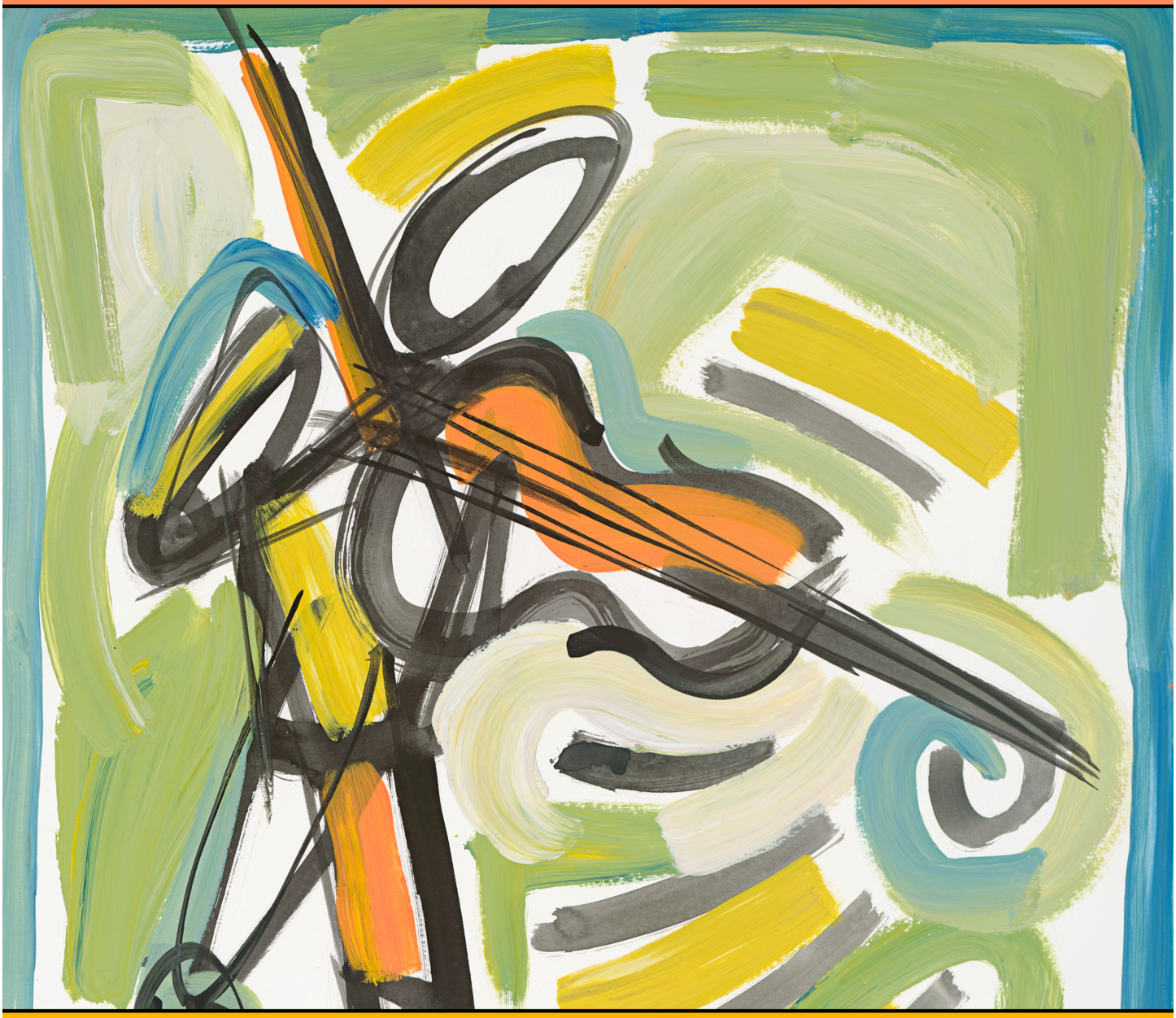
The Classical Boost

THE STRUM BOWING GROOVE ACADEMY

How Strum Bowing Enhances Your Classical Technique



by Tracy Silverman

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Classical Boost

How Strum Bowing Enhances Your Classical Technique

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Preface

When I first started teaching Strum Bowing about 20 years ago, my students would tell me that their classical teachers said their rhythm had improved or that they were keeping a steadier pulse in their Bach--that they were now able to play tricky rhythms that used to mess them up.

It was kind of ironic, because I had always felt that my mission was to help people break out of their classical boxes--to learn how to swing and how to rock on their instruments.

I was the one encouraging them to shake off those classical shackles that were holding them back. I was the guy who was telling students to do all the opposite things that their classical teachers were asking them to do--to make “ugly” sounds, tap your feet, sing or speak while you play. I was the good cop who was letting them play hooky from classical school.

But the last thing I thought I was doing was helping their classical playing!

Not that I'm surprised, of course. Strum Bowing is 100% about getting in touch with your inner groove. So, nothing could make me happier than to see that carry over into classical playing.

Strum Bowing breaks the process of playing a groove down to very small, actionable steps that lead you towards understanding and activating your own innate rhythmic sense.

You probably have no idea how much rhythmic sense you already have! The job of a teacher is to uncover the student's hidden potential. Some students overestimate their potential but most underestimate it. If you're telling yourself that you have terrible rhythm, that you are hopeless when it comes to swinging or grooving, and no one can fix it—then you are definitely underestimating yourself. Never give up on yourself! I certainly haven't.

And if you think that grooving is something that can't be taught and therefore you can't be taught, then you're underestimating me.

It's really not hard, it's just different. In fact, it's much easier than almost everything else you probably do on a string instrument. I mean, if guitar players can do it, how hard could it be?

For me, the fact that classical teachers ask me how I "fixed" their students' rhythm problems is proof that this isn't just about a chop stroke, a bow technique or some memorized groove patterns.

Strum Bowing is a shortcut to your inner groove. It's simple—just strum!


RKICE

Chapter 1

Breathing Life into the Ink

As young string students, there are a few refrains we tend to hear from our teachers over and over--things like “watch your intonation!” and “bend your thumb!” But possibly the most common of all teacher refrains is “Count!”

My years of violin lessons were littered with reminders and pleas to count, to keep time better in my head. One reason we need a constant reminder of this is that, as melody instruments, strings are often playing phrases that are not rhythmically active in the same way that an accompanying part might be. We are very focused on our tone and expressiveness, which is not a bad thing, but that is typically a different focus than someone whose main function is to be an accompanist--to keep time and provide the chords.

This is especially true for upper string players--that’s you violinists out there. Violins, since they are highest in pitch, are typically playing the melody and not playing a support role. It is often the cello or bass that is keeping the pulse and the viola or 2nd violin who is playing the subdivision.

Classical Music Rocks!

Rhythm permeates all music except the most static of drones. Even if the tempo is a slow-crawling Lento or Largo, there is still generally some sort of discernable pulse. And there is an undeniable human tendency to subdivide a pulse into faster iterations of that pulse. A quarter note beat will divide into 2 8th notes or 3 triplet 8th notes or 4 16th notes, etc.

You could divide a beat infinitely into smaller and smaller subdivision, but for the most part, the smallest fraction of a pulse will be the 16th notes or occasionally 32nd notes, depending on how it’s notated. These smallest

subdivisions of the beat are what we are concerned with--what I call Groovons: the smallest particle of the groove.

If we have, let's say, 16th notes in our part, we will tend to keep a strong and consistent rhythm because we are playing the subdivision. The problem comes when we play melodic phrases which have sustained notes and we are not manifesting all those subdivisions. That's when we need to be counting in our heads, to make sure we are holding those notes for their accurate values.

That's why my teacher always told me to "Count!"

Physicalizing the Subdivision

But we can do better than just counting. As evidenced by the fact that I had to be reminded to do it in every lesson, maybe counting in our heads isn't the best strategy. Counting out loud would be better, but not very practical for the most part. But even better yet, what if we made those subdivisions physical motions? What if, instead of counting silently in our heads, we physicalized that subdivision within our bow arm, the way a guitar player strums? This would ensure that the rhythm is consistent. After all, it's been working for guitar players for years.

Great idea--but how do we keep our bows moving if we are not playing the subdivisions in our part? How do we "strum" and still play the melody?

Well, we don't exactly. But what we are going to do in this book is to work on bridging that gap between classical grooves and classical melodies. We will learn how to rhythmicize our melodies in order to reframe them--to see them through a rhythm lens so that we feel how melodies are rhythmic animals. Melodies, unless they are over drones, always live in a rhythmic context.

Rhythm = Dance

Rhythmic Music Comes from Rhythmic Movement

When we dance to a musical groove, we create rhythm with our body. We express a pulse and a groove with movement. If we are holding a guitar, that movement will express itself as a strum. And when we make music with that movement, it then inspires the listener to move their body to the groove.

We are so far removed from whatever inspired our classical masterpieces that it's nearly impossible for us to imagine what the context was originally. But what I would like to demonstrate to you is that all these masterpieces of the past have vibrant grooves that enervate them and bring them to life, and to ignore those grooves is like pretending the beat doesn't matter in hip hop. Of course, it matters.

What we are doing with Strum Bowing is getting in touch with those grooves in the music. If you are a violinist, this will shift your focus from melodic playing to rhythmic playing. And if you are a violist, cellist or bassist, you are probably more familiar with being the accompanist, but you probably still focus on melodic playing a good deal in your lessons. This is about developing the groove skills you may have overlooked in the "easier" accompaniment parts.

Rhythm Strings

With Strum Bowing, we are functioning not as melodic instruments but as rhythm instruments--more like a rhythm guitar as opposed to a lead guitar. If you're not sure what that distinction is, think of the rhythm guitar being someone strumming chords behind a singer and the lead guitar as Jimi Hendrix playing the Star Spangled Banner. One is supporting the melody and the other is playing the melody.

Playing rhythm may seem like a paradigm shift for many string players, but that's partly because we string players tend to be less aware of contemporary popular music in general and how the rhythm section works in a jazz combo, a bluegrass group, a rock band or a pop record.

Actually, cellists, violists and 2nd violin players have been playing support roles for centuries. Think of the repeated 16th notes in the 2nd violin and 8ths in the viola and cello in bar 5 after the opening statement of Eine Kleine Nachtmusik. They were clearly rocking out to that light, Italianesque Viennese groove that everyone was digging, and you have to think that Mozart intended his music to groove to the point of feeling danceable.

So, this is actually familiar territory to strings, it's just that popular styles like Hip Hop may be unfamiliar genres.

What we are going to do with this book is focus on the groove that already exists in classical music. We are going to breathe life and physicality into these dots on the page. We are going to take the written music from Map View to Satellite View and reconstitute these dots on the page back into the living, breathing, dancing grooves they started as.

Chapter 2

Using Strum Bowing to Solve Rhythm Issues

One of the most useful applications of Strum Bowing for classical players is as a practice tool.

No matter what bowing you end up using to play a passage, using the simple approach of subdividing the rhythm with separate bows is an incredibly effective way to physicalize the groove.

First of all, it is essential to be able to accurately represent a composer's rhythmic intention without having the limitations or idiosyncrasies of a string instrument inhibiting that in any way. In other words, we don't get a free pass to distort a rhythm just because it's hard to play.

The solution, traditionally, is for your teacher to keep yelling "Count!! Count!!" during your lessons and for you to go blissfully on your way trying to count in your head while your hands try to do what they were doing before but with the added distraction of now having to count at the same time.

This doesn't actually work, or your teacher wouldn't have to keep repeating it each week.

Physicalizing

Here's what does work—internalizing the groove by moving your body in time. Which is a fancy way of saying dancing. Or what I frequently refer to, in Strum Bowing terms, as physicalizing.

The simple act of standing up and stepping back and forth to the beat is actually huge. It opens the doorway to engaging your body. It's one small step for a string player, one giant leap for string pedagogy.

All rhythms start in your body. That's where the grooves in music comes from. That's why listening to it makes you want to dance—because

Rhythmic Music Comes from Rhythmic Movement

This is a law of human nature. Anyone who has ever tried to write a piece of music knows that part of the process will inevitably involve your body, as you imagine the rhythm and how it feels. The word "feel" to describe music is an indication of how tactile and physical music actually is, even though we think of music generally in terms of either acoustics, sound waves, or written notation.

The truth is that music is closer to dance than anything. Music is dance that makes sound. To try to play just the soundwaves which are the end result of that dance is like trying to create smoke by drawing it. You can make something that sounds similar to a groove by focusing only on the end result of how it sounds, but real grooves come out of your body, not your brain. And they always affect the listener's body as well as ears.

You can't see it or touch it, but a groove is a real force which has a significant physical impact on your body. Your ears hear soundwaves but your whole body responds.

The Solution

So, the solution to most rhythmic issues is to:

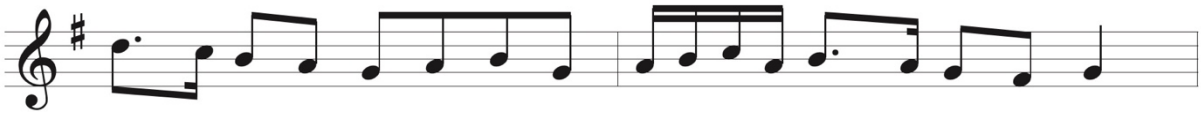
1) Internalize the rhythm by physicalizing the subdivision, (which is the clinical definition of Strum Bowing,) which creates a motor or inner drummer which is manifested in our bow arm as a continuous strum.

2) Try to retain this inner drummer even after returning to our real bowing.

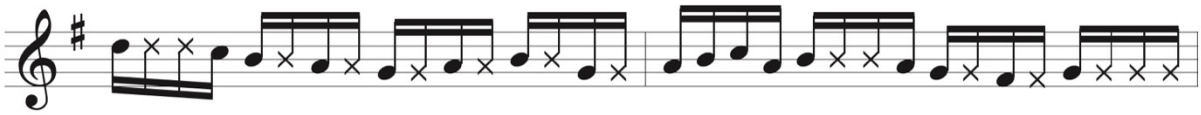
The first part is relatively easy. You just fill in all the long notes and rests with ghosted subdivisions. Subdivisions are the smallest particle of the groove—something I refer to as the Groovon. This is often 16th notes, but in faster tempos could be 8ths and in slower tempos could be 32nds.

I also refer to these added subdivisions as placekeeper notesm because they help to keep your place on the rhythmic grid.

Let's take a simple melody everyone knows like Deck the Halls.

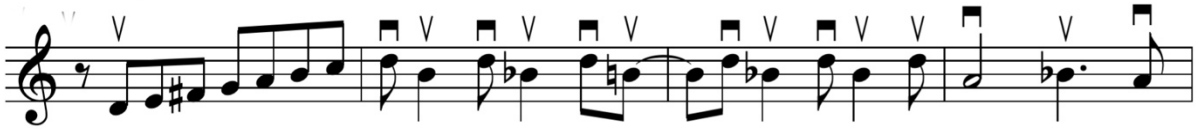


If we fill in all the longer notes with ghosted placekeeper notes, it looks like this.

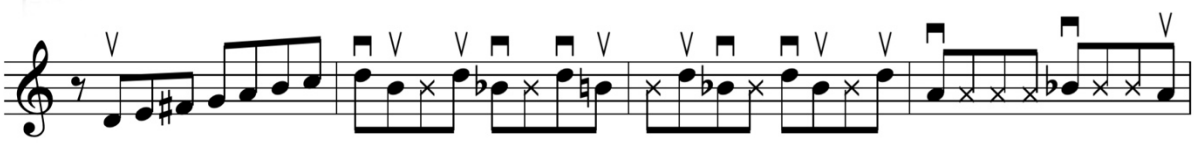


This is a very simple example just to clarify that you will be moving your bow continuously and adding notes to the original melody. It will be more useful when you apply it to a tune like "Pent Up House".

If we play it with as-it-comes bowing, it looks like this:



Let's fill in the ghosted placekeeper notes:



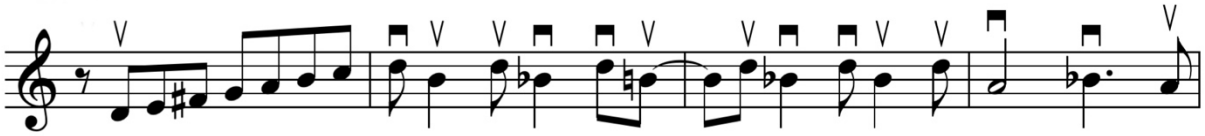
That's how we achieve the first part of the process—internalizing the subdivision by physicalizing it with our bow.

The Inner Drummer

The trickier part of this whole process is the second part—trying to retain the inner drummer after we go back to our real-life bowing. And that largely depends on how different that bowing is from the constant subdivision of Strum Bowing.

In terms of how to keep that inner drummer going, all I can say is that the more time you spend playing with a groove-centric bowing like Strum Bowing which emphasizes each subdivision, the easier it will be to keep that in your ear while you play the actual music.

Sometimes it's possible to alter your bowing so that it uses Strum Bowing where you are playing every ghosted subdivision, (even if the ghosted notes aren't written in.) I call this the bowing key—using Strum Bowing to determine the bowing.

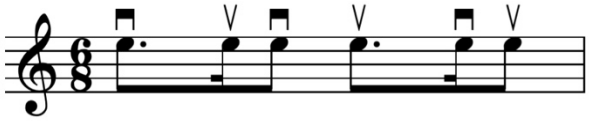


But often this is impossible because you are part of an orchestral section and have to follow a given bowing, or you need to follow a teacher's bowing, or it just doesn't work for the music. This is why it's so important to get that inner drummer working by breaking it down to the Groovon level and subdividing with your bow. This forces you to physicalize the subdivision, which helps to internalize that inner drummer.

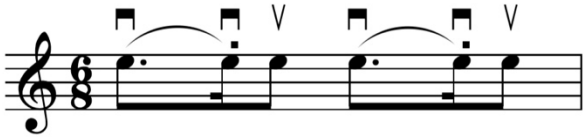
Beethoven

So, let's solve a little issue many string players don't even realize they have with Beethoven.

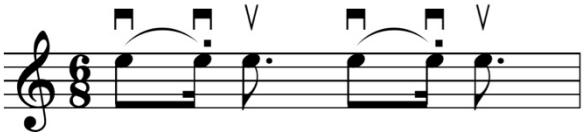
Beethoven's 7th Symphony, often called the "Dance" Symphony, has a dotted rhythm within a 6/8 time signature. It's notorious for being played inaccurately. It often falls slightly off the grid, maybe because it's played with the dreaded "as-it-comes" bowing:



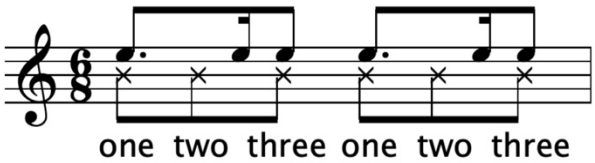
or this bowing:



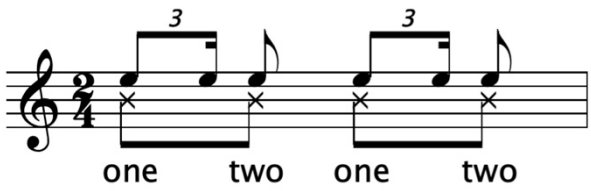
It takes a very good player to play it accurately with either bowing. It often starts to turn into something more like this rhythm, which has none of the vigor of the correct rhythm:



If it seems like I'm splitting hairs and you're thinking, "Who really cares if it's off a tiny bit? This feels more natural to me!" Well, the reason it's so significant musically is because this little inaccuracy shifts the primary pulse from two groups of three in 6/8

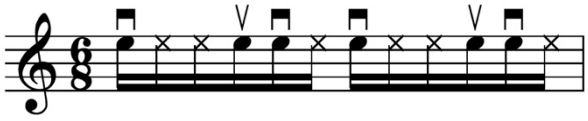


...to two groups of two in 2/4

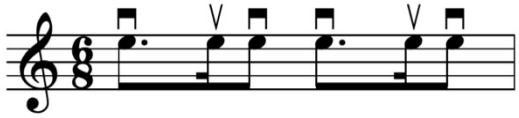


It may seem like a subtle difference, but it changes the whole underlying rhythm. Ludwig would not approve.

If we go down to the Groovon level, we see that it subdivides like this:



If we take away the placekeeper notes, what you end up with is this bowing, (the Bowing Key):



Now, this may or may not be the best bowing for a whole section to use, but it is certainly the best way to feel the underlying subdivision, and that alone puts you worlds ahead of many classical players who would never dream of adding notes to Beethoven.

How to Practice This Stuff

You should become an expert at making up little etudes for yourself. They don't have to be Paganini Caprices. I'm talking about short repetitive exercises which get right to the problem at hand and work towards one simple goal—a coordination of a specific groove muscle memory.

I recommend you spend time in the land of subdivisions. This is all about ghosting the placekeeper notes, keeping a steady pulse and bringing out the accents evenly.

Pro-Tip: play really quietly—pianissimo. Use much less bow than you would normally use. See if you can minimize your bow use on the ghosts down to where you almost think it more than play it. Give the accented notes tiny little grips and releases still using tiny bows.

Anytime you want to achieve precision as a rhythm player, which is pretty much all the time, your first instinct should be to reduce your bow size. Your teachers may well have been encouraging you to use more bow since your first lesson, so it may simply not occur to many classical players that when we are emulating rhythm guitar players, they are generally working with a little piece of plastic no bigger than their thumbnail and they're often barely grazing the string. Your bow is two and half feet long! That doesn't mean you have to use it all.

One of the ways guitar players get the sound they get is with a very quick strumming motion with their wrist. You can really only do this with a bow if you limit yourself to about ½ inch. And if you have a pickup or a microphone you can play into, there's absolutely no reason to use more bow than you need. It will just tend to make the rhythms sloppier and less effective.

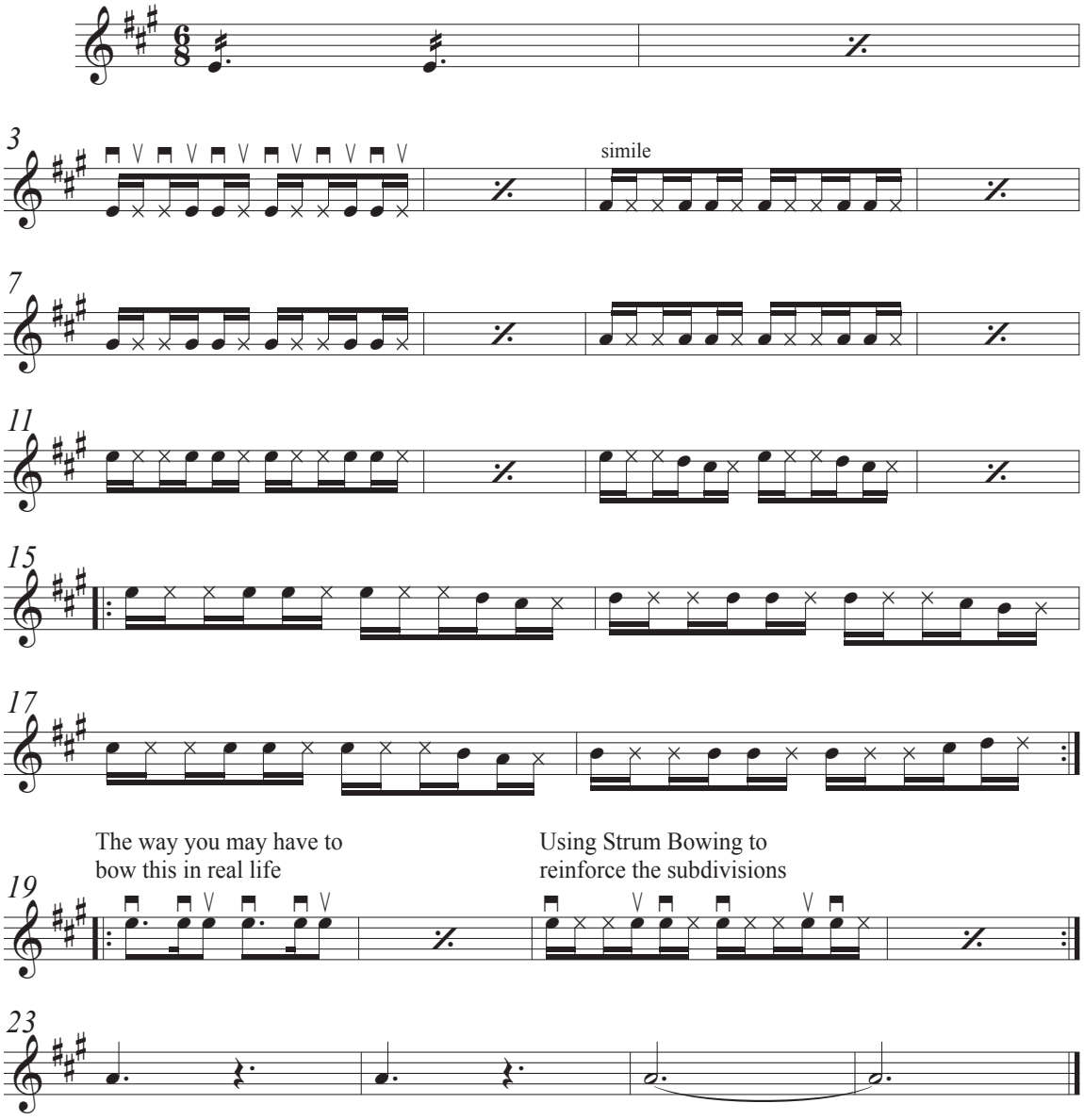
The less bow you use, the more accurate you will be. Pretend you're paying by the inch for bow hair use. Everything under a ½ inch is free.

Ludwig von Strum

Here's an example of the kind of etude you can create for yourself. Here we can use the rhythmic motif as a way of reinforcing our ghosting, using different fingers for ghosting. And we can also focus on our right hand/left hand coordination in bars 13-14, so we can get a crisp articulation of that rhythm.

In bars 19-22, you should try to reconcile the first bowing in bars 19-20, which is an example of a bowing which does not adhere to the Strum Bowing down/up grid, with the Strum Bowing in 21-22. You should try to achieve the same accuracy and rhythmic feel that you can easily get with Strum Bowing even when playing the first bowing.

Ludwig von Strum



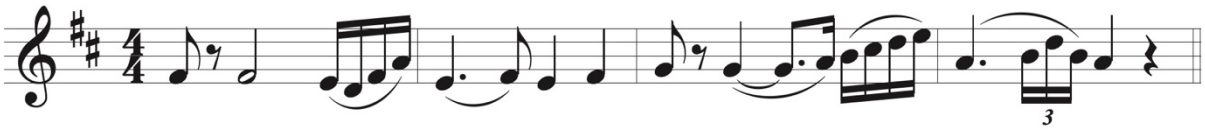
Chapter 3

Rhythm It Up:

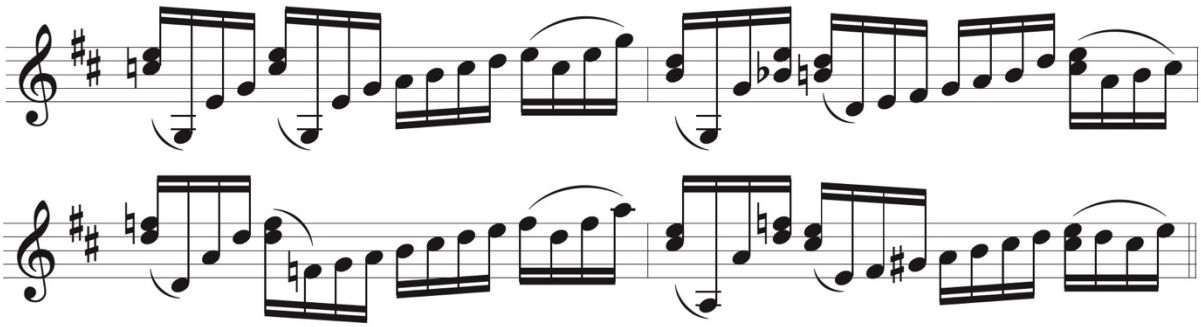
Rhythmic Variations

One of the simplest ways to add the all-important subdivisions (aka Groovons) to a melody is to think of it as a variation. We've heard this a lot in classical music as some form of theme and variations.

If you're a classical player, at some point you may run into a musical mountain known as the Tschaikovsky Violin Concerto. The main melody of the first movement is expressed by the solo violin like this:

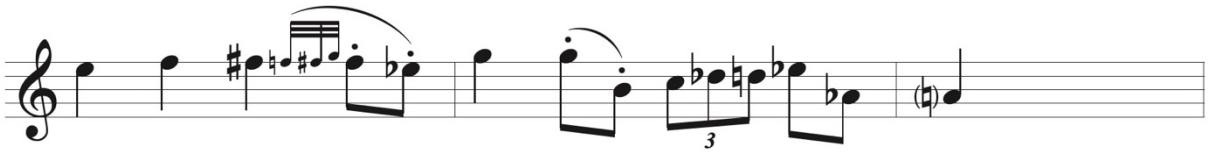


This is transformed later in the movement into this variation of that theme, now in the key of C:

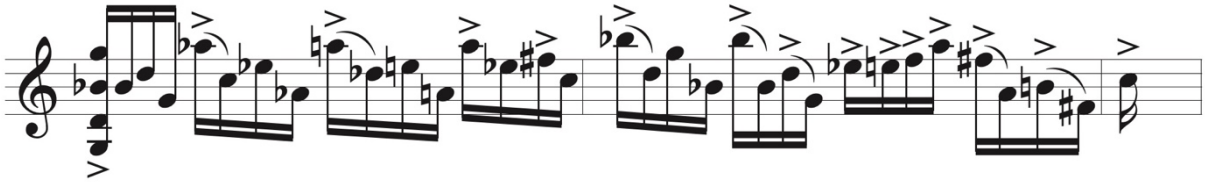


Pretty obvious. He's just filling in the blanks rhythmically speaking, with a bit of artistic license.

Here's another example, this one from the Prokoffief Violin Concerto #1. It comes up first like this in C major:



And then a few bars later, like this, now in G minor:

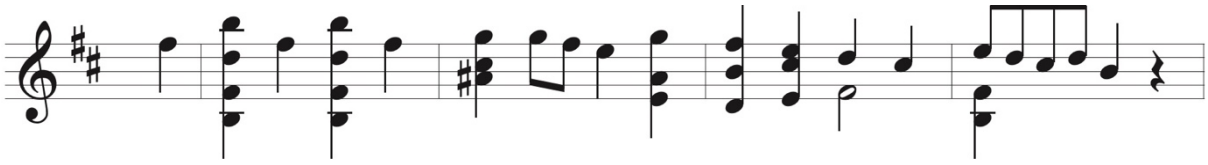


Pretty obvious where he's going with that.

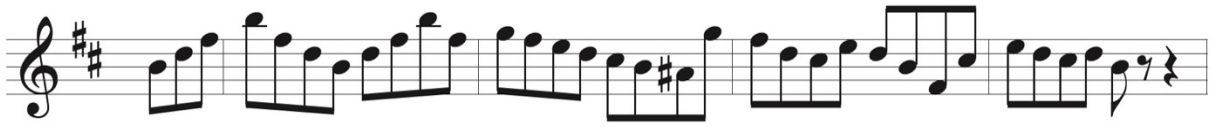
Ahh, Bach

How about these famous examples from the Bach solo sonatas and partitas. The B Minor Partita is a set of dance tunes, each followed by a variation of the tune called a Double because it is a double-time version of the tune, more or less. What that means is that there is a constant stream of equal-value notes, a sort of moto perpetuo version of the theme. Those would be the Groovons.

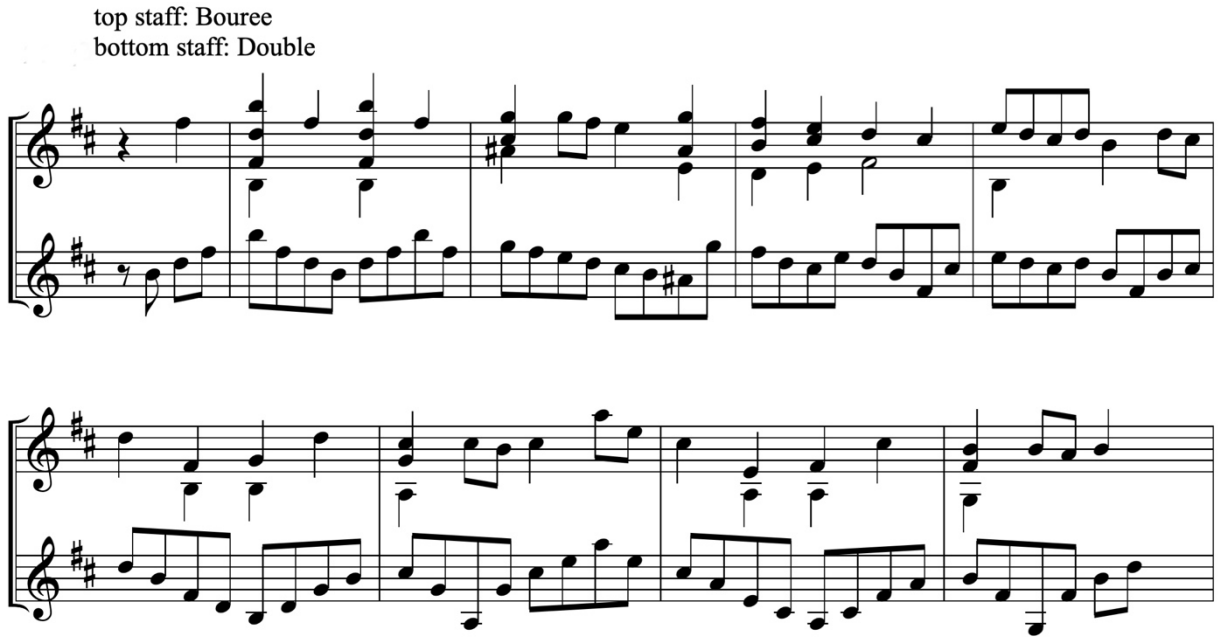
Here's the Bouree:



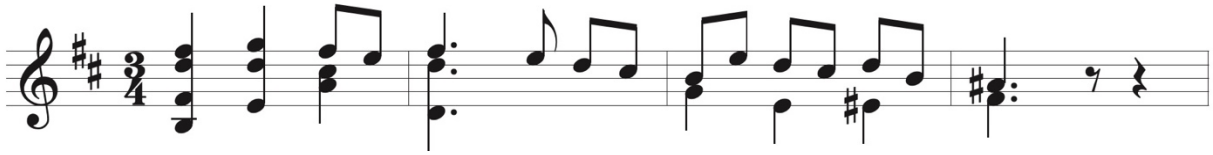
And here is the corresponding Double:



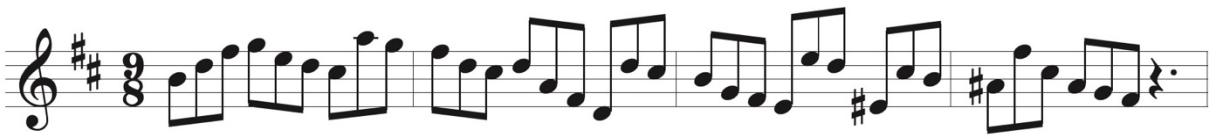
The double tracks so closely with the original that you can play them together as a duet.



Same with the Sarabande:



And its Double, which interestingly is subdivided into triplets instead of even 8th's. I'd say this is pretty strong evidence that the 8th's in the Sarabande were intended to be swung, or what Bach would have known well as *notes inégales* or unequal notes, which were especially common in French music such as Sarabandes:



These examples prove 2 things:

1) Variations on a theme is one of the most common compositional devices in all music. It's also one of the easiest forms of improvisation, one that was quite common among most musicians in the 18th and 19th centuries. So, if you have any lingering guilt about messing with the classics, you should realize that the composer whose piece you are playing would probably assume that, if you were any good at all, you would be making decent variations on their themes.

2) One of the most common ways to make a variation on a theme is to rhythm it up, or to bring out the subdivisions in the variation.

Let's also keep in mind the entire body of fiddle tunes, many of which consist of fast-moving melodies of subdivisions. The reason for this is that the fiddle was often the only instrument, so it had to provide the rhythmic motor as well as the tune. Not at all unlike Bach's Doubles.

So, what does this mean for you? How are you going to make variations on your classical music? Let's look at that in the next chapter.

Chapter 4

Playing Music

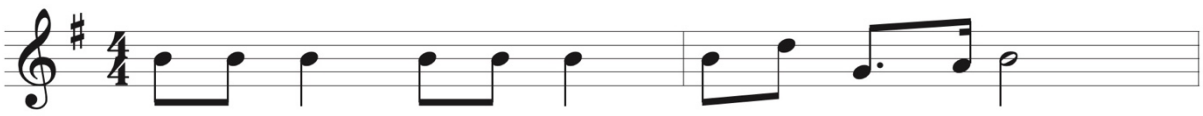
Back in my early days, right out of Juilliard, I would take pretty much any gig that I was lucky enough to be called for.

One year, this agency I did a lot of work for called with a fairly lucrative but soul-crushing gig. 8 continuous hours--I think it was 11am to 7pm--of Xmas music in the main atrium of Macy's main store on 34th St. in Manhattan. The ensemble was a string quartet, and they wanted lots of Xmas and festive music, naturally.

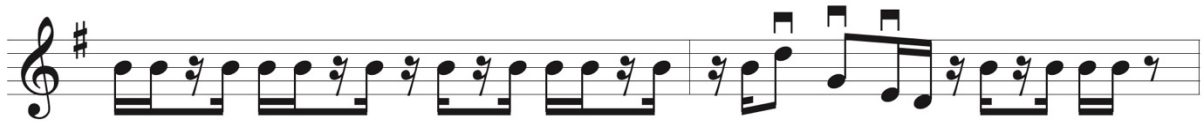
I had amassed a pretty good stack of repertoire--some of the more upbeat Mozart quartet movements sprinkled in among some pretty bad string quartet arrangement of holiday favorites, and even some carol booklets with the quartet reading the vocal lines. In all, I'd say about a solid 2-3 hour's worth of music. Which would have been plenty for an 8-hour gig with a constantly changing audience, where you can repeat as much as you like.

But not really quite enough, unfortunately, when you are playing this 8-hour gig 5 days a week for the first 3 weeks of December.

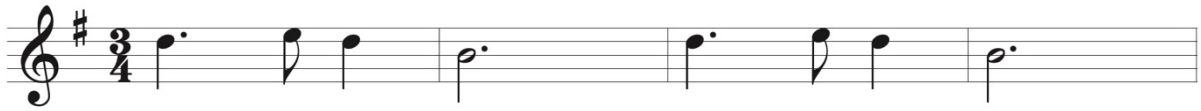
You get creative out of sheer necessity. Lines like this:



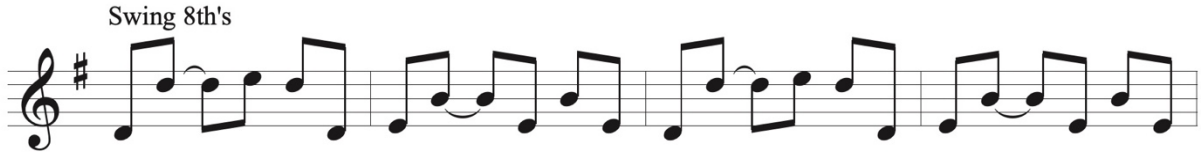
Can easily become this festive variation:



Or this old chestnut:



Can bring a little joy to the heart with this little twist:



The interesting thing is that the listeners always seemed to prefer the variations I would play to just playing it straight. Several reasons for this, most likely:

1) I'm clearly having more fun, and I'm entertaining the others in the quartet, so we're all smiling more and more engaged with each other and that is instantly more engaging to an audience.

2) The listeners are also bored to tears with the straight versions of all these tunes and are craving something new to spice them up.

3) I was inevitably injecting something of my own pop culture into the mix which is making it more accessible to the listener than if I hadn't. It was slightly jazzy or rocky or something that was not strictly in keeping with the stylistic practices of the original.

At this point I would like to make the big disclaimer that I am not making the case for jazzing or rocking the classics or that this rhythmicizing is better than being stylistically correct. Not at all. I am simply pointing out how instantly and undeniably this engages with the listener, and why. And I say this, not to

prove that we should play classical music this way, but to prove that strings should participate as fully rhythmic creatures in the new pop music being created in our own time and culture, just as string players did back then.

Playing With Music

We could sum up this whole experience with one word: **playfulness**. We don't work a violin, we play a violin. We play music, and although we have developed notation, before music was written down, there was always a degree of improvisation involved in one way or another. This looseness or play in the fabric of the music was what makes it meaningful and specific in the moment. All vernacular styles have improvised spontaneity baked into the recording and performing process. It's simply how vernacular music has always been made.

By vernacular I mean pop, folk and whatever music is made and listened to by the general public. This is to differentiate it from academic or concert music, (basically classical music,) which you could think of as a more formal, proper version of music, just as there's the Queen's English and slang or street English.

It's important to understand that classical music is different from pop music in this way. It is no longer the lingua franca—the current common language. It was when it was first written and played. But classical music is historical in nature; it is primarily the music of the past.

And that's a crucial distinction because I believe the fact that it's no longer the music people currently dance to in real life allows us to play it as if no one ever danced to it, as if it is somehow more intellectual and therefore "above" more primitive (and perhaps "sexualized") popular music and dance.

This has allowed us to disassociate our bodies and natural sense of rhythm from the once-living music we're playing—to drain the blood from it. We have replaced the handmade quality of spontaneous rhythmic accompaniment which was partially captured on the page a couple of hundred years ago with the notion of seeing 16 identically sized notes in a measure and aspiring to play them the way they look—identically.

So, when we are reverse engineering written music to perform it and bring it to life hundreds of years after it was written, it is our responsibility to breathe life into it and pull it off the page and into people's bodies, not just their ears.

Chapter 5

Pop Music as a Second Language

Learning a new style or technique on your instrument is like learning a new language. You should not be afraid that you will forget your mother tongue of classical technique.

When you learn a second or third language, you don't forget how to speak in your native language. Learning a new language is not destructive, it's cumulative. It brings insight and awareness into how we use our native language. Learning a 2nd language strengthens the first, it doesn't erase it. And nothing could be more true when it comes to grooving.

Rhythm is a huge problem area for many string players who were taught in the long-standing classical tradition of emphasizing melodic virtuosity above supportive rhythm, especially among violinists. Developing, nurturing and truly understanding the rhythmic life in pop music will only make you more aware and better capable of bringing out the rhythm that pulses through all the masterpieces of the classical string tradition.

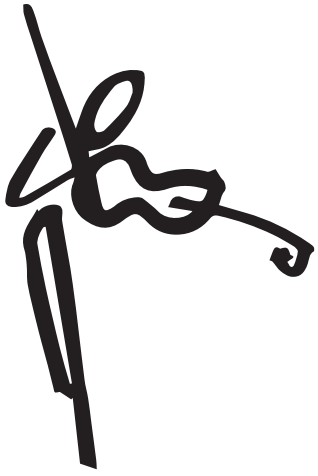
The real challenge for most classical players is not how to hold onto their classical technique, but how to lose their classical accent, especially the longer they have been playing. You will probably never lose that accent completely, but you could think of me as an actor's voice coach: if you naturally have a deep Brooklyn accent and you need to play the part of, say, an Australian, you need some help understanding what you need to change and how to incorporate those changes into your performance. But when you step off stage, you will never have to worry about not being able to speak like your normal self from Brooklyn.

Your classical accent is strong and will not be easy to hide. You can take the player out of classical music, but you can rarely take the classical music out of the player. Yes, you will develop new muscle memory. And we may have to

work hard to develop it. But don't worry! You will never lose your old muscle memory. It just will not happen. Even if you put your instrument down for 10 years and then came back to it, your classical habits would still be there. (And, by the way, the bad habits last just as long or longer than the good ones.)

But the real unfortunate irony is that we string players have to learn the musical language of our own culture—our musical lingua franca, the common pop music that surrounds us in every aspect of contemporary life—as a second language. It's like we only learned how to speak Shakespearean English and now we're suddenly plunked down in an American high school.

I believe it's time to teach strings in a way that is more in touch with our contemporary, very diverse culture, not just the 18 and 19th century European culture of standard classical technique.



Chapter 6

Different Rules for Different Schools

In order to apply Strum Bowing to your classical playing, it's important to understand that, just as there are different rules for different games, there are different rules for classical string playing than there are for pop styles. You can be good at more than one game, but not unless you know the rules.

Let's break down some of the main aspects.

Vibrato

Nothing gives away your classical background more than your vibrato. Your vibrato can distinguish your background much like the way you say vowels gives away what part of the country you're from. When classical players come to me to try to sound less classical, the first thing I do is try to get them to stop playing with vibrato.

This is difficult mostly because it is such strong muscle memory. Physical habits like that are very difficult to break, but it's not impossible. But it's a little like retraining a dog. You have to be aware that you will want to go right back to your old vibrato as soon as you stop thinking about it.

In pop music, vibrato is used not just as a way to make something sound warm or passionate, but often to release the tension of not using vibrato. It is much more typical in pop music for vibrato to be added much later in a note, not at the beginning. Sometimes just as a way to release the note.

Listen to the way Whitney Houston sings the chorus on “I Will Always Love You”. The first “I” is held without vibrato for about as long as she can, and then she breaks that tension with the vibrato.

Or no vibrato at all. Listen to Miles Davis play “Blue and Green” and you can count the number of notes with vibrato on one hand.

Tone

The sound and function in pop music that strings are closest to is the guitar. And the sound of guitar in pop music is often distorted or effected with other devices such as wah-wah pedals, delays, flanging and chorusing and other processing. The tones are often grittier than what we generally expect from your average Juilliard violin graduate. The parts of the rhythm guitar are often repetitious and sometimes the only real variation is in the amount of noise being incorporated. This is often called pam-muting, pick noise, dampening or other terms, but it amounts to some very percussive sounds that are generally short and sometimes more noise than note.

There are various kinds of articulation that are used in classical music, depending on the period of the piece. But the kinds of articulation we use for jazz and rock on strings often emulates the more typical jazz and rock instruments. That means, a tonguing type of attack that you might hear on a trumpet or saxophone. Or the sharp attack and quick decay of a string plucked with a pick. These articulations may be more coarse than many more elegant classical bowing articulations.

Electric guitars have emulated the singing sustain of string players for years, but they do it with the modern power of overdriven amplifier tubes and distortion pedals, which takes the idea of singing melodic phrases miles away from its Bel Canto beginnings. It recasts the idea of soaring symphonic string lines using the contemporary voice of rock and roll, distortion, and now we are forced to reclaim that melodic territory, but with the distorted accent of this guitar conqueror who has taken our place at the head of the musical table. How sad, but that’s what happens when you shut string pedagogy up in a cloistered ivory tower while the rest of the world plugs in and rocks out.

Slides and Ornamentation

There are really too many varieties of this to discuss in much specificity, but in general, the kinds of slides and ornamentation you find in American pop music is reminiscent of the American pop vocal style, which is an amalgamation of blues, Broadway, rock, jazz and hip hop. Like most instrumental styles, they borrow from the regional vocal singing style. Think of how the instrumental and vocal embellishments are similar in Indian raga, in Arabic styles, and many other cultures. Most popular music styles are wedded closely to the language and the verbal personality of the culture. Ours is no different, just maybe harder for us to recognize. But you'll find gospel piano players "crushing" notes to get that vocal blues bend, guitar players who can exactly imitate that vocal blues bend and the way singers scoop (slide into) notes, and you can find many other kinds of melismatic turns and ornaments and other artifacts of vocal styling all over our pop instrumental styles.

Groove

I saved the best for last, because probably the most significant but the most elusive of all the characteristics of a style is the groove. And here as well, the rules are not just different but a completely different paradigm.

The main difference between classical rules and pop rules when it comes to the sense of groove is in the sense of either permanence of pliability.

The classical world performs music that often adheres, at its deepest level, to an emotional grid—a push and pull of emotions which propel the music the way an actor and a script propel a movie or a play. This is one basic way the performer can be expressive: by manipulating tempo.

In classical music, if the soloist slows down, the whole orchestra follows their every nuance, holding a moment in time with a fermata, pushing ahead with an accelerando or slowing down with a ritard. The tempo is constantly being manipulated as a way of expressing emotion. To ignore these important expressive elements is to ignore the soul of the music.

By contrast, the pop world recognizes a groove as inherently steady. In fact, it is the definition of constancy—possibly the most primal human way to express the durability and the illusion of permanence of life itself. The beat represents much more than a tempo—it signifies eternity.

Because of that, a singer or instrumentalist can fall behind the beat or push the beat without ever moving it in the slightest. It's like Gene Kelly swinging off an immobile lamp post. It will always be rock solid. You can run in front of it, hang back behind it, but the beat goes on and on.

This is a little bit like Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus. There are 2 very different paradigms of communication going on when it comes to the groove.

So, as a classical musician, it's good to remind yourself that there are very different rules at work when it comes to something as "simple" as the groove. You will need to accept the idea that you are not being mechanical by keeping the pulse steady. By the same token, you are also expected to not play a repeated groove exactly the same way as you might in classical music. It may be repetitive, but it's not the exact repetition of classical music. It's the handmade rhythmic variations of rhythm playing that are now expected of you.

It's time to let your body help you find the inner drummer in everything you play. It's time to involve your knees and your ankles and your hips, as well as your elbows and wrists. The groove is not something you can intellectualize. It is by nature a physical, thing. It is in motion, not anywhere on paper. It only exists in the physical plane and, even then, it's really only a groove if someone wants to dance to it.


photo: Eric England

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Groooooooooove on

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