

Chapter 6

Bowing-The Strings

Although string bowing and wind instrument articulation are related as to their controlling the length and grouping of notes, conductors must be aware of the much greater influence which bowing has on the orchestra, since the bow is also the tone-producing means on a stringed instrument. Most conductors who have played a stringed instrument, or who have otherwise immersed themselves in the problems of string playing, are aware of this and will make tone a major consideration when a problem of bowing appears.

If the conductor is a non-string player who conducts a community or semi-professional orchestra, he will most likely have a concert master who is capable of determining the best bowing. Most college orchestras will be able to rely on the guidance of a member of the string faculty of that institution. In fact, it is ironic that in the area where the influence of an experienced string player is most needed—the public school orchestra—there is frequently no one with the necessary background in stringed instruments. It is in such a situation that the conductor must seek the help of private teachers, bringing in local string teachers whenever possible, and definitely encouraging all of his string players to study privately with such a person.

Such problems as string crossing vs. changing position, which part of the bow to use to best achieve a desired effect, the type of stroke to use in a given technical passage, (i.e., on the string vs. spiccato, etc.), are problems which require the guidance of a string player, or one who has an otherwise extensive background with such problems. Again, however, we must conclude that much is dependent on the conductor's concept of how a string section should sound, and his willingness and desire to initiate whatever steps are necessary to achieve that which satisfies his expectations.

THE SOUND OF STRINGS

Almost every musician has experienced a concert of a school or amateur orchestra in which many of the string players use no more than one third of the bow throughout the concert, producing a most unsatisfying sound. It is true that much of this can be plainly attributed to the lack of experience or lack of talent on the part of such players. On the other hand, it is not uncommon that this is due to a lack of awareness on the part of the conductor. The same trait which permits a conductor to tolerate an oboist with a hard, raspy sounding reed, and a snare drummer whose drum-head sounds water-logged, will allow such bowing timidity among string players. Fre-

quently the same timid players who shy away from a difficult allegro sixteenth note passage approach the final fortissimo whole note with the same hesitancy. It has been my observation that in an amateur orchestra there is a rather close parallel between the aggressiveness with which the string players bow, and the enthusiasm with which the conductor approaches his task.

KNOWING THE CAPABILITIES OF EACH PLAYER

One weakness which occurs in the non-professional orchestra—more frequently in the case of the community orchestra than with the school orchestra—is the conductor's lack of knowledge of the bowing capabilities of the individual string players. This is a problem which should have most significant bearing on the selection of music for programming. Should the conductor be unfamiliar with, for example, the spiccato capabilities of the members of his violin section, he would be unwise to consider most of the Haydn symphonies until he looks into the matter.

The entire matter of seating—which is important to an orchestra far beyond the pride of the individual players involved—should not be decided until the conductor knows the bowing capabilities of the individual players. The same problem which was described in relation to wind articulation in the preceding chapter—the selection of literature which is beyond the technical ability of the musicians—applies to string players. The conductor will avoid a great deal of aggravation if he knows what his string players are capable of performing before he selects literature for his musicians.

The conductor should also be alert to any weaknesses among his string players which might be corrected with remedial exercises or a private teacher. Such problems as tenseness, an improper bow grip, careless positioning of the bow on the strings, etc., if detected by the conductor might be corrected, especially in younger players. Certainly such alertness is mandatory in a school orchestra, where the conductor frequently has the sole responsibility for the musical development of the string player.

EDITING THE MUSIC

The conductor should be aware of the importance of editing music, not only to achieve what he considers to be a more authentic interpretation of the work, but to make a given passage better suited to the abilities of his own orchestra. Changes in a particular edition might be considered for the following reasons:

1. The music might have been poorly edited by the publishers.
2. The editor (or composer) might have conceived his particular edition for an advanced professional orchestra. In regards to long phrases which can be performed with a full sound only by a fine professional orchestra, it is frequently necessary to break up the phrases for a less proficient orchestra. This is especially true with the music of composers of the Romantic Period.
3. A conductor might have a special weakness within his orchestra which must continually be obscured by clever editing. For example, in the case of a weak viola section, short, difficult passages might be improved by adding one cello or one stand of violins, if the range permits. In the case of a weak viola line in a tutti orchestral passage, an additional clarinet can support a viola line without damaging the overall sonority. It is also frequently helpful to break a passage into two divisi passages to simplify it. In the case of a passage which calls for a change of position or string crossing for just one or two isolated notes, one or two stands or another section can play such notes, if they do not break up a phrase which could only be musically expressed by the intended section. The following example illustrates this technique.

EXAMPLE 20



Instead of playing the part as originally written, the violas play the substitute g and a, and the violins play the original g and a.

Such changes, though perhaps disturbing to the musical purist who would have nothing changed from the original edition, are necessary to enable a non-professional orchestra to give its best interpretation of a work.

4. The conductor might have a different concept of the passage, necessitating a different approach to a problem such as bowing. In the second example below, the crescendo on beats three and four might be much more convincingly executed through the additional bow stroke.

EXAMPLE 21



EXAMPLE 22



Another example of editing which might be based solely on the conductor's preference is the use of several contrasting bowing patterns within one section to achieve the effect of continuous bowing.

It would be beyond the scope of this workbook to compile a list of bowing problems and their solutions here. There is a great deal of instructional material available on bowing problems, particularly in basic violin and cello method books. Some suggestions for prospective conductors, especially those whose experiences with the stringed instruments are limited, which would broaden their concepts regarding the string instruments are:

1. Study a stringed instrument, though recognizing that your initial attempts will seem very unmusical.
2. Prepare your own bowings of violin solo works and orchestral excerpts and take them to a qualified string player for evaluation. Discuss why you suggest a certain bowing, and if he does not agree, ask why he suggests another.
3. Work with younger string orchestras (elementary) when the opportunity arises. You may develop confidence by learning with youngsters.
4. Attend concerts, recitals (especially of string chamber music), seminars, private lessons, etc., whenever possible.
5. When you conduct an orchestra, work with the concertmaster if he is a competent violinist so as to understand bowing problems in the works which are programmed.
6. Consult string instructional books on bowing and bowing problems. Two such works, *Orchestral Bowing and Routines*, by Elisabeth A. H. Green, and *Principles of Violin Playing and Teaching*, by Ivan Galamian, are listed in the bibliography.