



Spiccato

by Dr. Thomas Tatton

A brief refresher will assist us in understanding the spiccato bow stroke and its historical use. The development of the bow, even more than that of the violin itself, was in a state of flux from the very beginning of the development of the violin family in the 16th century until the last 25 years of the 18th century. The “modern bow,” the one that produces the qualities of articulation that we teachers use today for the “Classical period” music of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and beyond, became infinitely more standardized with the bow maker François Tourte (1747–1835). His bows became the standard and created not only the “spiccato” we want to hear today in Mozart symphonies and violin concertos (1775), but also the legato sound we so highly prize.

The changes in the bow that Tourte instituted were all experimented with by others in the preceding 50 years but never solidified into a standard construction format. Tourte brought together the elements of a slightly concave stick, use of pernambuco wood, more wood at the tip in a shape we call a “hatchet head,” more wood at the fluted frog which was made movable by use of a screw, and a “spreader box” at the tip and the frog which allows for a flat, evenly spread ribbon of hair.¹

We teachers must not use the same staccato stroke when we teach separated bow strokes in the music of Bach and Handel as when we teach Mozart and Haydn symphonies (and beyond). It is simply not stylistic. If we are not native string players and many or most of your youthful charges are not taking private lessons, the question becomes: How do we teach the spiccato we desire to large groups of junior or senior high school string players?

There are excellent, but preliminary spiccato “teaching tips” in James Kjelland’s book **Orchestral Bowing: Style and Function**², a book I have recommended before. We can go into a little more depth here. Think of the infinite variety of artistic bow strokes we call spic-


cato. Let’s look just at bow placement:

- 1 Just at the place where the bow divides between the middle and upper third - the spiccato stroke is very light – think Mendelssohn’s **Overture to A Midsummer Night’s Dream**.
- 2 At the balance point, the spiccato becomes more easily controlled and more substantial in sound – think a Mozart symphony or concerto.
- 3 A spiccato at the frog is heavier and less speed is available - think the opening of Beethoven’s **Fifth Symphony**.

All this sound color and variety is available. We just need to teach a basic spiccato to all of our charges.

Teaching Spiccato

There are a couple of different ways to teach basic spiccato to groups if the student musicians have well formed and flexible bow grips, and have practiced the exercises that prepare their fingers and wrist as outlined in the Winter 2014 issue of **CMEA Magazine**, Volume 68, Number 2.

- A.** This teaching strategy will take anywhere between two to four weeks of daily practice (four to five minutes, in the warm-up, of course) to secure an acceptable spiccato for the entire ensemble.
- Place the bow midway between the bridge and the fingerboard. Starting just above the balance point drop the bow on the string while moving the bow in a down bow direction. Allow the bow to drop on the selected string moving in a down-bow direction. Allow the bow to bounce as many times as it will with its natural buoyancy like a ball dropped on a gym floor.
 - With a controlled speed of about 16th notes a  = 112. Allow the bow to drop and bounce to sound five notes only, all down-bow. Repeat, but this time flick the bow in an up-bow direction on the fifth note. Work to not allow an accent on the flicked up-bow note.

- Repeat bullet two but allow the bow to sound only three notes. Repeat and flick the third note in an up-bow direction.
- Now two notes and then flick the second note up-bow. Voila, you have a bounced spiccato.
- Practice on one note in each direction four 16th notes at $\text{♩} = 112$. Next, try a little slower, next, a little faster and so forth.
- Now try closer to the string, i.e., with a low bounce, then a somewhat higher bounce.
- Now, use your normal scale procedure or perhaps just one octave, but play four 16th notes per pitch, each note on a separate bow.

B. This strategy can be used periodically, not necessarily on consecutive days.

- Using only right hand fingers practice flicking the bow on consecutive up-bows in eighth notes at about $\text{♩} = 100$. Make sure the bow is placed midway between the bridge and fingerboard just above the balance point. Also, instruct your charges to make sure the contact point (where the hair meets to string) remains constant. The bow hand fingers stretch then retract to make small circles.
- Using right hand fingers and a slight circular motion in the wrist, practice flicking consecutive down-bows at the same speed.
- Next, play back and forth eight notes using the same location, speed and motion with considerable weight on the bow stick for four beats. Then, release that weight for the next four beats. Continue that alternation. After awhile the musicians should have a rather acceptable "brush" stroke spiccato.

C. This strategy might be used for a slightly older group and can be used to make decisions on the type of sound desired for a particular spiccato passage. Use the same motions, location and speed as above. This is an exercise in changing the relationship between length and height.



- First, tap the bow on the string silently
- Then barely sounding
- Followed by crisp V shaped strokes – short, dry spiccato
- Next, more oval at the contact point – think bottom of the oval
- Longer, a much more lateral stroke
- Finally – on the string, detaché

Try bullet three and four with different heights of bounce – close to the string, medium and a high bounce, perhaps half and inch or so. Now that we have some control over the height of the stroke, try the same exercise with three different placements: near the upper third, around the balance point and near the frog.

Next, using the same series of spiccatos, try three different locations on the string: close to the fingerboard, near the center, and closer to the bridge.

Lastly, using three different tilts of the bow, (note: the bow (wood) tilts towards the scroll) very tilted, less tilted and flat hair.

After exploring the variety of spiccatos, your ensemble will have greater command of the variety of sounds possible with the spiccato stroke by varying the height, length, distance from the bridge and tilt. Expanding the palate of your string section will create a broader array of more refined, resonant, and satisfying spiccatos to use in the vast amount of literature available to us.

¹ For a more in depth discussion, I recommend: David Boyden, *The History of Violin Playing*, Oxford university Press, 1967. Pp. 206–211.

² James Kjelland, *Orchestral Bowing: Style and Function*, Alfred Music Publishing Co., 2003. Pp.39–44.