Bow distribution

How to achieve a nuanced and colourful sound through a more sophisticated use of the bow

JACOB ADAMS
Assistant professor of viola and assistant director of graduate studies at University of Alabama School of Music, US

When I was a graduate student I worked hard, practiced diligently, listened to recordings and tried to emulate the sounds of the great players that I admired, but I always felt there was something missing in my sound. A light bulb went on for me when I started to focus on bow distribution and speed, and how to adjust that within a single bow. It was a simple enough idea, but I was in my late twenties by the time I figured it out.

The bow is our breath support and oxygen, and we need to think more like singers when we plan our own playing: the amount of breath we use, the speed at which we use it and the way we distribute it allows us to create nuance in our sound. Learning to go from a very fast to a very slow speed, a very slow speed to a very fast speed, and everything in between all under one bow, will considerably increase our abilities in terms of color and expression. Since I realised this, bow distribution has been a key component of how I teach: my ultimate goal is to ensure that my students use their bows efficiently to add variety to their sound from the outset.

EXERCISES

Many students – especially those who start with the Suzuki method – are taught to play with a constant bow speed using whole bows and half bows. They think about how much bow they are using and which part of the bow they are in, but never about varying their bow speed. Even advanced players still use this basic concept of bow division, with a full bow for a long note and less bow for a shorter note. By thinking in terms of bow speed instead, they can add more nuance to their playing. This is a concept that can be introduced at a very early stage.

To begin, try exercise 1 using the bow divisions marked. This exercise is all about keeping a constant bow speed with varied bow divisions. Then play exercise 2, this time with constant bow divisions in the middle of the bow, but at varying speeds. I have taken this idea from Gerald Fischbach’s article in The Strad, September 2004 (see bit.ly/2M8J8YI). Fischbach uses miles per hour (mph) as a simple way of thinking about bow speed: minims (¿) at 10mph; crotchets (¿) at 20mph; quavers (¿) twice as fast again, and so on.

UNEVEN BOW SPEEDS

To practise using uneven bow speeds, play exercises 3 and 4 with a metronome set to = 60.

EXERCISE 1
Play Long, Long Ago from Suzuki Book 1 with this standard bow-division plan

**Bow division:** WB UB WB UB UB

**Moderato**

EXERCISE 2
This time play Long, Long Ago in the middle of the bow, thinking in terms of bow speed – here indicated in ‘miles per hour’

**Moderato**

EXERCISE 3
Play Long, Long Ago this time with varied bow divisions, thinking in terms of bow speed

**Moderato**

EXERCISE 4
Play Long, Long Ago in the middle of the bow, thinking in terms of bow speed – here indicated in ‘miles per hour’

**Moderato**
The aim is to become comfortable with using varied bow speeds on different note values, even when crossing the strings. It seems like a simple concept, but I find that students of all levels think that smaller notes always need less bow and longer notes need more. These exercises are designed to undercut that idea and to expand on the way we think about it.

Keeping your contact point centred and consistent for a warm, ‘spinning’ sound, with flat bow hair for clarity:

- Experiment to find the combination of bow speed and weight that you need in order to stay in time while using the amount of bow specified under each note.
- Repeat each bar and bow-speed combination until you feel comfortable, before moving on to the next.
- On each repeat, try to make each variation sound as similar as possible to the last, so that using only ⅓ of the bow on a minim sounds the same as using ⅔ of the bow on the minim. At the same time, think about the differences between the two. Why might you prefer to use one over another, and where might it be more useful?
- Keep focusing on bow speed even for the string-crossings. Notice all the different colours and sounds you can achieve with the different bow-speed and distribution combinations and think about how you can apply these to your pieces.

**MAZAS STUDIES**

Mazas’s *Seventy-Five Melodious and Progressive Studies* Book 1 op.36 is useful for working on bow distribution; nos.1, 7 and 8 are good for slow, lyrical practice. In exercises 5–7 I have marked selected bars from these etudes with ideas for different bow-distribution plans to practise. For the first two bars of exercise 5, the dynamic high point is on beat three, so start with a slow bow, increase the speed and weight on beats 2 and 3, and slow down again (maintaining a good contact point) on beat 4.
**REPERTOIRE**

The Bruch Romance is the first intermediate-level Romantic piece that many violists learn. To play it well, it is important to understand how to divide and distribute the bow effectively so that the phrases sing over the bar-lines. Put exercise 4 into practice using **example 1**. To work on exercise 3, you can use the opening of the Brahms F minor Viola Sonata (**example 2**).

**EXAMPLE 1** Soar over the bar-lines in the opening of Bruch’s Romance

![Image](image1.png)

**EXAMPLE 2** Use the first bars of the Brahms F minor Viola Sonata to practise the principles of bow distribution addressed in exercise 3

![Image](image2.png)

**EXAMPLE 3** Make sure you save enough bow to bring out every note of each phrase in the second movement of the Franck Sonata

![Image](image3.png)

Lastly, try the opening of the second movement of the Franck Sonata (**example 3**). Attack with a *forte* or *sforzando* for the beginning of the crotchet, then make sure you have enough bow and speed for the two semiquavers (2) that follow, so that they can be heard clearly. Really sing all the way through, and make sure you have enough bow for every note.

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**IN YOUR PRACTICE**

Spend five minutes on the basic exercises in this article in every practice session, so that the concept becomes a more natural part of your playing over time. It could be the very first thing you do, or something to practise after you have played your scales. The goal is to add bow speed as a new tool in your arsenal that will always be ready and available, and to find the right sound world to use for the repertoire you’re practising.

We tend to focus mostly on fingerings and bowings when we start to learn a piece, but it’s important to think about bow speed and distribution too. Why is the bowing in your music edition the way it is? How can you make it most successful? Bowing choices are, of course, very important; but I would argue that with a good bow-distribution plan you can make even the worst bowing sound convincing and effective.

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**TIPS FOR TEACHERS**

Because so many string players learn to use only whole bows or half bows to begin with, they have trouble with the concept of using more bow for shorter note values and less bow for longer note values when they need to develop a more sophisticated sound later on. If your students struggle with any of the exercises in this article, go right back to basics: divide the bow in half, or in 2/3–1/3, and talk about the sound.

Sometimes I ask my students to record themselves and then me playing the same bow-distribution exercise; then they play both recordings back to see if they can hear and understand the difference. We apply the same idea to one or two bars in the repertoire directly afterwards, to reinforce the connection between technique and actual musical production.

INTERVIEW BY PAULINE HARDING

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**STUDIES**

Simon Fischer’s *Basics* book contains some useful exercises for working on bow speed and playing in different parts of the bow at different dynamics.

*Studies in Lyricism*, edited by Doris Gazda, looks at bow distribution and changing dynamics under a slur, as part of learning to play expressively, over the bar line with a more musical, less technical approach.

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**NEXT MONTH**

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