to the vertical resistance.
3. Then exert horizontal pressure

with the arm, until the bow escapes the string, resulting in a single “burp.”

4. Try the catch or “burp” on all strings in all parts of the bow. This can be practiced with a partner, keeping score. If one produces multiple “burps,” the player must take a point. The player with the most points loses the round.

In teaching the collé, sometimes problems may come up. One always needs to make sure that the thumb stays relaxed, even in the elongated shape and that it never pushes the bow out and in but rather follows the fingers in the down and up bow direction. Also, if the arm is not naturally pronated, with the radius bone leaning on the ulna, a good ring

on the bite cannot occur. If the pinky tends to slip off, a good suggestion is to rest the pinky on the ridge closest to the player, not directly on top of the bow.

Working on collé in the viola studio is beneficial for generally waking up and sensitizing the fingers and provides a quick right hand warm-up. It helps the student develop awareness for the different response times of each string. It teaches the brain to feel

out small muscle movement and learn when to use it and when to let the fingers respond to the arm. To develop all staccato attacks and especially the martelé, one must be able to produce a good bite. Studying collé also helps to develop good core-sound contact in legato playing and to gain understanding of the balance of all parts of the bow. Even in thrown strokes such as used in the spiccato excerpt from Mendelssohn’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, it is useful to practice each passage as collé. Then when one goes back and plays the passage with a true spiccato, more clarity and roundness results in the sound.

In conclusion, the collé is one of the most helpful techniques we have in our teaching arsenal. Viola, due to its slower response because of its acoustical imperfections as well as thicker strings, needs help in clarity and projection. In order to make a beautiful sound, relaxation tends to be perhaps overvalued, resulting in quite wonderful players who sound too mushy in a hall. A thorough investigation of collé serves to develop the dynamic clarity, as well as the voluptuous sound that all performers are seeking. B

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fluffy cloud or feel a blown-up balloon under the armpit. At times, we've had success by visualizing all the cells in the arm and/or the whole body pulsating or dancing. I believe these kinds of images provide a more lively feeling of connection with the sound.

Several years ago, I stumbled on a trick that has facilitated the perception of the buoyant feeling—breathing sound. One day when I was teaching in Taiwan (with no interpreter), I demonstrated the idea of arm connection, using some exercise-resistance bands that I carried with me to use for workouts in my hotel. I hooked one under the student's elbow and one under his wrist, thus carrying the arm for the student: up bow, down-bow. The student was quickly able to trust the rubber bands, releasing his holding in the shoulder area, and then to perceive his own natural bow path. As I "bowed" him (with much accompanying giggling on the part of the student and the observing class), his sound became focused and full. Since that initial experience, I have often used the bands to provide an opportunity for the student to realize how little pressure or effort is needed to transfer energy through the stick. Also, it gives me a chance to sug-

gest through the kinesthetic sense a more efficient direction, if necessary. These resistance bands can be purchased in many sporting goods stores.

Learning Styles

A number of researchers have established that students learn primarily through one of the dominant senses: visual, auditory, or kinesthetic. Students who learn primarily through the auditory normally like to hear explanations or talk about problems. Sometimes I find that these students have difficulties in their bow arms due to use of specific language. The almost universal definition of up and down-bow seems to affect us adversely. (While the French *push/pull* is better, I don't feel that it's ideal, either.) For the violist, certainly there is not much "up" about an up bow. On the C and G strings, it is an almost horizontal movement, and on the D and A, it is a slant angle. When students hear "up," they tend to initiate the movement up, thus constricting the muscles and inhibiting the flow of the bow arm. The shoulder socket needs to stay free so the torso muscles can support and react to the arm direction. I make the suggestion of feeling the energy flow out the arm even as

the bow moves toward the frog. Some students have had success pretending they're painting on the far wall with an imaginary brush extending out from their elbow.

I think it would be great to invent a new vocabulary for these bow directions: for *up*, perhaps "tranthru" for "transfer through." The down-up is simpler in that one needs only to follow the movement of the frog, so maybe the term "fol-frog" could be used. So we could use *TT* and *FF* or "trant" and "fol"! I think this would free up the students' perceptions of working with gravity, while keeping their bodies looser.

Students who are visually oriented tend to learn by imitating what they see. This works well when the teacher demonstrates a lot, particularly if the student and teacher have similar builds. Sometimes I have students with much longer arms and fingers than I have, who distort their own natural bow arms to look like me! When this happens, it's important to demonstrate why you need to do what you do and what you hope will work better for them, appealing to their reason and other senses of hearing and feeling. Obviously, great harm is caused by teachers who insist that all their students should look like them.

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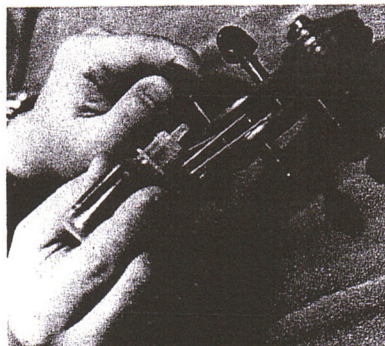
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Opinionisms

One last aspect of teaching the bow arm that interests me is in the area of what I term *opinionisms*. For some reason, most of us players and students tend to have a preconceived idea about how a sound quality or technique will feel in our arm. For example, we might assume that a very dynamic accent will feel very strong in our arm or a part of our arm. When working with students it's important to emphasize that they might need to let go of their idea to perceive how to produce a new technique or sound quality. (Often, when expressing myself by playing the viola, the old adage "less is more" comes to mind.)

Also, as teachers, we must realize that there is usually some fear about letting go of one's opinions because it feels as if one's uniqueness is lost. Students have expressed to me, for example, "I would like to open my elbow earlier, but then I won't feel like my bow arm." As a teacher I feel one needs to provide a safe environment in which students can learn with their whole self in a disciplined yet creative way. Ideally, students can discover the optimal use of body/mind to express their own true musicality.