



Five Myths of Baroque String Playing

This commentary is patterned on the “Five Myths” column that appears weekly in the Washington Post’s Outlook section. The Post describes this format as “a feature that dismantles myths, clarifies common misconceptions and makes you think again about what you thought you already knew.”

1. Don’t vibrate.
2. Don’t sustain or play legato.
3. Swell on long notes.
4. Play out of tune.
5. Get a student violin, put gut strings on it, remove the chinrest, borrow a baroque bow and survive a Bach fugue.

1. Do not vibrate.

Trying to play beautifully by eliminating your most immediate expressive tool is like eliminating soy sauce from Chinese cooking to make your recipes “French.” French cuisine doesn’t use soy sauce, so shouldn’t that work? Not only are your new dishes not “French,” but you have diminished the quality of your old dishes. Trying to play beautifully and expressively simply by modes of subtraction is well, daft.

2. Don’t sustain or play legato.

Baroque music was born from vocal music. Have you ever heard a song? All songs, especially those from the 17th and 18th centuries contain *lots* of legato and long tones. Often the notes the violin plays are exactly the same notes as a singer who is singing vowels. Legato, lyrical, beautiful playing and singing was prized in the 18th Century. So was phrasing, dynamics, articulation, inflection, stress, rubato, accelerando, good intonation, varied bow strokes, passion, drama, emotion. Sounds like they liked expressive music back then!

3. Swell on long notes.

It’s called *Messa di Voce*. Basically, forget about it. The first early music scholars misunderstood 18th Century bowing exercises, which instructed string players how to develop their sound to make long sustained tones (see no. 2). We owe a great debt to those scholars who opened up a world of information for us, but they got some things wrong. *Messa di Voce* is a beautiful and very organic ornament that can be used if the moment really calls for it—just like a mordent, a *terce de coule* or a shot of vibrato). But the ubiquitous use of it is simply the confusion of this ornament with a bowing exercise, it was not something to do on every note. Extreme swelling? Take ibuprofen. It doesn’t belong in early music.

4. Play out of tune.

As it turns out, 17th and 18th century string players were expected to achieve extremely detailed pitch accuracy. Yes, really. They understood that tuning one key perfectly (with pure intonation) on a keyboard will make other keys unusable. They devised various “temperaments” making all keys usable, with some sounding better than others. Nevertheless, each key had a unique quality and character. They reveled in those differences, and players were expected to be able to display those tonal distinctions. Early violin primers suggested teaching major and minor semi-tones in the second lesson (i.e. d - eb, vs d - d#). French theorist Joseph Sauveur suggested limiting musicians to a 50-note octave in the “interest of practicality,” saying a whole step should be divided into only five semi-tones (d, d#, d##, ebb, eb, e). Equal temperament was the ingenious method of making everything equally out of tune and uniform. Scandalous! It can be challenging when at first working with wind and keyboard instruments at different temperaments, but in the end this trial can hone your intonation to a new level of perfection. Try measuring the breadth of your beautiful vibrato. You might discover it spans several double sharps and flats.

5. Get a student violin, put gut strings on it, remove the chinrest, borrow a baroque bow and survive a Bach fugue.

Yes, It is expensive to buy a whole new instrument, but if you simply put weird strings on your “second” violin and try to play it with a strange bow with no chin or shoulder support, you have only succeeded in playing a handicapped violin. Just because something looks a bit like something else, and feels different, doesn’t mean it is the something else. Ever taste those beautiful, realistic fake sushi rolls?

And, as towering and magnificent a composer J.S. Bach was, he was one of hundreds of composers during that period. Ever wonder why you haven’t heard of the others? Were they all bad?

All kidding aside, what is baroque performance practice?

First, let’s start with the understanding that there is no such thing as a single “baroque style.” There was as much, if not more, diversity of performance traditions between 1600-1800 as there were in the following 200 years. Of course, there was no Internet or recordings, which meant there was no such thing as disembodied music. If you lived in Venice, you heard the music being played in Venice on that day. Maybe you got to hear a touring soloist from Paris, but the performance was the music and the player was the only vehicle

through which the music could be heard. Music was an event, not a product. Furthermore, any composer who heard someone play had to rely on his memory to recapture what that other music sounded like. If he wanted to incorporate this new style of music into his compositions, it was 100-percent filtered through his own point of view and memory. Think of J.S. Bach writing French overtures after he heard the music of Couperin when he was studying in Luneburg at the age of 15. Where do we look to understand how to play those overtures? Bach's notation was distinctly his own, but there was clearly something French and Couperin-like in his mind. So, do we just study his scores? French music? Couperin? There are so many layers, and so much to learn and think about and experiment with.

Every composer was unique, a product of their locality (not simply their nationality), time period and cultural environment. Communication among themselves was limited. However, they did write books, and it is mostly through these treatises that we can establish certain commonalities of notational and performance conventions of their time. But these books are starting points. Every note is its own unique case; the books and scores left to us don't tell the whole story.

It turns out, historical performance practice is a pretty extensive study. It is a wide array of varied languages, replete with immeasurable and nuanced expressions. Applying a few simple gimmicks to your current playing only cheapens an exquisite body of work by an important group of composers.

If you approach the study of early music with the same seriousness and integrity that you approached learning later music, the study will reward you with a world of personal, musical eloquence you may not have known lived within you. It was all about the expression back then. Is it really any different from now?

For more information on the study of early music, consider coming to the Institute for Early Music on Modern Instruments. Study baroque performance practice on your own modern instruments. June 10-14, 2013 at George Mason University. Visit ModernEarlyMusic.org.



Elizabeth Field is co-director (with cellist Stephanie Vial) of *The Vivaldi Project* and the Institute for Early Music on Modern Instruments (EMMI). She is currently concertmaster of *The Bach Choir of Bethlehem* and *The Spire Chamber Ensemble* and has served as guest concertmaster of several DC orchestras including *The National Philharmonic*, *The Washington Bach Consort* and *Opera Lafayette*. Field holds a D.M.A. in historical performance practice from Cornell University and is an associate professor of violin at George Washington University, as well as a guest instructor at the Curtis Institute of Music.

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