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String Crossings in the Second Movement of Telemann's Viola Concerto

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Abstract

String crossings in stringed instrument playing are vital as it is one of the characteristics in the most classical repertoire. Telemann's Viola Concerto, specifically the second movement, requires the technique of string crossing. This study examines the characteristics of the string crossing technique in the said piece and determines how the method is performed. Data for this study was gathered through interviews and sought to obtain information on how violists interpret and perform the work. The outcome revealed various views among four violists who participated in the study.

Keywords: String Crossings; Technique; Viola; Telemann

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Background

Among all the 18th-century composers, Georg Philipp Telemann is the most paradoxical. His identity is surrounded by ambiguity and overwhelmed by misapprehension. During his days, his musical fellows considered him paramount to all composers in living memory. However, he is viewed as a minor master by today's generation. His great oratorios and cantatas were once celebrated, but now he is recognized for little but chamber music. Throughout his life in the baroque era, he experimented with the latest musical styles and genres, yet today only his most conservative pieces are heard (Stewart, B.D.).

Although the viola was treated as a "harmonic complement" during the baroque period, Telemann wrote some meaningful pieces for the viola, such as the Viola Concerto in G major (Seitz, M). In the performance of a bowed-string instrument, the principal function of bowing movements is to exert prompt control of the sound. Additionally, bending activities must be planned before playing to anticipate future actions. Already in simple note sequences, this can lead to relatively complex movement patterns, in which sound control, timing, and anticipation are spliced (Schoonderwaldt, E. and Altenmüller, E., 2014). The production of a good tone under the voluntary control of the player also depends on subtle coordination of bowing (Schoonderwaldt, E. and Wanderley, M. M.). String crossing is included in one of the most vital bowing techniques. Violists need to be able to execute the string crossing technique properly because it will affect sound control, timing, and anticipation during the performance. A section from Telemann's Viola Concerto in G major will be observed further to investigate the features of the string crossing technique. In the score of the second movement, it was notated with no indications of legato bowing or any bowing, for that matter. However, several exciting interpretations were found while performing the sections that involve string crossing.

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1.2 Problem statement

String crossing is a fundamental technique when playing any classical string instrument or viola. This is because the characteristics of advanced classical repertoire for string family instruments include rapid string crossings and both slurred and separate bows. Thus, to become a professional violist, one must acquire this technique. However, as string crossing is not an easy technique to master, beginners to intermediate violists tend to overlook the importance of learning string crossing properly. The ignorance to practice string crossing with proper technique may lead to injuries. One of the most popular viola pieces known to violists is the Viola Concerto in G Major by Georg Philipp Telemann. This work, specifically the second movement, requires the technique of string crossing. Hence, this study is to further comprehend the string technique's prowess for violists in the piece mentioned above.

1.3 Objectives

To examine the characteristics of the string crossing technique in the Second Movement of Telemann's Viola Concerto.
To determine how the string crossing technique is performed in the said piece.

1.4 Research Questions

What are the characteristics of the string crossing technique in the Second Movement of Telemann's Viola Concerto?
How is the string crossing technique performed in the said piece?

1.5 Significance and Limitations of the Study

This study contributes to the knowledge of string crossing, specifically on the viola. Moreover, the rationale of this study is to help violists, especially beginners to intermediates, to learn more about string crossing further. One of the limitations of this research is that this is a small and focused study. Another limitation is the time constraint. It is conducted over a short period, which is only 14 weeks. Finally, the limitation includes a small sample size due to the time constraint.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 History of the Viola

Viola is the middle-range instrument of the violin family. As the viola is similar to the violin, it is often mistaken as its soprano relative by non-musicians. It sometimes is called the "big violin" by music performers or educators. It is understandable as the viola is played with a bow and placed on a shoulder, as is the violin (Dalton, 2019). Nonetheless, the viola has unique characteristics that make it different from the violin. Since the sixteenth century, the viola has undergone many transformations until it becomes the one we all know to help improve playability and sound projection (Dell'Osso, 2013).

At the end of the nineteenth century, several composers and violists were ambitious to make the viola become a more prominent and notable instrument and to change the musical community's perspective on this under-appreciated instrument. Many started to write beautiful music in which the viola was the solo instrument. Lionel Tertis, the most popular English violist of this era, had produced several emotionally moving sonorities from the viola that his contemporaries were keen to create works for him. Another example of a violist who was determined to make the viola more outstanding was William Primrose. Primrose was a Scottish violist who used special techniques to show other musicians and audiences that the viola can be an essential virtuosic instrument (Nelson, 1972).

The musical community needs to find value in the viola. Those composers and musicians with a better understanding of the viola usually showcase the rich timbre of the instrument more clearly, instead of giving it a non-vital role (Dell'Osso, 2013). The viola has not until recently received the attention that it deserves. Viola contemporary makers have the opportunity of being in a similar position as the makers of the violin back in the 16th and early 17th centuries as the viola has increasing popularity with players, composers, and audiences (Milward, 2004).

2.2 Georg Philipp Telemann

As photographed in Figure 2, Georg Philipp Telemann was born on March 14, 1681, in a city called Magdeburg in Brandenburg, Germany. Before becoming the most prolific composer in his era, he had self-taught himself playing the violin, flute, and zither. He entertained his friends without knowing anything about notes on a page during his childhood. After two weeks of formal keyboard lessons with a German organist he would describe as torturous, he quit. At this point in his life, he never did learn anything more from the music teacher until he was sent away by his mother to a school in Zellerfeld located in the Harz Mountains region. During one mountain festival in his school, he was put in a position where he had to help his cantor set music to poetry and conduct the music as well because he was suffering from severe gout. The crowd during the performance was stunned by the beautiful music, and some even honoured him by accompanying him home. Another person who admitted that he enjoyed his music was his warden, who then urged him to pursue conducting and composition (Payne, 2006). Later, Telemann became one of the most prominent composers of the late Baroque period who wrote both sacred and secular music. Nonetheless, Telemann was highly admired for his church compositions which ranged from small cantatas to large-scale works for solo instrumentalists and orchestras. Telemann was compared favourably to his close friend Johann Sebastian Bach and George Frideric Handel, whom he knew personally. In 1740, the composer and music theorist Johann Mattheson once opined that Telemann was the greatest composer of his day. In Mattheson's words, "Corelli and Lully may be justly honoured, but Telemann is above all praise" (Bergmann, 2009).

2.3 String Crossing

A characteristic of advanced classical repertoire usually includes rapid string crossings, be it slurred string crossing or separate bows. To give a more profound comprehension and clear difference between slurred and different bow string crossings, Bach's Suite No. 1 in G major is well-known for the slurred string crossing. At the same time, Vivaldi's Concerto in A minor is recognised for the separate bow string crossing. String players need to be capable of implementing the string crossing technique properly for the reason that it will affect sound control, timing, and anticipation during a performance (Schoonderwaldt, E. and Altenmüller, E., 2014).

The string crossing technique often occurs in the form of arpeggios or an arpeggiated chord pattern and applies when a string player plays multiple notes on different strings. This is one of the most critical techniques that ring player needs to master. If it is not executed very well, then rounds produced will not be immaculate.

Generally, players must ensure the correct position of both rights and left arms when executing string crossing. The right arm should move up and down, doing an arch-like action from the shoulder to ensure string crossings of the bow and for pizzicato. Meanwhile, the left arm should swing like a pendulum from the shoulder to achieve string crossings for the fingers, assisted by a clockwise rotation of the forearm to lower strings and a counter-clockwise rotation of the forearm to higher lines, as shown in Figure 3 (Lecher, 2007).

2.4 Telemann's Viola Concerto

The Viola Concerto in G major, TWV 51:G9, is a concerto written by a composer greatly respected and regarded as the most prolific of all composers, Georg Philipp Telemann. This concerto is among his famous works since the middle of the twentieth century and is still regularly performed today. This is probably because, among the few eighteenth-century viola concertos, this one flatters the solo instrument very well. This concerto comprises four movements, in which all of which are in ritornello form (Zohn, 2008).

With the dynamic marking of the Allegro, the second movement from this concerto is a fast-tempo movement. Furthermore, this particular movement is the one that contains several parts that require the skill of string crossing. With the arpeggiated chord pattern and the tempo fast, it demands a firm string crossing technique.

3.0 Methodology

Four undergraduate viola students from the Faculty of Music, UiTM Shah Alam were selected to participate in the arranged interview sessions via Google Meet. This sample was chosen due to the limited research which focused on diving deeper into the string crossings in Telemann's Concerto for viola. The collected data from the recorded interviews with each participant were transcribed and analyzed through thematic analysis.

3.1 Research Instrument

The interview will be semi-structured, aligned with the nature of qualitative research (Pathak, Jena, & Kalra, 2013). The questions involved open-ended questions which allowed the participants to add more value to their respected feedback (Cresswell, 1998). Section A inquired about demographic information regarding music qualifications and years of viola playing experience. Section B to C touched on the string crossings in general and the details of the technique in the specific excerpt from the piece selected by the author (see Fig. 1). Section D requested suggestions on the improvement of the technique.



Fig. 1: Excerpt from the Second Movement of Telemann's Viola Concerto
(Source: International Music Score Library Project)

4.0 Findings

The findings can be categorized into four sections:

- Section A
- Section B
- Section C
- Section D

Section A inquired about the demographic information of the respondents (see Table 1).

Table 1. Demographic Information of the Respondents

Respondents	Music Qualifications	Viola Playing Experience (Year)
A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Grade 5 ABRSM (Viola) ● Diploma in Music (UiTM) 	8
B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Diploma in Music (UiTM) ● Degree in Music Performance (UiTM) 	6
C	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Grade 4 ABRSM (Piano) ● Diploma in Music (UiTM) 	4
D	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Grade 5 ABRSM (Piano) ● Diploma in Music (UiTM) 	4

(Source: Author)

Section B comprised the respondents' knowledge of string crossings. All respondents are familiar with the technique albeit they all rated average on their prowess. This is because this technique is not being taught comprehensively to most of the respondents during lessons with their respective teachers. All respondents agreed that this technique needs to be covered during lessons as it can be useful when advancing in their repertoire and playing in the orchestra.

Section C focused on the string crossings in the chosen excerpt from the piece. All respondents agreed that based on their playing level, they find that the crossings of string in the said excerpt are challenging particularly in bars 45-47. The majority said that it is easier to play the notes on the last two beats in bar 39 using the first position. Respondent B stated that the notes are better played in the third position. Next, Respondents A and B that the notes that require string crossings in bars 45-47 should be slurred as it will enhance the sound production, and the player will have better control of the bow. Meanwhile, Respondents C and D preferred them to play separately as it will be difficult to control the direction of the bow and it will cause the tendency to use a long bow when slurring which then will affect the whole playing. Following these bars, all respondents agreed that the notes in bars 48-49 should be string crossed instead of shifting the position. All respondents agreed that deciding on the fingerings and doing warm-ups before playing the piece will help to execute the string crossing technique better.

Section D invited the respondents to share their thoughts on how they could improve the string crossing technique. Respondent A recommended exercise no. 10 from Kreutzer 42 Studies. Respondent B also uses the Kreutzer book during lessons, but at the same time suggests the exercises from The Progressive Studies Book II by Herbert Kinsey. Respondent C also suggested The Progressive Studies by Herbert Kinsey. Both Respondents C and D recommended using the Leichte Etuden fur Bratsche by Robert Pracht. When asked to suggest how other violists can enhance their string crossing technique, all respondents mentioned that the right arm plays the most important role when string crossing and that every string player should focus on the movement of the right arm. Both Respondents B and D suggested doing long bow exercises while concentrating on the right arm. Finally, all respondents agreed that recordings of professional violists on YouTube should be referred to as a guide when learning the second movement of the Viola Concerto in G major by Telemann.

5.0 Discussions

The discussions of the findings are based on the research questions.

5.1 Research Question 1

The findings of this study explained that the characteristics of the string crossing technique in the second movement of the Viola Concerto in G major by Telemann vary according to the interpretations of different violists. All respondents shared the same thought on how it is important to master the said technique before playing any piece that contains string crossings, or Telemann's Viola Concerto particularly. Hence, they all agreed that the string crossing technique must be taught properly and in-depth by viola teachers during lessons.

It is agreed that the section from the excerpt which mostly calls for string crossings requires a good string crossing technique, although as simple as it may seem. Mastering the technique will result in the accuracy of the string crossing itself while preserving the exact articulation, precise intonation, stable control of the bow, as well as excellent sound projection. Most importantly, a good string crossing technique will prevent any pain or discomfort to the limbs when performing the string crossings.

Based on the excerpt, it can be said that all respondents faced difficulties with string crossings from bars 45 to 47. Respondents A and B mentioned that the tone and intonation are affected the most if the string crossings are not executed properly. This is mostly due to the way the notes are written and how the fingers are located when playing them. In addition, Respondent D also agreed that the string crossings are especially difficult in bars 45 to 47 but opined that the difficulty continues to bar 52 because of the need to jump from high to low string.

When inquired about the preferences on whether the notes in bars 48 and 49 should be played string crossed or shifted, all respondents chose string crossed. The majority preferred to cross strings because of the sound production. Respondent A stated that these bars are

going to the first climax of this piece. Thus, playing these bars with the notes string crossed will make the sound brighter. Respondents B and C thought that shifting is not suitable because the tone would be different. Nonetheless, Respondent D preferred to cross the strings when playing those notes due to familiarity with the first position.

5.2 Research Question 2

From the findings, it is found that every violist had their way of interpreting the passage from the excerpt shown to them. Referring to bars 45 to 47, Respondent A preferred to slur the first two notes of every beat, which require string crossings. Playing these notes slurred will help make the transition smoother and the process of crossing the strings will become easier. Conceding with Respondent A, Respondent B said that slurring these notes will result in much better control of the bow. Having said that, Respondents C and D preferred to play the notes with separate bows. Their opinions considered bow control and arm movement. Respondent C said that there is a tendency of using a long bow when slurring, which may result in the playing being behind the tempo. Respondent D claimed that slurring will only add more confusion to the bowings because the notes are in a repetitive pattern.

All respondents had their preferences regarding whether the notes on the last two beats in bar 39 should be played in the first position or shifted position. Respondent A claimed that it is easier to use the first position, considering that the following bar is assumed to be easier if played in the first position. Interestingly, Respondent B said shifted position would be a better choice. The reasons are that the notes will be nearer to each other and that it will be easier to string cross. Having said that, Respondent B chose to play in the first position because Respondent B refused to risk the intonation while shifting in a fast tempo. Respondents C and D, too, agreed with the use of the first position in the particular bar due to familiarity with the said position. All of them preferred the use of the fixed fingerings of the first position when playing the notes in the last beat of bar 39.

All respondents opined that it is convenient to use fingerings that are suitable according to each preference when performing the string crossings despite the use of the positions. Respondents A and D stated that different players have different physicalities; thus, it is favorable to custom the fingerings according to one's comfort.

Doing warm-ups is highly encouraged before practicing any piece, in this case, the second movement of Telemann's Viola Concerto in G major. All respondents agree with this statement because it will help the limbs to be more flexible to move and the muscles are prepared for long hours of practice. Additionally, doing warm-ups will indirectly help players to produce better sound. Besides, the respondents shared a few books that helped them with their string crossing technique. Significantly, Respondent A stated that exercise 10 from 42 Studies for Violin by Kreutzer helped with Respondent A's string crossing technique regarding bow control and arm movement. Aside from that, the respondents also encouraged other violists to use the recordings of professional violists on YouTube as a guide when learning this concerto so that it can give different ideas on how to approach the piece with their interpretations.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper contributes to fulfilling the literature gap in the string crossing technique for the viola.

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