

ALEXANDER SHONERT'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO VIOLIN METHODOLOGY

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Abstract

This article introduces violinist and pedagogue Alexander Shonert and his principles of violin teaching methods, which touch on the correct way of practicing the violin, a specific type of firm staccato, and stage fright. This research and description of Shonert's teaching and practice method are inspired by a workshop that Alexander Shonert held at Základní umělecká škola Ilji Hurníka [Ilja Hurník Elementary Art School] in Prague, Czech Republic on December 7, 2018, and based on interviews that the author of this article conducted with him between 2018–2021. The structured interviews were conducted in Czech (translated into English by the author) in person and by electronic correspondence in the case of clarification of details. This study also follows up on two published author's articles, "Alexander Shonert – Violinist and Pedagogue" and "Firm Staccato Is Born in the Mind, Not in the Hands." Shonert's methodological principles are situated in the context of other prominent violinists from the nineteenth century until now.

Keywords

Alexander Shonert – violin – violin methodology – stage fright – firm staccato – practicing the violin

Introduction

On December 7, 2018, one from a series of Alexander Shonert's violin master classes designed especially for violin teachers took place at the Ilja Hurník Elementary Art School in Prague. As a pedagogical model for demonstrating his methodological principles, Shonert chose Eva Šibřinová¹ from the author's violin class at the Faculty of Education of Charles University, who met the requirements both in terms of technical and musical maturity and in terms of the quality of professional, methodological guidance. As this course was based on detailed work with tone production and its colors, combining the sound of the student's violin with Shonert's was interesting from this point of view. They both play master instruments of a darker tone color (Guarneri model) from the workshop of famous Prague luthier Petr Zdražil.² The listeners could hear even the slightest nuances in the tone of the master instruments very clearly. At the same time, the student had the opportunity to imitate the desired color and sound quality. Shonert focused on three themes, which became the subject

¹ Eva Šibřinová (* 1997) is a master's degree student at that time in the field of Music Education – Playing an Instrument (violin) at the Faculty of Education of Charles University in the class of Gabriela Kubátová. She teaches violin at ZUŠ J. Suka Benešov [Elementary Art School of J. Suk at Benešov]. The student agrees with the statement in this study.

² Petr Zdražil (* 1963), Prague violin maker with an atelier on Malostranské náměstí [Lesser Town Square].

of this study. The first topic, “How to practice the violin correctly,” is addressed by violinists daily. The second topic, “How to learn the upward and downward firm staccato,” sounds promising to violinists since Shonert’s firm staccato is an element of violin technique Václav Hudeček³ has described as: “Phenomenal! I have never heard anything like it in my life.”⁴ The last topic, “How to eliminate the fear of performing,” is timeless and attractive not only for violinists.

Why consider Shonert’s methodological principles presented at the seminar? In addition to his solo career, violin virtuoso Shonert is an intensive teacher. He is the author of methodology, which aims not only to improve the quality and effectiveness of teaching but also to help violinists at all levels, including professional violinists and teachers who turn to him for advice. Reflecting on his views and ideas is interesting in light of this aspiration. Therefore, this study is not a theoretical analysis of topics such as stage fright, about which thousands of pages of studies have been written, but captures Shonert’s views on the subject and his ways of teaching. The author either glosses them from her position or places them in the context of the views of the world’s most prominent teachers and virtuosi. Shonert’s ambitions are considerable. He is at the peak of his creative powers; he had to master, at an advanced age, quite consciously, the reworking of his violin technique, which requires considerable effort; he could confront the views of his first teacher with those of the renowned pedagogues Zakhar Bron,⁵ Alexey Gvozdev⁶ and Mikhail Turich.⁷ Shonert left Russia for abroad, where he compared his methods with Western schools. He teaches students worldwide, so he has a direct opportunity to see the results of different methods. Moreover, he is constantly improving his methodology. He demonstrates his methods with his violin art. His world-unique firm staccato alone is proof of the results.

Alexander Shonert⁸ was born in 1972 in a musical family in Irkutsk. In 1989 he moved to Novosibirsk, where he learned from one of the world’s best teachers Zakhar Bron at the Novosibirsk State Conservatory of Arts M. I. Glinka.⁹ After a few months, however, Bron left for Germany, and Shonert began studying with Professor Alexey Gvozdev, with whom he continued his postgraduate studies. In the last year of the doctoral program in 1999, he was simultaneously in Mikhail Turich’s class. However, he did not complete his postgraduate studies because he did not submit his dissertation.¹⁰

Since 1999 he has been working in Prague. Josef Suk,¹¹ in the 2010 Czech Television program “Z metropole“ [From the Metropolis],¹² said of Shonert and his interpretation of Antonín Dvořák’s compositions: “He is a genius artist, gifted by God. I was moved because my

³ Václav Hudeček (* 1952) is a Czech violin virtuoso.

⁴ Available from https://shonert.com/en_GB/o-mne-menu/o-mne/.

⁵ Zakhar Bron (* 1947) is a Russian violinist and violin pedagogue from Kazakhstan of Jewish, Polish, and Romanian descent.

⁶ Alexey Vladimirovich Gvozdev (* 1943) is a Russian violinist and professor of violin at the Novosibirsk State Conservatory of Arts M. I. Glinka.

⁷ Mikhail Isaakovich Turich (1945–2018) was a violinist, conductor, and professor of violin at the Novosibirsk State Conservatory of Arts M. I. Glinka.

⁸ “Životní pout houslového génia“ [The Life Journey of a Violin Genius]: Babylon [television documentary]. Aired September 9, 2008. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3r3mXWqlaZc> (Translated by the author).

⁹ In Russia, a conservatory has the status of a university (academy).

¹⁰ Author’s interview with A. Shonert.

¹¹ Josef Suk (1929–2011) was a Czech violinist, violist, chamber musician, and conductor.

¹² “Houslista, který do Česka přišel ze Sibíře“ [A Violinist Who Came to the Czech Republic from Siberia]: Z metropole [From Metropolis] [television documentary]. Aired June 19, 2010. <https://www.ceskatelevize.cz/ivysilani/10116288835-z-metropole/210411058230025/obsah/147358-houslista-ktery-do-ceska-prisel-ze-sibire> (Translated by the author).

famous great-grandfather deserved to be interpreted this way.“ He has performed throughout Europe and the United States. In 2014, he gave a recital at one of the most prestigious concert halls in the US – the National Gallery of Art in Washington. He considers David Oistrakh¹³ and Yehudi Menuhin¹⁴ as his musical role models. Oistrakh undoubtedly influenced him in terms of the general system of violin playing, the complete thoughtfulness of violin technique down to the smallest detail, in which not the slightest detail is left to coincidence. Menuhin inspired him with his combination of violin playing and yoga. Shonert also applies elements from tai-chi in teaching, especially in terms of maximum smoothness and continuity of all movements. Shonert uses his brilliant technique not only in classical compositions but also in jazz and folk. Shonert’s domain is his improvisations on Jewish themes, in which his spontaneous temperament bursts forth and combines with deep emotions. Professor Ivan Štraus¹⁵ of the Prague Academy of Performing Arts remarked, “[Shonert] has excellent technique, intonation, plays beautifully, and has something extra special – improvisation. In this, he is absolutely phenomenal, where his technique overcomes the laws of gravity!”¹⁶

Alexander Shonert gives seminars and masterclasses at music academies and conservatories in Europe, Canada, the USA (The Julliard School in New York, Jacobs School of Music in Bloomington, etc.), and Singapore. He often works with his students online. Shonert’s methodology for practicing firm staccato is the subject of his e-book *How to Master Firm Staccato Up and Down in 3 Lessons: The Shonert Technique based on the use of Chi energy*¹⁷ and is included in full in the e-book *Advanced Violin Techniques Vol. 1* from 2015, in which he focused on the following topics: How to Learn Firm Staccato, How to Learn to Play the Violin Correctly, How to Learn Beautiful Vibrato, The Philosophy of Violin Playing, and How to Get Rid of Stage Fright. A critique of the chapter focused on the staccato mentioned above was published in February 2016 in the prestigious British magazine, *The Strad*, where Philippa Bunting¹⁸ wrote of Shonert: “It is admirable that he is willing to use his phenomenal playing ability to illustrate his theories and to share his skill with colleagues in an open fashion.”¹⁹ In October 2017, Shonert’s article, *Firm Staccato*, was published in the same magazine in the section *The Best of Technique*.²⁰

How to Practice the Violin Correctly

“Nothing is more precious to a performing musician than the ability to work efficiently – to know how to learn the maximum in the minimum possible time. One of the most necessary skills a teacher should teach a student is the technique of practicing correctly,”²¹ writes Ivan

¹³ David Oistrakh (1908–1974) was a Soviet classical violinist, violist, and conductor.

¹⁴ Yehudi Menuhin, Baron Menuhin of Stoke d’Abernon (1916–1999) was a violin virtuoso and conductor.

¹⁵ Ivan Štraus (* 1937) is a violin virtuoso and a long-time professor at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague.

¹⁶ Schneider, Jan. 2006. “Jak vidím barvy, tak slyším tóny” [As I See Colors, I Hear Tones]. <https://shonert.com/o-mne-menu/o-mne/>.

¹⁷ Shonert, Alexander. 2015. *How to Master Firm Staccato Up and Down in 3 Lessons: The Shonert Technique based on the use of Chi energy*. Kindle Edition. <https://www.amazon.com/Master-Firm-Staccato-Down-Lessons-ebook/dp/B00X2PSZFW>.

¹⁸ Philippa Bunting (<https://cz.abrsm.org/en/about-us/structure-and-key-staff/>) is a violin teacher and ABRSM’s Director of Teaching and Qualifications in London.

¹⁹ Bunting, Philippa. 2016. “How to Master Firm Staccato Up and Down in Three Lessons.” In: Book Reviews. *The Strad* 2016 (127): 93.

²⁰ Shonert, Alexander. 2017. “Firm Staccato.” In: *The Best of Technique*. *The Strad* 2017 (128, 1530): 79–80. <http://cz.shonertacademy.com/>.

²¹ Galamian, Ivan. 2013. *Principles of Violin Playing and Teaching*. New York: Dover Publications. p. 93.

Galamian²² in the introduction to the chapter on practice in his book *The Principles of Violin Playing and Teaching*.

Jascha Heifetz²³ commented on the issue as follows: “I do not think I could ever have made any progress if I had practiced six hours daily. In the first place, I have never believed in practicing too much – it is just as bad as practicing too little! And then there are so many other things I like to do,” Heifetz confided to an astonished Frederick Martens, who estimated the number of hours of daily practice at six to eight. “I hardly ever practice more than three hours a day on average, and besides, I keep my Sunday when I do not play at all, and sometimes I make an extra holiday. As to six or seven hours a day, I would not have been able to stand it at all. I exercise three hours a day on average, and I still have Sundays off. (...) I suppose that it looks easy when I play in public, but before I ever came on the concert stage, I worked extremely hard. And I do – but always putting the two things together, mental work and physical work. And when a certain point of the effort is reached in practice, as in everything else, there must be relaxation.”²⁴

Leopold Auer²⁵ answered the same question: “The right kind of practice is not a matter of hours. Practice should represent the utmost concentration of the brain. It is better to play with concentration for two hours than to practice for eight hours without it. I should say that four hours would be a good maximum practice time – I never ask more of pupils – and during each minute, the brain must be as active as the fingers.”²⁶

Alexander Shonert also does not lead students to mindless repetition during practice. The secret of success does not lie in practicing for many hours or playing a piece repeatedly. He considers it more important to discover and learn to feel the energies inside our mind and body and, with their help, find the correct position for each finger of the left hand or the movement of the bow led by the right hand. By playing correctly, not only will we remove stiffness and tension, but the change will positively affect the tone, which will sound more sonorous and malleable. He is convinced that the physiology of movement is “burned” into memory as an unmistakable sensation. He compares it to the sensation of discovering a sense of balance when riding a bicycle.

Shonert considers it a gross mistake to start practicing the violin by practicing the violin. Just like in ballet or football, muscles must be warmed up and prepared to prevent injury. He teaches his students several special exercises to strengthen specific muscles, such as muscle awareness exercises needed for relaxed playing, relaxation exercises, and exercises using energy work that he has adopted from tai-chi. As far as yoga is concerned, he follows the tradition of the famous violinist Yehudi Menuhin, who practiced yoga all his life and said that his best violin teacher was his yoga teacher, Guru B. K. S. Iyengar.²⁷ Yoga teaches how to control the body, mind, and soul, which is very important, and Shonert teaches how to apply the principles to violin playing. It helps to prevent work injuries, protect the cervical spine, etc. It is also necessary to comply with Shonert’s methodical principles because the student

²² Ivan Alexander Galamian (1903–1981) was an Armenian American violinist and violin teacher.

²³ Jascha Heifetz (1901–1987) was a Lithuanian violinist.

²⁴ Martens, Frederick H., ed. 2006. *Violin Mastery: Interviews with Heifetz, Auer, Kreisler and others*. New York: Dover Publications. pp. 47–49.

²⁵ Leopold Auer (1845–1930) was a Hungarian American violinist, teacher, and conductor.

²⁶ Martens, 2006, p. 11.

²⁷ Bellur Krishnamachar Sundararaja Iyengar (1918–2014), better known as B. K. S. Iyengar, is the founder of the yoga school called “Iyengar Yoga.”

cannot relax a muscle he either does not know he has or is so stiff that it blocks other muscles. Twenty to thirty minutes, including warm-up exercises on the violin, should be enough. After the warm-up exercises, however, it is essential to pick something the student already knows or is good at. It needs to be perfected, and only then should the student try to transfer the methods to more challenging material. With students, Shonert often sees them doing the opposite. Playing something difficult with a sense of ease represents a much shorter path to a result than starting with something more challenging. Shonert considers it essential to set a precise goal, not just focus on abstract exercises.

In a lesson devoted to proper practicing, Shonert asked Eva Šibřínová to demonstrate a warm-up exercise: It was based on a *détaché* in the middle section of the bow with the feeling that the hand was doing everything independently as if it were a pendulum. All concentration was directed towards a clear sound and perfectly smooth and inaudible bow changes. Shonert likened the violin's sound to a ringing bell, which he called the "bell effect." He emphasized that if we vibrate the bow downward and stop the movement with a lousy bow change, we also interrupt the vibration, which must be perceived not only with the ear but with the whole body.

After mastering the short *détaché*, one can gradually discern the note with the whole bow and increase the dynamics, but with the feeling that the more strongly the violinist plays, the more relaxed they must feel. Then begin to alternate bow lengths, playing two separate quarter notes with the half bow and a half note with the whole bow, again maintaining the quality and balance of the sound as much as possible, using only the weight of the arm, not unwanted pressure.

Shonert recommended and demonstrated the third exercise on his chosen violinist model: "scale meditation." The goal is to disconnect thoughts and feel every note and vibration completely without emotion – two bowings so that the notes are played up and down in the same quality. Shonert, listening with the utmost concentration, stressed that the bowing changes must be indistinguishable even with closed eyes. The important thing is to follow the rules – not to speed up the tempo and not to change the dynamics. Moreover, it is essential to "meditate" at this stage. For violinists, this means playing with maximum calm. The aim is to learn to play a long tone without emotion. Shonert comes from the conviction that if the violinist can do this without emotion, adding emotion is no longer a problem.

He also consistently paid attention to the unification of the color and dynamics of individual notes in the sense of placing the fingers on the string and the possibility of coloring the tone with the fingertips. The teacher's ability to identify the cause of failure and recommend practical exercises also helps the effectiveness of the exercise.

Shonert strives to ensure that students can apply the mindset and knowledge gained in violin lessons to other areas of life that have nothing to do with music. He considers it a mistake for a teacher to teach only violin. He combines violin playing with yoga, tai-chi, and Chinese medicine, which heals holistically. He applies the same principles in his teaching. He uses special physical exercises that teach students to control their muscles, tensing or relaxing them precisely as needed, and psychological and spiritual practices that they can apply in practical life.

Shonert concludes: "As my professor Alexey Gvozdev and professor Jiří Tomášek²⁸ used to say that it is not the hands that must be tired, but the head (the mind, author's note).

²⁸ Jiří Tomášek (1942–2017) was a Czech violin virtuoso and a long-time professor at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, the author's professor.

Perfect mastery of any technique is only the beginning. Playing the violin is one of the ways to reach spiritual perfection. It is a philosophy, a way of life.”²⁹

How to Learn the Firm Staccato

The firm staccato is a unique element of violin technique, which could be considered a parlor magician’s trick or momentarily induced illusion. Throughout the centuries, top violin teachers have consistently tried to devise a method of achieving the perfect firm staccato, coming up with entirely different, controversial, often eccentric, and even ridiculous methods that do not shy away from the association with “divine endowment” and “occult sciences” (Dounis).³⁰ Essentially, it is a sequence of short, sharply separated notes with a bow on the string that contains two elements: an accent at the beginning of each note and a stopping bow at the end of the note. According to Rok Klopčič,³¹ whose study I am following up on in *The Strad*,³² there are two main kinds of staccato: firm and brilliant, which Dounis describes as different processes. Firm staccato has been given different names: controlled (Hart); martelé, slow or heavy (Dounis); honest (Heifetz); rhythmic (Galamian); mordant (Capet); Spohr (Flesch). Firm staccato is a series of martelé notes in one bow. Different authorities put different maximum speeds on what one can achieve: Flesch has the speed limit for semiquavers as M. M. = 66, and Harold Berkley gives M. M. = 88.

Brilliant staccato also has many names: tense, rapid (Dounis), fast (Galamian), cramp (Mostras), nervous (Applebaum), or Wieniawski (Flesch). It is used for higher speeds, where control is somewhat sacrificed in lieu of speed. Approaches are usually quite individual, and the mechanics are described variously.³³

Many renowned violinists and teachers agree that a spasmodic hand movement produces high-speed staccato. Carl Flesch,³⁴ a renowned teacher, discusses the problem of staccato at some length in his book *The Art of Violin Playing*:

“No doubt, many violinists possess a brilliant staccato, but very few can also control it in tempo. (...) To tell the truth, approximately three-quarters of professional violinists, including artists of the very first rank, have an insufficient staccato. Hence the capable teacher should not only be able to solve the comparatively simple problem of teaching beginners the correct staccato but should have the faculty of curing faulty staccato of every type; be able to undertake staccato correction. (...) There is a type of staccato that bids defiance to all rules of logic in the most insubordinate, savage, and brutal fashion, yet which when rightly understood and conceived, may be brilliantly effective. It is the stiff staccato. (...) Every teacher will remember more or less frequently occurring cases of pupils who, after having tormented themselves

²⁹ Author’s personal interview with A. Shonert.

³⁰ Klopčič, Rok. 2003. “Staccato – One of the Most Controversial Elements of Right-hand Technique.” *The Strad* 2003 (X1). <https://www.thestrاد.com/improve-your-playing/staccato-one-of-the-most-controversial-elements-of-right-hand-technique/13972.article>.

³¹ Rok Klopčič (1933–2010) was a Slovenian violinist, musicologist, and pedagogue.

³² Klopčič, 2003.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Carl Flesch (1873–1944) was a Hungarian violinist and teacher.

for years with all sorts of exercises without the least success, became the happy possessors of a magnificent stiff staccato overnight.”³⁵

The overnight miracle should be the ultimate rescue method for all violinists who strive for this element of violin technique. Still, Joseph Gingold³⁶ confessed to another – particularly “scientific” – method of Eugène Ysaÿe,³⁷ which he described as follows: “He asked me to put the bow on the string, shouted at me to tighten the upper arm, and then roared: ‘Play!’ He scared it out of me.”³⁸ To understand the scope of the effect, it is necessary to imagine not only Ysaÿe’s highly respected musical authority but also the hulking stature that complemented his imposing appearance.

Ivan Galamian also believes that fast, firm staccato is based on tension associated with muscle tremors in the arm, hand, or fingers caused by this tension.³⁹ Jindřich Pazdera⁴⁰ devoted a chapter to this issue in his book “*Vybrané kapitoly z metodiky houslové hry*” [Selected Chapters from the Methodology of Violin Playing]:

“The firm staccato is a specific problem. One can agree with the opinion that the basis of its rapid and successful mastery lies in an innate motor endowment. It is equally clear that, with the necessary patience, it is usually possible to successfully cultivate this bow, even in those who do not show a similar gift. The criterion is not only speed but also control in all areas. The ‘inherent’ firm staccato is often the so-called Wieniawski staccato. (...) In performing it, the right arm (the upper arm) is brought into a state of such tremendous fixation ‘that it is really like being crushed’ and takes advantage of the resulting trembling. The virtuosic effect tends to be very convincing; in addition to speed, this staccato has a considerable degree of specific expression and is usually equally fast in both directions of the bow stroke.”⁴¹

Alexander Shonert disposes of another type of firm staccato that is not limited in speed and, at the same time, does not arise from cramps. Shonert’s composition “The Wind,” in his interpretation, can serve as evidence.⁴²

Shonert’s staccato is genuinely phenomenal. The violinist has perfect control over the speed, the staccato is regular, both up and down, and it does not arise from cramps. The author counted 178 to 180 notes on the slow-motion image of Shonert’s piece “The Wind.”⁴³

³⁵ Flesch, Carl. 1924. *The Art of Violin Playing*. New York: Carl Fischer, pp. 69–71.

³⁶ Joseph Gingold (1909–1995) was a Russian-born American classical violinist and teacher.

³⁷ Eugène Ysaÿe (1858–1931) was a famous Belgian violinist, composer, and conductor.

³⁸ Klopčič, 2003.

³⁹ Galamian, 2013, p. 78.

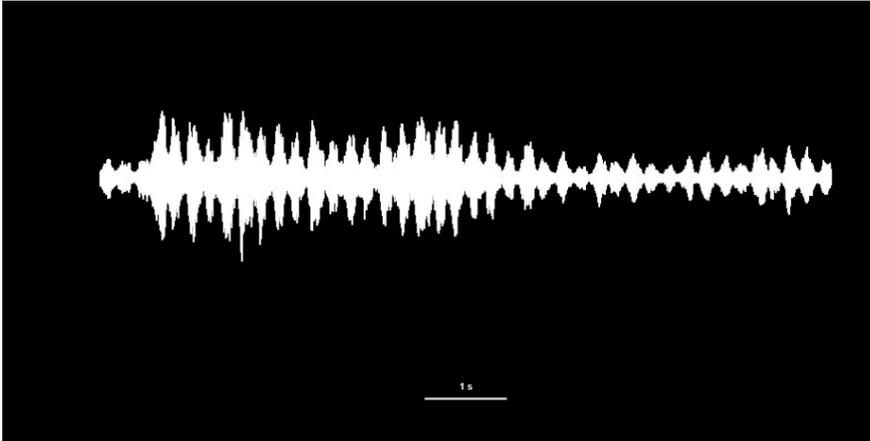
⁴⁰ Jindřich Pazdera (* 1954) is a Czech violinist and long-time pedagogue at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague.

⁴¹ Pazdera, Jindřich. 2007. *Vybrané kapitoly z metodiky houslové hry* [Selected Chapters from the Methodology of Violin Playing]. Praha: AMU, p. 221. (Translated by the author).

⁴² Two versions: 1. Shonert, Alexander. “The Wind.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=70wyeCNmCwE>.

2. Shonert, Alexander. “Dedicated to Paganini: Alexander Shonert plays A. Shonert’s ‘The Wind.’” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uzysthbm4zU>.

⁴³ Shonert, Alexander. “The Wind.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=70wyeCNmCwE>.



Example 1: The part of the graphic form of Shonert's firm staccato from the composition *The Wind*.

One way to calculate the individual notes of a firm staccato is to convert the sound into a graphical form. Here is part of one of Shonert's firm staccatos performed downward from a YouTube recording (A. Shonert – "The Wind") slowed down to half of the standard frequency and captured with a microphone into spectrogram software (oscilloscope.science music.org). This sample represents a small part of the cut – about a fifth.

During a personal consultation,⁴⁴ Shonert managed to play a 4-octave scale up and down, with each note repeated four times on one bow. He can add one more octave with the upstroke. That means that with his 224 notes downwards and even upwards 250 notes, which he can play in one stroke, he has surpassed the legendary firm staccato of the Czech virtuoso Josef Slavík,⁴⁵ who, according to Chopin's written testimony, could play 96 staccato notes in one stroke.⁴⁶

Equally exciting and valuable is how Shonert achieved it. He was already thirty years old and mastered the firm staccato using his method in about one month, to which he remarked: "The process could have been quicker, but I was in the process of finding exercises that would help me to teach. Mostly I understood the principle myself."⁴⁷ It is not "magic." Shonert can methodically describe how to learn this unique element.

The most interesting of these is that it is not a staccato produced by spasm, as is the case of many violinists and often described in professional publications, but a staccato that is born of perfectly relaxed playing and comes from consciously controlled muscle parts. A Shonert's firm staccato is not born in the hands but in the mind. According to Shonert, for a violinist to master a firm staccato, it is first necessary to eliminate incorrect habits

⁴⁴ The author's personal consultation was held on March 20, 2023.

⁴⁵ Josef Slavík (1806–1833), a Czech violinist and composer, was also called the "Czech Paganini."

⁴⁶ Voynich, Ethel Lilian, ed. 1931. *Chopin's Letters*: Collected by Henryk Opienski and translated from the original Polish and French by E. L. Voynich. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, p. 130.

⁴⁷ Author's personal interviews with A. Shonert.

because no element of violin playing occurs in isolation. The fundamental problem with firm staccato, which he has observed in many violinists, is that the muscles of the right hand go into spasm and become uncontrollable, especially in the downward bowing. He discovered a method that allows the right-hand muscles to relax and work together smoothly.

The main secret of Shonert's firm staccato is that the fingers on the bow do not lead the staccato movement, but the movement originates in the relaxed hand. The movement of the fingers is just a spontaneous response to the movement of the hand – it does not initiate staccato. He can demonstrate this phenomenon with a simple example. According to his method, staccato can be played by holding the bow with only two fingers while changing them in a flowing way, each one always with the thumb, by sliding up and down. Shonert can even play a firm staccato using only the thumb and pinky.⁴⁸ However, as many violin schools teach, he does not simultaneously rotate the wrist from the index to the pinky. According to Shonert's analysis, this principle might work for a slow staccato in the middle of the bow. Still, it would be challenging for a fast staccato throughout the bow and almost impossible for a downstroke. Each violinist has their own feelings, but in principle, physiologically and psychologically, a firm staccato must start in the hand, not in the fingers. According to Shonert, achieving a fast, firm staccato with conscious use of the fingers in every movement is impossible. He sees staccato not as a series of many small movements but as a single movement of the whole hand that is "interrupted" by the staccato (as if we were stringing pearls on a necklace). In this sense, it is possible to achieve a result where the movement of the hand is uninterrupted, and the hand remains still, almost motionless, for the entire duration of the staccato.⁴⁹

Ivan Galamian (as well as Carl Flesch and many others)⁵⁰ mentions the two biggest problems in practicing the firm staccato. One is the movement itself; the other is the coordination with the fingers of the left hand and the transitions across the strings, which Jindřich Pazdera also analyses in detail.⁵¹ According to Shonert's analysis, the hand becomes momentarily uncontrollable at this point. Sometimes there is even a momentary cramp, which significantly impairs the quality of a firm staccato because the muscle spasms are usually uncontrollable. The bow then begins to bounce on the string and loses its rhythm. In this case, one must be able to consciously relax the arm and put a little more weight of the whole arm. It is necessary to learn to add weight to the arm sensitively. That is why Shonert not only teaches staccato but focuses on the technique of the whole right arm, using staccato as an example. As a bonus, this will give the student a beautiful, sonorous, balanced tone and improve all other bowings. It is one of the causes of failure. The other, according to Shonert, is panic. Even a staccato that started well may not repeatedly succeed in the downward direction. Usually, the problem occurs in the middle of the bow, or the students have an individual spot on the bow where the staccato is more challenging for them. The violinist must know that place and practice it separately. Each step must be honestly practiced so that the next can follow. Shonert points out that care should be taken not to overload any muscle part when practicing.

⁴⁸ Incredible Staccato on the Violin Using Only Two Fingers, played by A. Shonert. Available from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gXrW_1vec4.

⁴⁹ Author's personal interview with A. Shonert.

⁵⁰ Galamian, 2013, pp. 78–80; Flesch, 1924, p. 72.

⁵¹ Pazdera, 2007, pp. 222–223.

During the masterclass, Shonert demonstrated the practice of firm staccato on his pedagogical model: The basis of Shonert's staccato lies in the perfect control of the long bowings. At first glance, the exercises look simple, but the opposite is true. Achieving a perfect sound with a relaxed arm while maintaining a constant speed without a trace of forcing and with absolutely inaudible bow changes requires excellent mastery. Refined aural control and cultivating a sense of the violin's natural resonance under the supervision of a teacher play a vital role.

For Shonert's specific staccato, keeping the bow grip as loose as possible is essential. So, before starting the actual practice, he recommended the following exercise – holding the bow at the frog with the tip pointing toward the ceiling.

The student then played *détaché* – one bow up and one down bow in the most comfortable part of the bow (from around the middle and towards the top). The exercise was to be performed four times using a different combination of fingers on the bow: 1. thumb and index finger, 2. thumb and middle finger, 3. thumb and ring finger, and finally, 4. thumb and pinky finger. The position of the hand on the bow should remain almost unchanged. Shonert emphasized control of the sound, which should stay constant and smooth. The movement originates in the forearm, and the role of the fingers is only to guide the bow without being the initiator.

The next step was a continuous *détaché* with random alternation of fingers, the changes to be performed as imperceptibly as possible. The ring finger and the pinky finger are prone to tensing up. At this moment, it must be switched to the index and middle fingers. Shonert recommended playing each half note at least once using a bow up and down at a quarter note speed of M.M. = 50–60. The middle strings are the easiest to play, so he always starts practicing on the D string, then on the A and E strings, and finally moves to the G string in the same exercise aimed at maximum control when playing long notes.

The student should concentrate entirely on making each half-note sound exactly the same from the frog to the top. Neither the sound nor the speed of the bow stroke can change, even when reversing the bow. Shonert constantly checked that the student's right thumb was relaxed and that the weight of her arm rested on the bow and string. He guided the student's arm to move naturally during the stroke change. Once she got the correct movement and sound, she could switch to the new string without changing the grip on the bow.

The goal is to play it with a focus and concentration on the sound without distracting thoughts. This level of concentration and relaxation is essential when playing a firm staccato and helps find the most natural movement for the violinist. This exercise aids in proper bow posture while improving the area of bow control.

Shonert further recommended playing a half note with a short pulse in the middle of the bow. He preferred speed to pressure and used the smallest possible bow segment for the pulse. The movement comes from the forearm with the same sound and feeling of relaxation before and after the pulse. The number of pulses gradually multiplied according to the metronome up to 4 pulses.

In the following exercise, Shonert added an inertial movement. The student started with a long note in the first half of the bow and played four pulses but this time two times faster in the upper part of the bow. The pulses should originate from existing inertial movement as if continuing the hand's movement from the bow's first half. The pulses are to be added in an accurate metronome rhythm with constant hand control before going into a spasm. If the violinist finds the exercise difficult or the sound jerky and uncontrollable, they should set the metronome to a slower tempo and gradually increase it again.

Once the student had mastered the pulse, she moved on to replacing the impulse with a form of a slight sway into the martelé. Shonert uses an extremely loose right hand. This allows the movement to come from the shoulder and the fingers on the bow to move naturally. In Shonert's methodology, focusing on the muscles and their cooperation, a relaxed arm and the elbow is essential. The first step to successfully mastering staccato is conscious preparation.

He recommends continuing with the metronome set at M.M. = 45 or slower if it feels more comfortable and playing two short martelé per stroke. Again, listening carefully and ensuring that the long note still sounds balanced is essential. A release must necessarily follow every martelé. Shonert uses the weight of his arm instead of pressure and lets it hang off his shoulder. The number of martelé movements should be gradually multiplied precisely according to the metronome while maintaining the feeling, as in the playing of the long tone. The faster the tempo, the quicker the release must follow each martelé movement.

The moment the hand begins to stiffen (usually on the downstroke), Shonert recommends playing the long note immediately, thinking about the difference between the long note and the staccato, and then trying the martelé again with the feeling of playing the long note. Shonert finds Kreutzer's etude No. 4 very useful for practicing staccato up and down and recommends practicing the martelé using only the weight of the arm, not the pressure needed for the martelé bowing. It should be enough to create a (lighter) staccato movement without tension.

Gradually, no longer using a metronome, the tempo and number of staccato notes should be increased, returning to the long note whenever necessary while maintaining a constant bow speed. The goal is to gradually increase the number of staccato notes and gain the ability to play them during the stroke of the entire bow.

All presented Shonert's exercises are perfectly arranged from the instructional point of view and logically follow each other. However, they are challenging to perform and require maximum concentration. The main difference of the Shonert method is that the fingers are not involved in the bow exchange. It is necessary to relax the whole hand from the wrist to the fingers so that the movement comes from the hand, with the fingers moving by inertia. The structure of the hands is different for each violinist, so the movement of the fingers will be slightly different for everyone.

Shonert is willing to pass on his method. However, learning staccato in one seminar or from the web is impossible. What is essential is direct contact with the teacher and regular guidance. Even if the violinist does not achieve a dizzyingly fast staccato, individual exercises can contribute significantly to forming right arm work and technique. Even here, however, correction of sound under the supervision of an erudite teacher is necessary if the pupil is not yet sufficiently mature and accustomed to listening to the maximum extent possible. It is also essential to check that the movements are relaxed and correctly executed.

How to Get Rid of Stage Fright

On the devastating effects of stage fright, Shonert stated: "I remember from my childhood having crazy stage fright before every performance. Sometimes it was almost panic with increased body temperature and rapid pulse. The fear used to be so great that I wished

something would happen – anything – just so I would not have to play, and unfortunately, the stage fright took away from the quality of the performance.”⁵²

Shonert sees stage fright in anyone who performs in front of people – musicians, actors, politicians – as a normal phenomenon. He even believes that if a violinist came to play without stage fright, it would be boring for him and others. He finds it challenging to eliminate stage fright in a way that benefits the cause. It is necessary to work with stage fright consciously. He, therefore, tries to find ways to befriend stage fright so that it helps him. He developed his own technique to deal with stage fright and overcome blocks. First and foremost, he sought to eliminate the fear in his mind and then transfer the feelings to the body so that his hands could also relax and control the instrument. Today he teaches that learning to control the conscious and subconscious mind is essential. A revelation for him was the Pinchas Zukerman masterclass, in which he was highly impressed and inspired by the example of controlling emotions and the instrument.

Shonert recalls: “Zuckerman was playing Vitali Ciaccona – his violin was crying, and he was telling jokes as he played. It was an amazing experience for me. Controlled work – a hot heart and a cool head. Emotions must be controlled; otherwise, emotions will control you, and the violin playing will lose quality. Fear is hard to eliminate completely, but it must be controlled so that the technical quality of the performance does not suffer.”⁵³

Shonert summarized his idea within *The Shonert Technique*⁵⁴ into twenty-one tips for controlling stage fright, which he discussed in detail at the seminar. It might be worth rearranging the tips in a logical order. In terms of the focus of this study, only the most exciting opinions are mentioned.

Shonert considers frequent public performing as an essential ingredient, the importance of which is also stressed by David Oistrakh. Even though he was not immune to stage fright, explaining: “If one plays less than twice a month, it could crack anyone’s nerves,” he recommended constant public playing as the only sure antidote. He admitted: “In most cases, I feel a tremendous inner tension,” but warned against the danger of being “too calm.”⁵⁵

One of Shonert’s tips is to transform and redirect the feeling of fear into inspiration. He recommends learning to improvise and clarifies: “Improvisation protects against the fear of forgetting what to play. If one can improvise for a moment in the spirit and style of a given piece, the average listener will not know it.”⁵⁶

The preparation, both instrumental and mental, immediately before the performances is undoubtedly crucial. Many teachers advise what to focus on when performing on stage. Yuri Yankelevich,⁵⁷ a renowned pedagogue, considered the best mental preparation before going on stage to be the feeling of absolute control of one’s instrument. Before a performance, he recommended playing through the piece without stopping at a slightly slower tempo and following all the nuances. He further recommends:

“It is important to be able to exaggerate the musical idea but without ever becoming too excited or flustered. This also helps to grasp the form, consolidate the transitions

⁵² Author’s personal interviews with A. Shonert.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Available from <http://cz.shonertacademy.com>.

⁵⁵ Roth, Henry. 1997. *Violin Virtuosos from Paganini to the 21st Century*. Los Angeles: California Classics Book, p. 146.

⁵⁶ Author’s personal interviews with A. Shonert.

⁵⁷ Yuri Yankelevich (1909–1973) was a Soviet violinist and teacher.

and sequences, precisely control all the details, and improve the coordination between mental conception and physical realization. It is important not to lose oneself on stage. The performer should think only about the music and not notice anything else. Nothing unexpected should interfere with the violinist's fundamental goal, which is artistry and musically convincing whole... Emotion must be already created when first studying the piece. A musician must always be engaged and live the music without waiting for 'inspiration' on stage. I cannot remember Victor Tretyakov⁵⁸ ever playing anything in a lesson without being wholly involved, he never 'saved' anything extra for the stage."⁵⁹

Moreover, Shonert states that violinists should be in control of everything they do on stage. Stage fright comes from insecurity.⁶⁰ Shonert advises perceiving the concert as a series of tasks that must be completed and recalls: "David Oistrakh once had an extremely successful performance. After the concert, a journalist approached him and asked him what he could say about today's particularly successful performance. Oistrakh replied, 'I managed to do almost everything I wanted to do today.'"⁶¹

To a large extent, these are well-known lesson principles whose positive impact depends on many factors – the violinist's mental resilience, personality, pedagogical guidance, etc. In Shonert's conception, we can see an eclectic mix of approaches that focus on influencing the psyche of the individual affected by stage fright. The problem is the considerable – at least so far – "unpredictability" of these practices. Shonert describes them in relatively general terms, with the practical implementation in his hands in the class with the student and in his perception of the particular student. It is thus an exceptionally meritorious activity, but it can hardly be called orderly methodology. The importance of the improvisation would be alone as a subject for a separate study. Shonert can be credited with his efforts to describe and further develop his methodological procedures, which he continues to improve with the ambition of having student-teachers in the future who would take up his procedures and teach them further.

Conclusion

The three themes chosen are timeless and have always been topical regarding modern violin-playing principles. The text draws on many interviews conducted with Alexander Shonert. It is outside the scope of this article to discuss the issues in detail, but pointing out the diversity of opinions may benefit many violin teachers. Shonert's ideas can help violinists (and teachers) on their journey to violin artistry. Of course, mastering such a complex element of violin technique as the firm staccato without direct contact with a teacher in the case of book-based study is debatable, as is mastering the firm staccato in a single seminar. However, the methodological principles and examples can inspire further development in the field of violin playing. The positive aspect of Shonert's approach is the respect for the individuality of the pupil and the attempt to make the playing freer by way

⁵⁸ Viktor Viktorovich Tretyakov (* 1946) is a Russian/Soviet violinist and conductor.

⁵⁹ Lankovsky, Masha. 2016. *The Russian Violin School. The Legacy of Yuri Yankelevich*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 227-228.

⁶⁰ Author's personal interview with A. Shonert.

⁶¹ Ibid.

of corrections or refinements, “cleaning up” the basic principles of violin technique so that the individual elements come together in the most freely developed system, at any level of playing. It would certainly be interesting to watch the pupils that Shonert himself guides.

It is a meritorious activity to raise awareness in the field of physical exercise, which is often neglected, yet plays a pivotal role in preventing and developing professional injuries. One of the most remarkable contributions is the emphasis Shonert places on the pupil learning to listen to themselves and to perceive sound quality. Auditory control is an essential issue without which further improvement in violin playing cannot occur.

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