

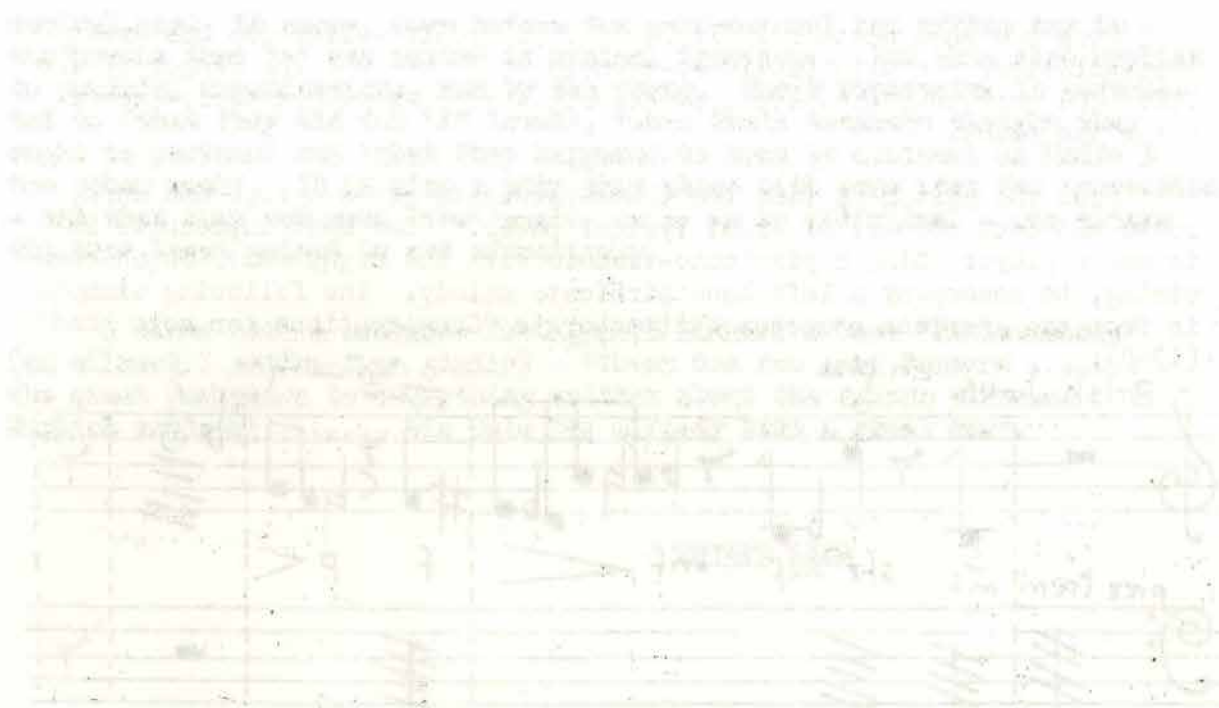
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CONTEMPORARY STRING TECHNIQUE

We have a certain concept of what we think a string player* is. He should play in tune, using vibrato with the left hand to produce good tone; and this should be perfectly co-ordinated with a good bowing technique involving smooth bow changes at first and staccato, slurred and spiccato bowings later. This sound but limited concept is as widely held today as it was seventy years ago, and there has been little real innovation.

Yet the percussive possibilities of his instrument are enormous. As soon as the many effects caused by plucking, tapping and rapping the instrument are examined seriously, not treated as effects, but on an equal basis with normal technique, a whole new philosophy emerges.

PLUCKING: The great achievements and popularity of the guitar, sitar and jazz double bass indicate that plucking, known as pizzicato, is a very rich field to study and emulate. From the jazz bass we find velocity can be acquired by rapid alternations of the third and second fingers of the right hand, while holding the bow, or by all the fingers, putting the bow down.


The pizzicato tremolo is a most exciting oriental sound, produced by a backward and forward movement of one finger on the string, so that the string is always vibrating while plucked (quasi mandolin). Stated differently, it is a sustained note with rapid repetitions of that note over it:



From the same eastern influence the pizzicato -glissando has great possibilities. As with pizzicato-tremolo only the stopping finger of the left hand must touch the string, the glissando beginning a micro-second after the pluck.

From the guitar we find the thumb-pizzicato gives a ripe and dark, round and deep colour, of great lyrical power. But most impressive is to see a player using a pizzicato-tremolo with the right hand, on an open string, to accompany a left hand pizzicato melody. The following example is from the American composer Whittenberg's "Conversations for solo bass" (1968).

Brisk $\text{♩} = 116$ (l.h. pizz)

The indication  over a note means we should lift the string up and let it crash against the fingerboard. This sounds like a pistol shot, and when used unexpectedly is very good for frightening audiences.

TAPPING: It is difficult for string players to think of a violin as a potential drum and discretion should be important here. If we use the knuckle, palm, fingertip, fingernail and cupped hand on the ribs, neck, back, bridge, scroll, tailpiece and fingerboard, we have five different generators on eight different sounding parts of the body. Many permutations are clearly available, especially using both hands, and purely percussive sounds of great rhythmic beauty and subtlety are possible.

In his "Improvisations for solo bass" (1969) the American Eugene Kurtz uses a precise notation —


means to slap the strings against the fingerboard.


is the clef for percussive effects.



means slap the body.



 means rap the body with knuckles.

 means to trill with the flat of the fingers on the body. Upward stems indicate the right hand, and downward stems the left.

Now consider the excitement of the following passage from Bars 83 to 87 of this following piece:-

Handwritten musical score for two staves. The top staff has a treble clef and a 3/8 time signature. The bottom staff has a bass clef and a 5/8 time signature. The music consists of rhythmic patterns with various dynamics including *mf*, *f*, and *ff*. The piece concludes with the word *secco*.

PLAYER'S VOICE: As a piece of music is written for a player as well as his instrument, and not the instrument by itself, there is no reason why the player should not add an additional vocal part. Articulations and interjections like HEY! and BAAR! can help to bring sudden focus on the music. He can sing or hum along with the instrument, or in counterpoint with it, especially near or into the f-holes, with great effect. A short speech part can be anything from comic to dramatic, as can various movements or gestures, whether related to the instrument or not.

To return to bowing, it is necessary to promote the scratchy *sul ponticello* (near the bridge) and the velvety *sul tasto* (near the fingerboard) to an equal status with normal bowing. Similarly the hard and brittle *col legno* (with the stick part of the bow), in both *battuto* and *tratto* (struck and drawn) forms, should be of similar status. Lastly, the amazing sound of bowing on the tailpiece, and strings behind the bridge, is too weird to be overlooked in this article.

None of this is really madness. With the Polish composer Penderecki's "Tragedy for the Victims of Hiroshima" (1960) and his string Quartet (1964), pioneer work has started in Europe. Although all this is being done in the United States at present, our own composers will easily catch up. There is a great future in string playing, but not in the way that string players think. The way forward lies in sonic, extra-musical and neo-electronic sounds, giving freshness and extra dimensions to normal technique.

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