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The Influence of Historic Violin Treatises on Modern Teaching and Performance Practices

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Abstract: Effective technique in violin playing evolved due to several historical pedagogical treatises written by knowledgeable masters. These treatises have greatly influenced the development of today's pedagogical approaches. Unfortunately, many students may not know why a technique has been prescribed or how the various aspects of technique work together. Understanding why these techniques are used today, and even how they evolved, can help a student correctly apply and reach the desired result. The treatises of Francesco Geminiani (1751), Leopold Mozart (1756), L'Abbé le Fils (1761), and Pierre Marie François de Sales Baillot (1834) shaped performance practice and contributed to the development of today's optimal Franco-Belgian violin technique. These masters understood effective technique. They had defined approaches to various performance matters including left hand dexterity, posture, bow hold, and the performer's knowledge of theory and styles.

Keywords: *violin, treatise, technique, instruction*

INTRODUCTION

Basis and Background

Many violinists begin their musical studies at a young age and continue playing, believing they are improving, learning, and growing with each year of study. Of those students who continue their studies in college, many learn that the foundation of their playing—their technique—is in need of significant improvement.

Often these students had music teachers who encouraged them and, without a doubt, inspired them. However, in many cases, the teachers of these students failed to ground them in strong technique. Their technical instruction may have been high but in many cases not deliberate, leaving the student without a foundation upon which to continue building.

These students may become discouraged when critiqued on their technical approach. Many will find themselves rebuilding the foundation upon which they had already built so much—a frustrating situation for both the student and

teacher. This situation may push students to abandon their instruments; but sometimes, a student accepts this obstacle as an opportunity.

Those individuals hoping to be future teachers will want to investigate ways to help violin students build a solid foundation throughout their music education so that the students may continue to grow and be successful, without discouragement or frustration.

Relevance and Significance: The Objective of the Research

Effective technique in playing the violin has evolved because of several historical treatises and the experienced, knowledgeable masters who wrote them. Today's teachers should resurrect these treatises and their authors' ideas for pacing and supplementing instruction. By using this process, students can better master fundamental technique. With a solid technique, students will find success and enjoyment with the violin, possibly motivating more of them to continue and

reach a virtuosic level. Whereas many current-day teachers have a somewhat defined target for effective technique, some teachers may not help students understand why a technique was prescribed and how the various aspects of technique work together. Thus, few students know how these techniques evolved and why. With the passage of time, it may be difficult for a teacher to troubleshoot and prescribe corrections for poor technique.

For the benefit of teachers, this article assesses today's Franco-Belgian technique, its evolution, and how to help students understand why certain techniques are considered optimal.

Previous Research

Although violin pedagogy, its origins, and effects are familiar to research and discussion, these topics are primarily discussed and used only at collegiate and advanced levels. So while violin pedagogy is a topic that is repeatedly researched, students are still struggling over proper technique. Often teachers, students, and performers have sought out information on the influences of the technique they were taught, seeking to understand concepts such as the evolution of the instrument, compositions, and performance practices. Why are these historical treatises considered valuable? Why do today's students struggle to establish a strong technical foundation? This article seeks answers to those questions so that teachers can provide the best instruction.

METHOD

Today violinists are able to trace their pedagogical pedigree back to Francesco Geminiani (1751), Leopold Mozart (1756), L'Abbé le Fils (Joseph-Barnabé Saint-Sevin; 1761), and Pierre Marie François de Sales Baillet (1834). These men laid the groundwork for modern performers and educators. Their treatises discuss important technical factors of playing the violin. This article reviews the treatises in detail. Each treatise is analyzed to identify significant contributions, as well as to provide an understanding of the evolution of the violin, the bow, and violin compositions.

Each treatise shows something that the author considered fundamental. This article will show the similarities and differences between their teaching styles (along with their contexts), considering the changes over time to the violin, bow, complexities of musical compositions, and performance practices. This examination leads to a discussion of fundamental techniques and approaches that will benefit students.

Important techniques prescribed by each master are discussed, including concepts such as the following: bow hand technique; left hand technique; posture; the reason or effectiveness of the technique; and the approaches to various performance matters.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND ANALYSIS

History and Background of Violin Technique

In the sixteenth century, the violin was an instrument with simple roles, much like many instruments of the time. The violin provided dance music and entertainment, as well as doubled persons' voices or accompanied choral music (Boyden, 1990, p. 50). Unlike the violin's ancestors (the viol and lute), the violin was considered to be an instrument of a low status; it was not an instrument that was encouraged for the education of nobles and their children (Boyden, 1990, p. 4).

Usually composers did not identify which instruments were to be played in their pieces. Instead, the choice was left to the instrumentation available. But by the seventeenth century, when the violin became a prominent orchestral instrument, music became focused for the violin. At this point there arose a need to standardize violin technique. This need was driven by the early violin compositions and the virtuoso violinists who played them.

The violin and short bow of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries enabled rhythmic dance music to be played with ease. Dances and the music accompanying them were critical to the culture of France. For example, King Louis XIV heartily supported the arts and dance. In 1661 he created the Académie Royal de Danse to "restore the art of dancing to its original perfection and to

improve it as much as possible” (Core of Culture, n.d.). France, the country known for developing ballet, was proud of its dances and the music associated with dance. Music and dance accompanied social gatherings, performances, and even served as a political tactic by King Louis XIV to portray political superiority.

While the French focused on the development of dance and dance music as an art form, Italian Arcangelo Corelli (1653–1713) was writing concerti, sonate, and other famous works that prominently featured violins. As a virtuoso violinist and composer, Corelli heavily influenced violin technique for centuries. One of the types of sonate he composed was called *sonata de chiesa* (or church sonata). This was a sonata that furthered the musical and technical progress of the violin as well as encouraged the role the violin in church music. With Corelli’s work, the violin “permeated the Church, the theatre, and chamber” (Boyden, 1990, p. 213).

Technique of Francesco Geminiani (1751)

In 1751, one of Arcangelo Corelli’s most well-known students, Francesco Geminiani (1687–1762), wrote a treatise documenting the ideal technique. Geminiani’s *The Art of Playing on the Violin* emphasized a migration from traditional music to solo and orchestral works. He felt strongly that the idea of music only representing concrete examples, such as a Cuckoo bird or even dancing, was an incorrect one, saying, “The Intention of Music is not only to please the Ear, but to express Sentiments, strike the Imagination, affect the Mind, and command the Passions” (p. 1).

One of the most important technical instructions made by Geminiani was that knowledge of the fingerboard and its geometry was essential for success. As music is comprised of notes, Geminiani (1751) mapped the tones and semitones as found on the violin (Figure 1) with the intent that learners would mark their instrument in this way to assist them in their efforts to play in tune. He also felt that there was one true position of the left hand: “To Place the first Finger on the first String upon F; the second

Finger on the second String upon C; the third Finger on the third String upon G; and the fourth Finger correctly on fourth String on D” (p. 1). Practicing this grip will enable students to feel and see the correctly structured left hand position. The Geminiani Grip (Figure 2), accompanying the Learner’s Fingerboard, put much focus on establishing intonation and posture, and eliminating error. Grip is essential for beginning success.



Figure 1. Geminiani’s Learner’s Fingerboard. Source: Geminiani, 1751

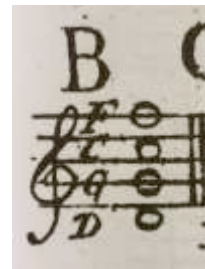


Figure 2. Geminiani Grip. Source: Geminiani, 1751

In addition to discussing intonation, Geminiani (1751) emphasized tone production. An ideal location exists to hold the bow for maximum clarity of sound, and this spot sits a small distance from the frog. He noted that the bow should be held between the thumb and first joint of the fingers and tilted inward. With free, relaxed joints, the player can draw the bow parallel to the bridge with the weight of only the index finger. He felt that the beauty of the violin could be highlighted by correct tone, unrestricted bows, and musical expressions of the bow.

The bow used in Geminiani’s time was most likely a Baroque bow, similar to that used by his teacher, Arcangelo Corelli. The Corelli Bow, as

depicted in David Boyden's book, *History of Violin Playing from its Origins to 1761 and its Relationship to the Violin and Violin Music* (1990), was shorter than a modern bow; the stick was more convex (compared to modern bows, which are concave); plus it had a pointed tip and a new tightening mechanism in the nut that allowed the player to tighten the hair. (See Figure 3, item 5.)



Figure 3. Sequence of Bows, Purporting to Represent the Development of the Bow from Mersenne to Viotti. Source: David Boyden, *History of Violin Playing from its Origins to 1761 and its Relationship to the Violin and Violin Music* (1990)

Baroque bows may appear short and inefficient; yet for the Baroque violinist, they were proportionate and met the needs of the

compositions of the time. Shorter bows assisted in performing music such as rhythmic French dances. There was no need for a longer bow until Corelli composed lyrical sonate. Once Corelli's sonate and other lyrical compositions were produced, a longer bow enabled musicians to meet the composition's needs: long notes, in addition to long, lyrical phrases. During the 1700s, there were many changes to the bow and many different bows were being used. All changes were propelled by the requirements in Baroque compositions.

Technique of Leopold Mozart (1756)

Leopold Mozart was a respected violinist, but he was never great enough to be an orchestral concert master (considered the highest ranking job of a violinist in his day). Therefore he was not well known for his violin playing. An unfortunate truth is that he is best known for being Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's father (Einstein, 1948, p. xi). However, his work, *A Treatise on the Fundamental Principles of Violin Playing*, is without a doubt a critical resource known by violinists all over the world.

In 1756, Leopold Mozart published the first edition of his *Violinschule (A Treatise on the Fundamental Principles of Violin Playing)*. Unaware of previous publications, such as that of Geminiani, L. Mozart believed he was the first to produce such a guide (p. 8). The introduction describes his frustrations with teaching students who had previously been taught incorrect technique, and the struggles these students had after playing for years by substandard technique. He believed that for a student to become a great violinist, the student needed to be a knowledgeable violinist. He encouraged the study of the string family, followed by the history of music and theory. Only after a student studied these, did L. Mozart allow them to hold the instrument.

The violins in the 1700s favored models made by Nicolò Amati (1596–1684) and his student Antonio Stradiveri (1644–1737). Violins at this time, compared to modern instruments, had a

shorter, thicker neck; a flatter, lower bridge; gut strings; and no chin rest, which was not used until the 1800s (Powers, 2003). These characteristics met the needs of compositions from the Baroque and early Classical eras. For example, the modern extended neck was unnecessary, considering that compositions did not require the instrument to have a higher range.

L. Mozart (1756) presented his audience with two options for holding the violin. The first option (see Figure 4) was to place the tail end of the violin body against the collarbone in a slanted fashion, enabling the bow to be pushed upward instead of back. He claimed that although this position was more “natural looking,” it was more “inconvenient” for the player. The second option was the more “comfortable” option (see Figure 5). As he explains it (p. 54), the stance is rather modern: “the violin [is] placed against the neck so that it lies somewhat in front of the shoulder and the side on which the E (thinnest) string lies under the chin...”



Figure 4. Leopold Mozart holding the violin at his collarbone. *Source:* Mozart, 1756



Figure 5. Leopold Mozart holding the violin at his neck. *Source:* Mozart, 1756

Beginning in the seventeenth century, violinists and other string players were being grouped together for operas, orchestras, and small ensembles. There became a need for rules regarding bowings, because the lack of rules left the audience with a visual nightmare to accompany their musical entertainment. They saw an appearance of disarray due to different individual bowing directions. Asking string players to (usually) begin measures with a down bow and alternate between down-bows and up-bows not only met the need for visual aesthetics, but also allowed for the down beat—usually the strongest, or stressed beat—to naturally occur. Quickly, “down beat, down bow” became a rule for string musicians. As L. Mozart (1756) says, “So the first and chief rule should be: if the first crotchet of a bar does not begin with a rest, whether it be even or uneven time, one endeavors to take the first note of each bar with a down stroke, and this even if two down strokes should follow each other” (p. 74).

In contrast, Geminiani did not favor such restrictions. He believed that the violinist should

simply alternate bowings. “You are to execute them by drawing the bow down and up, or up and down alternately; taking care not to follow that wretched Rule of drawing the Bow down at the first Note of every Bar” (Geminiani, 1751, p. 4). It is possible that Geminiani was simply rebelling against rules of dance music (Boyden, 1990, p. 401). However, L. Mozart addressed orchestral playing while Geminiani focused on individual expression; this difference in focus may explain why L. Mozart found bowing rules far more critical.

Technique of L’Abbé le Fils (Joseph-Barnabé Saint-Sevin) (1761)

Up until the mid-eighteenth century, the technical progress of French violin music was impeded by the limitations of dance music (Boyden, 1953) and was behind the virtuosic Italian-German violin music of the time. From the 1600s until around the 1750s, the divide between the two violin styles was drastic due to France’s reluctance to see past the notion that music was only good in proportion to its portrayal of something (Boyden, 1953). However the influence of Italian sonata-style music was spreading and even breached the border of France; traditionalists felt the pressure for change. “After the introduction of the Italian-style, the progress of the violin in France was rapid, and the technical leadership passed from Italy to France in the late eighteenth century” (Boyden, 1990, p. 316). For this reason, as well as many others, the treatise written by L’Abbé le Fils was groundbreaking. His *Principes du Violon* (1751) discussed the old French dance music, the new Italian sonata styles, and the techniques required of the instrument at the time.

The French bow throughout the 1600s was tailored to the rhythmic and compositional needs of French dance music. However, as French violinists started experimenting and playing sonata and other soloistic and lyrical pieces requiring a longer bow, the necessary adaptations were made. L’Abbé le Fils favored the bow hold of the Italians, not even discussing the French bow hold. As noted by Boyden (1990), L’Abbé le

Fils spoke to the role of fingers individually. In his view, the bow is controlled by the index finger, which is slightly separated from the others, with pressure sometimes applied between the first and second joint. The little finger is to be placed on the part of the bow stick fastened to the frog, whereas the thumb is positioned opposite of the middle finger (pp. 373–374).

The treatise by L’Abbé le Fils expanded the world of harmonics and fingerings. Harmonics are overtones of the string produced when the string is lightly touched in specific locations. Although harmonics were previously used, they were infrequent. Previous treatises by others discussed natural harmonics, which require the violinist to touch the string faintly to hear a light, flute-like sound at least an octave above the written note. Yet L’Abbé le Fils discussed both natural harmonics *and* artificial harmonics. Artificial harmonics are also known as “two-fingered” harmonics. These harmonics require the violinist to stop the string with the first finger while lightly touching the string with the indicated finger (Boyden, 1990, p. 385). This maneuver produces a note two octaves above the stopped, first-finger note. In the treatise of L’Abbé le Fils, a full diatonic and chromatic scale system is offered, made up of a complete list of natural harmonics and artificial harmonics. L’Abbé le Fils also believed that the fourth finger should be used as much as possible, for example to play trills and double stops (Boyden, 1990, p. 374).

L’Abbé le Fils called for violinists to hold their violin much like Leopold Mozart recommended—the violin over their shoulder, its tailpiece against their neck, stabilized by the chin (L. Mozart, 1756, p. 54). The significant difference with the viewpoint of L’Abbé le Fils, however, is that the chin must work to brace the violin on the side of the G string, not the E string as mentioned in previous treatises (such as that of L. Mozart). This method by L’Abbé le Fils of holding the instrument was modern for the times. It is a technique we still use today with the help of the 1800’s invention of the chin rest.

Unfortunately, the treatise of L’Abbé le Fils is not available in English, but his *Principes du Violon* is still important to study; there are many

articles and books, including David Boyden's *The History of Violin Playing from its Origins to 1761 and its Relationship to the Violin and Violin Music* (1990), which discuss the L'Abbé le Fils technique. L'Abbé le Fils was the first person to discuss the importance of modern practices such as bow-hand pronation, half position, double-stops, harmonics, and the modern fashion of holding the violin (Boyden, Walls, Holman, & Stowell, n.d.). L'Abbé le Fils, much like L. Mozart, became known more for his instruction than his playing.

Technique of Pierre Marie François de Sales Baillot (1834)

Pierre Marie François de Sales Baillot, Rodolphe Kruetzer, and Pierre Rode were commissioned in 1795 by Paris's Conservatoire de Musique to establish a standard of violin technique. Kruetzer and Rode wrote *étude* books. These books provided musical compositions designed as an exercise to improve the technique or demonstrate the skill of the player. Even today, these books help students solidify their technique. Baillot's job was to establish the text for the method. Thirty years later, in his treatise *L'Art du Violon* (1834), he described, with detailed pictures, how a person should stand and hold the violin, the position of the left and right hand (in relation to the moving parts of the arm), correct bow posture, and the movement of the violinist's fingers while playing. Ultimately, this treatise led to the prominence of the Franco-Belgian method of violin playing.

In previous treatises by others, there had been discussions on how to hold the violin (in relation to the neck or collarbone), as well as the proper method of holding the bow. But Baillot, setting himself apart, also discussed the violinist's body and the ideal posture when performing with a violin. He began with a list of criteria—almost a checklist—for the student to follow. For example (see Figure 6), in his first lesson on how to stand, Baillot (1834) provided eleven steps that, once applied, would leave students standing in a way that would benefit their playing.

How to Stand:

- ³⁵₁₇ The body and the head are straight.
- ³⁵₁₇ The chest open and forward.
- ³⁵₁₇ Shoulders back... (p. 19)



Figure 6. Drawing by Baillot of Standing Posture
Source: Baillot, 1834

The timing of Baillot's treatise coincided with the rise of the virtuoso violinist. Clearly practice improves a violinist. Thus Baillot felt that practicing must be mentioned. So much in the same way that he had authored the checklists for posture, he created steps to guide a student's practice, such as:

- 1) Practice one thing at a time,
- 2) Link what you have just succeeded in doing well with what comes before and after,
- 3) The less advanced [the] student, the shorter and more frequent his practice periods should be... (pp. 467–468)

He felt that the metronome, a tool for time keeping, should be used “only to learn the first tempo given by the composer” (Baillot, 1834, p. 460). He did not want the metronome’s robotic, rhythmic pulse to take away from a composer’s musical intentions.

Prior to Baillot, compositions were written for a player or written by the performer. In contrast, according to Goldberg (1838), “Baillot was one of the first violinists to perform works by other composers... [and] thus was one of the first violinist-interpreters.” Today’s modern violinist studies music and the styles of the time, and performs pieces of music the way the composer would have wanted. Baillot used the study of compositions in a greater lesson model to assist in learning techniques. He believed in a three-step lesson:

- 1) A definition is given and an example is given to support it;
- 2) Purely technical exercises are given and basic technical difficulties are summarized; and,
- 3) Finally, an application of all the principles is made to the pieces that are to be chosen... (1834, p. 15)

Baillot (unlike L. Mozart and L’Abbé le Fils) was viewed as a performer as much as a teacher. He discussed in great detail the “genius of performance” and, similar to Geminiani, felt that violin music had the power to inspire and touch people. He claimed that it was the “genius of performance that allows the artist to make the great geniuses of past centuries live again... with the enthusiasm suitable to this noble and touching language, which has been so beautifully named, along with poetry, the *language of the gods*” (Baillot, 1834, p. 479). He did, however, say that violinists must perform with technical accuracy—yet be confident in their technical abilities enough to get lost in the expressions of the music. In Baillot’s words, “rules only served to make [the violinist’s] ideas bloom and instill themselves more deeply into what he performs” (p. 479).

CONCLUSIONS

What is similar about these treatises? First, the authors are troubled with the state of their students’ playing after years of experience. They realized the serious need for the development of standardized violin technique. Thus each author (Francesco Geminiani, Leopold Mozart, L’Abbé le Fils, and François Baillot) played key roles in the standardization of violin technique.

A second similarity is that the writers did not establish a technique that was stagnant. They were able to observe and notate, allowing their written theories to follow the effective practices of the time. As history shows, playing technique has continued to evolve due to changes in the violin, bow, and demands of compositions. It is said that theory follows practice. Today, both music and performance practices have evolved beyond where they were when the historic treatises were written. And yet, the treatises provided solid foundations for students learning the violin in their day.

So are such historical methods obsolete? Not at all; modern pedagogy may have evolved, but it is still necessary that today’s beginning violin students are given the foundations they need to eventually reach virtuosic levels of performance.

A third similarity of the treatises is that the authors believed in a well-rounded musician, saying that violin students should study music history, theory, and the instrument itself before even touching the instrument. Today, students learn about the history and theory of the instrument later in their instruction—or, in some cases, only after they prove it is something they are sincere about learning. The fact that we follow the example of Geminiani, and mark the fingerboards for finger placements, before teaching students about the theory and history, leaves students relying on a resource (the tape on the fingerboard) instead of knowledge. Interestingly enough, this situation may be what L. Mozart was concerned about when he warned students and teachers against using this strategy.

Another similarity is that L. Mozart and Baillot both wrote about learning without developing bad habits in every new technical area.

L. Mozart warned of errors, even going so far as to blame former teachers for their students' errors. He claimed that this problem is what caused him to write his treatise! Baillot used a three-step process, enabling students to learn correctly (the first time). He also wrote an entire section in his treatise dedicated to good habits for "practice." Today, we have taught students that *practice equates to perfection*; whereas the truth of the matter is, that incorrectly learned technique (when repeatedly practiced) results in a student who will eventually need to remediate a technical error.

During the time of these treatises, there was so much evolution and growth occurring for the violin, bow, and music for the instrument. These treatises became essential in the ever-changing world of the violin—as it evolved toward becoming a principal orchestral instrument. With the treatises, students could begin to use standardized technique and also remain current. It is curious how the world of the violin is an ever-growing one, yet at the same time, in many ways, instructors are failing to teach a strong technique foundation to their current students. It would make sense if teachers could have a process for establishing a solid, early technique with their students (with the curriculum to support this process). Such a process should involve studying theory, grasping the history of the instrument, and learning the instrument itself (including the geometry of the fingerboard and the jobs of each finger on the bow hand). All these topics should be mastered before learning to play the instrument. But such a process is rarely implemented. As mentioned, in today's curriculum, this depth of study is expected only after a student has committed many years of playing the instrument. But why should students have to prove the sincerity of their interest in order to receive instruction fundamental to their ultimate success? As these historical treatises abundantly illustrate, all students, from their first days, should receive an age-appropriate curriculum. Let us teach them music theory, history, and knowledge of the instrument, *especially* the geometry of the fingerboard and the jobs of each finger on the bow hand.

Why do many teachers not use this process?

There may be several reasons. First, some teachers may lack foundations in these areas. Perhaps some teachers are not aware this process is needed. Others may seek to achieve student retention by giving students the gratification of handling the instrument and playing the music as soon as possible. The consequences, however, will be felt soon, when students develop faulty technique. In contrast, a solid foundation gives students greater proficiency with their instruments and thus the potential for more enjoyment.

Although today's music and performance practices require techniques that have evolved past those in the historic treatises, the techniques prescribed in the treatises are fundamentally sound and largely applicable today. New students and those violinists requiring correction would benefit from a regimen that includes elements from these treatises. The regimen for a beginning student could include the following steps:

- Basic music theory (L. Mozart and Baillot)
- General music history, violin history, and performance practice (L. Mozart and Baillot)
- The parts of the violin and bow (L. Mozart and Baillot)
- Posture, holding the violin, bowing, arm movement, finger movement (L'Abbé le Fils and Baillot)
- Learner's fingerboard and grip (Geminiani)
- Basic approach to practice (Baillot)
- Approach to perfecting individual techniques—using the lesson, exercises, and music that requires the technique (Baillot)

The historic treatises of Francesco Geminiani (1751), Leopold Mozart (1756), L'Abbé le Fils (Joseph-Barnabé Saint-Sevin) (1761), and Pierre Marie François de Sales Baillot (1834) shaped and defined technique used in modern violin performance. String teachers can simulate the basic approaches to using those techniques with their new and remedial students. Teachers should be aware of the major points of these treatises.

Those teachers who understand why a specific technique was established may be most effective in describing that technique and also in helping students adapt when not initially exposed to effective technique.

In the beginning, the purpose of the violin was for dance and entertainment. It evolved into the centerpiece of an art form. Once Corelli and other composers started writing for the violin, there was a great surge in interest for the instrument, and hence the need for these virtuosic treatises. Today, many students learn the violin and other instruments as an extracurricular activity. Even

though they may continue with the violin only for a short time, their music education should be the same as students planning to play for their whole lives. We should provide every student with virtuosic instruction from the beginning, paving the path for a technically sound violinist. By resurrecting these treatises, and their authors' ideas for pacing and supplementing instruction, students' fundamental technique will lead them to bigger successes on the instrument, possibly motivating more of them to continue and reach a virtuosic level.

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