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The Violin: A Learning Experience

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by

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My interest in the violin and my choosing it for a semester project was actually out of curiosity. To be truthful, I really didn't care much for listening to violin music, but I had always heard how difficult it was to play, so I convinced myself I could prove different.

As to this aspect of the project, I failed. But I gained much more than I had ever hoped. A verification of this statement is found in a recital recently given by one of our faculty members. I was anxious to hear one, other than my teacher, performing on this instrument. Whereas previously I would have listened with a very critical ear (especially toward squeaks and wrong notes), after having some knowledge of the violin, I realized that it took a tremendous effort to even hold the thing correctly.

And that was what my first lesson dealt with--holding the instrument. I never would have suspected it to take thirty minute's practice a day to accomplish this while plucking a few strings. I felt such satisfaction and accomplishment after having perfected my first song, Twinkle Twinkle Little Star. I "light-fingeredly" progressed to such pieces as Onward Christian Soldiers and Faith of Our Fathers. (My teacher had a remarkable sense of humor about my attending a Christian institution.) Who would ever have believed that before the semester's end I would be playing first violin of Haydn's Surprise Symphony?

Even though I learned a great deal in the short span of time in which I took lessons, it seems as though it would take two years to my one year at piano to accomplish equally as much. While the piano is concerned with playing correct notes with both hands, phrasing, and dynamics, the violin bears reference to these things plus being aware of the many different bowing techniques. You have one half

inch on the piano to play the correct key, but only the tip of your finger in an exact place on the violin.

Proficiency in its performance was only part of my learning experience, for I gained a greater insight to the violin as an instrument. It is the treble voice of the class of bowed string instruments. The violin is constructed with a top fashioned from pine or spruce, a back generally cut from maple, and the sides and neck made of wood matching that of the back. The bridge is almost always made of maple. Ebony is the favoured wood for the fingerboard, end-pin, tail-piece saddle, fingerboard nut, and pegs.[1]

These parts are glued together, but there remain two other important parts which are not glued to the main body of the instrument, the bridge and the soundpost. The bridge is the string's support. It has a pattern of holes cut into it to give it more flexibility. Inside the violin, wedged between the back and the top under the bridge is the sound-post. It is a thin rod of pine which conducts sound from the front to the back of the violin and helps support the top against the pressure of the strings.[2]

There are four strings, E, A, D, and G which are tuned in fifths. The E string is usually made of steel while the others are made of aluminum, stainless steel, catgut wound with silver, and various other materials.

The violin has two "f" shaped sound holes. When strings are plucked or bowed these outlets permit an activating of the air mass in the sound box producing tone.[3]

The bow is a curved flexible stick made of Pernambuco wood. It is about 27 inches long and has attached to it from 175 to 250 horsehairs. Horsehairs are used because

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[1]Oscar Thompson, Ed., International Cyclopedia of Music and Musicians (New York, 1952), pp. 1978-1985.

[2]Field Enterprises Educational Corporation, World Book Encyclopedia, XIX (Chicago, 1971), pp. 302-304.

[3]F.E. Compton Co., Compton's Encyclopedia, XXIII (Chicago, 1970) pp. 326-328.

they have many small bristles pointing away from the hair root, half pointing in one direction and half in the other. They can be loosened or tightened by turning a screw at the end of the bow. It is the bow that vibrates the strings.[1]

The first typical violin is said to have been made by Gaspero da Salo, an Italian who lived from 1540 to 1609. The craft was later greatly developed and perfected by the Italians.[2]

An important center of violin making was the little Italian town of Cremona. This is where the master violin-maker, Andrea Amati lived and worked. He experimented with various woods until he found the most suitable, then he worked with treating and finishing the violin.

Cremona's greatest master was Antonio Stradivari. He made special contributions toward curves and arches in the violin. He experimented with oils and finishes until a varnish which gave the violin a rich amber color was created. Since Stradivari's time, the secret of the varnish has been lost and there has never been made any violins similar to his.[3]

Germany is also the home of many great violin workers. One of the greatest masters there was Giuseppe Guarneri. He was a rival of Stradivari and produced violins of rich, full tone.[4]

Jacobus Stainer's workmanship could not be surpassed even by Amati. He was Germany's greatest violin maker. Stainer found inspiration in those violins from Italy and probably received some instruction from Amati.[5]

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[1]Field Enterprises Educational Corporation, World Book Encyclopedia, XIX (Chicago, 1971), pp. 302-304.

[2]Abradale Press, The World of Music, IV (New York, 1963), p. 1439.

[3]F.E. Compton Co., Compton's Encyclopedia, XXIII (Chicago, 1970) pp. 326-328.

[4]Field Enterprises Educational Corporation, op. cit.

[5]Oscar Thompson, Ed., International Cyclopedia of Music and Musicians (New York, 1952), pp. 1978-1985.

Learning about the master violin makers was an important part of the project, but it wasn't quite as interesting as actually playing the instrument. There were many rules to remember concerning correct posture, hand positions, and bowing techniques.

How to sit or stand should not be the object of exact prescriptions, but the player should simply feel at ease. The violin should be held between your chin and left shoulder and should be able to be supported without the use of your hands. The elbow is never actually set. Whatever its placement, it must change beneath the instrument with the movement of the fingers across the strings. The wrist can influence the placement of the fingers on the strings. There should never be a sideways curve in the hand, but must be held so that there is an approximate straight alignment of the hand with the forearm. The placement of the hand should not remain distant from the neck of the instrument, but should slightly touch both sides of the violin. As the first finger falls on the string, it should resemble three sides of a square. The fingers fall perpendicularly on the tip. Depending on the note being played, they will be in either an elongated or square position. It is the thumb's task to exert a counter-pressure against the fingers playing.

In order to obtain the correct bowing position a circle should be formed with the right hand by placing the tip of the thumb against the second finger. The bow stick is brought into the circle so that the thumb contacts the stick and the frog. The third and fourth fingers work together to counter-balance the weight of the bow.[1]

It seems a long and almost impossible road to the mastery of the violin. It takes great interest, devotion, and, of course, talent. I had quite a bit of interest, enoughdevotion, and very little talent. But it was fun and I plan to take more lessons or work privately in the future if time permits. Because of the experience gained

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[1]Jack Pernecky, Basic Guide to Violin Playing (Chicago, 1963), pp. 5-24.

from this project I have acquired a greater appreciation for violin music and a knowledge of the basics of the instrument.

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