

Colour co-ordination

Mastering the elements of *messa di voce* allows you a huge palette of musical sonorities. So how do you start?

Pedro de Alcantara offers some practical advice

In last month's *Strad* we pondered Giuseppe Tartini's statement that the *messa di voce* – swelling and diminishing a long note – was the most difficult and important of all exercises. We learnt that the *messa di voce* was a vocal ornament much favoured by singers of the early Baroque. In time it grew in scope to become a mainstay of vocal and instrumental pedagogy. The performance of a perfect *messa di voce* requires an interplay of tensions and relaxations that exists only in a perfectly balanced, dextrous technique. To master the *messa di voce*, then, is to conquer technique and to coordinate yourself ideally at the instrument.

In string playing, the main factors in managing dynamics are the bow's point of contact on the string, its speed and its pressure. Moving the bow from the fingerboard towards the bridge or vice versa causes immediate changes in sound quality. So do changes of speed and pressure. Like a painter who mixes three primary colours to create millions of possible combinations, players blend bow speed, bow pressure and

point of contact to create their tonal palette, changing the mixture note by note as they shape their phrase.

To execute a *messa di voce* you must vary at least one of the three basic elements. In a crescendo you may increase bow speed, increase bow pressure, draw the bow closer to the bridge, or combine any two or all three elements. Some players consider the idea of pressure negative, speaking instead of releasing 'arm weight' into the string or suspending weight away from it. Yet the pressure of the bow on the string is like the pressure of breath against lung or of blood against vessel – a lively and vital force acting upon an elastic surface. The string, the bow stick and hair, and the player's arm are all flexible and resilient. Together they create a system of springs that not only withstand pressure but thrive under it.

To understand how pressure, accompanied by movement, can be powerful yet effortless, imagine opening a vacuum-sealed jar. Without sensing how the thread of the lid fits against the thread of the jar, you waste energy and end up further tightening the lid rather than unscrewing it – and tightening your neck and shoulders in the process. Conversely, if you direct your energies along the right path the lid yields to your touch as if by magic. The way you hold and open the jar is of great importance. Keep your spine long, your neck free and your arms limber. Apply a firm, supple, enveloping touch, as you would when stroking a cat. The thing thus handled – jar, cat, or cello – welcomes such a touch and opens up to it. If you find the right touch and the right path of energies, you may apply considerable pressure on the string without misusing yourself or asphyxiating the instrument.

BELOW an illustration from *The Singer's Preceptor* by Domenico Corri, instructing singers in *messa di voce*

LESSON I.

p *cres* *f* *ff* *dim* *p* *mor.*
 Begin with a delicate softness, increasing the tone to its loudest degree and diminishing it to the same point of softness with which you began

The swelling and dying of the Voice
 Messa di Voce

The Soul of Music.

These accords are only intended to give the Notes their Harmonic parts, if Scholars find the Arpeggio difficult as noted, they may take only the Chord, which may be played with either hand.



Ask a cellist friend to play an open C string. With a little aural attention you'll hear several other pitches at the same time: the C an octave above the open string, the G a fifth above it, another C, then an E, a second G, and a very flat B flat nearly three octaves above the open string. The main note is called the fundamental and the overtones above it the partials. Together they form the harmonic series. While preparing for a *messa di voce*, the cellist draws an impeccably controlled, slow bow near the bridge. This makes the harmonic series even more audible, causing the note to resonate brilliantly and carry easily above a concert grand piano or an orchestra. Use the *messa di voce* to tap into the power of the harmonic series and soon you'll free up your playing and undo many difficulties of technique and coordination.

To begin our practical work, we revisit Giuseppe Tartini's advice: 'First, exercise yourself in a *messa di voce* upon an open string, for example, upon the second, which is the D string. Begin pianissimo, and increase the tone by slow degrees to fortissimo; and this should be equally done on the down bow and the up bow.' After swelling to a fortissimo, diminish the note back to its original dynamic level. Start your work with the open strings and their first and second partials (the octave above and the octave plus a fifth). These pitches vibrate freely on string instruments, making it easier for you to perform a satisfying *messa di voce*.

The following example is a sequence that contains the skeleton of a harmonic progression, giving form and substance to the exercise. If you wish, use vibrato on some of the notes, but make sure that it doesn't interfere with the steadiness of the bowing arm:



Devise a similar sequence for yourself and practise two basic variations on the *messa di voce*: the *exclamatio viva* (starting a note forte, then diminishing and swelling it) and the *exclamatio languida* (first swelling the note, then diminishing it again, to finish with a second swell). Visualise and memorise these variations by studying this list:

<i>Messa di voce</i>	<>
<i>Exclamatio viva</i>	><
<i>Exclamatio languida</i>	<> <

We now pay homage to Leopold Mozart and perform what he called 'divisions' in his Treatise on the Fundamental Principles of Violin Playing. 'One must know how to divide the bow into weakness and strength,' Mozart wrote, 'and therefore by means of pressure and relaxation, to produce the notes beautifully and touchingly.' The last division that he describes is the most interesting: 'a double loudness, alternating with softness [that] can obviously be performed four, five, and six times; yes, often even more in one stroke.' The more units of crescendo and diminuendo you can fit into a single bow the better. Make some units louder, others softer and arrange them into larger groups of two or three units. Each unit becomes a syllable and each larger group a word. Within a single long note, organise the groups into a phrase, varying the loudness and length of each unit. Thus begins the collaboration between *messa di voce* and phrasing. ▶

ABOVE players blend bow speed, bow pressure and point of contact to create new tones, just as painters blend primary colours

String Quintet in C major D956, Schubert
First movementSuite for solo cello op.84, Křenek
Third movement

LEFT mastery of *messa di voce* on long notes helps the control of bowing, articulation and dynamics over series of short notes, as in these passages



We now insert the changing dynamics into a musical setting. Play the following scale using the *exclamatio viva* to add rhythmic vitality to the short notes, enhancing the qualities of legato and sostenuto:



Let your imagination take flight and turn the scale into an improvised melody:



This swelling and diminishing of long notes is exactly how singers shape and sustain their vowels. In singing, as in playing, consonants are important too: unless your consonants and vowels add to one another, your technique will be uneven and uncomfortable. Place the bow on the string and ready yourself to draw it. Sense your right arm's circuit of connections (from back to shoulder, from shoulder to elbow and so on, to the fingertips) and enjoy the elastic feel of the hand pressing the bow against the string. Now play a few short notes with very little bow at moderate speed, starting each note with a clear, soft but unequivocal articulation, like a very quiet consonant.

Now articulate each note with a quiet consonant and immediately afterwards start drawing, shaping and sustaining a long vowel, using the *messa di voce* or its variations. If you can sustain the vowel easily from

beginning to end, regardless of where you articulate the consonant along the bow, then you know that your consonant is healthy. This is a surprisingly difficult exercise, as most consonants tempt you to use too much bow or scrunch the string or otherwise go wrong. Mastering it will give you tremendous control of bowing, articulation and dynamics in passages as those illustrated above.

You're now ready for the *ne plus ultra* of all exercises. Play a long note on a single bow with an absolutely even sound quality. Using the knowledge you have



accumulated so far, ensure that you are ready at any moment to execute a crescendo or a decrescendo, both in quick succession, a sforzando followed by a piano subito, or any combination of dynamics whatsoever:

This is 'latent *messa di voce*', at your disposal at all times. It makes your bow seem infinitely long. As a result, your playing becomes endlessly rich. ■

TEACHING AN OLD DOG NEW TRICKS

The capacity of an instrument to respond to the player's touch changes constantly. In some ways instruments are like cars, shoes, pieces of furniture or tools. Badly used, they deteriorate with time. More intriguingly, when well used they improve over time. If you haven't conquered the *messa di voce* and its requisite varieties of pressure, your instrument won't have gone through the adjustments that these pressures entail. Therefore, your first efforts to work on it may bump against the resistance of the instrument. Besides learning the *messa di voce*, you'll also need to teach it, as it were, to your instrument. It's possible to execute a perfect *messa di voce* and sound terrible, if your instrument hasn't been broken in properly. It's tempting to give it up at this point, but perseverance will bring enormous benefits – to you and your instrument.