Applying the Ševčík Approach to Selected Excerpts from the First Movement of the Brahms Viola Sonata in F Minor

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APPLYING THE ŠEVČÍK APPROACH TO SELECTED EXCERPTS FROM THE
FIRST MOVEMENT OF THE BRAHMS VIOLA SONATA IN F MINOR

By

Ross Adam DeBardelaben

A LECTURE RECITAL ESSAY

Submitted to the Faculty
of the University of Miami
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts

Coral Gables, Florida

May 2012
APPLYING THE ŠEVČÍK APPROACH TO SELECTED EXCERPTS FROM THE FIRST MOVEMENT OF THE BRAHMS VIOLA SONATA IN F MINOR

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Applying the Ševčík Approach to Selected Excerpts from  
the First Movement of the Brahms Viola Sonata in F Minor.  
(May 2012)

Abstract of a lecture recital essay at the University of Miami.

Doctoral lecture recital essay supervised by Professor Pamela McConnell.  
No. of pages in text. (51)

Originally for clarinet, the Brahms Viola Sonata in F Minor Op. 120 no. 1 is famous amongst violists for its technical challenges. This doctoral lecture recital essay is an archival version of a live lecture recital given in April 2012 about how one can apply renowned violin pedagogue Otakar Ševčík’s method of creating original exercises designed to conquer the technical and musical challenges of this Brahms sonata. This document includes the lecture recital script, DeBardelaben’s original exercises, which serve as a catalyst for learning correlating passages of the Brahms, and DeBardelaben’s edited viola part with his bowings and fingerings for the first movement of the sonata.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful for the musical mentorship, personal care, and support of my committee members Scott Flavin, Thomas Sleeper, Rachel Lebon, and especially my committee chair Pamela McConnell who continues to inspire me as a violist. I am grateful to God for giving me an unquenchable love of music. I would like to thank Mary Knapp for invaluable personal coaching and encouragement. I would like to thank my siblings and friends who cheered me on and prayed for me. Lastly, I would like to thank my parents, Steve and Arlene DeBardelaben, for their unconditional love.
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APPLICATION THE ŠEVČÍK APPROACH TO SELECTED EXCERPTS FROM THE
FIRST MOVEMENT OF THE BRAHMS VIOLA SONATA IN F MINOR

CHAPTER ONE

LECTURE RECITAL DOCUMENT

Opening Remarks

Good afternoon. Thank you for coming to my lecture recital. Originally for
clarinet, the Brahms Viola Sonata in F Minor Opus 120 no. 1 is famous amongst violists
for its technical challenges. Some people feel that this sonata is too difficult for viola and
should only be played on the clarinet. However, violists are continually drawn to the
work in spite of its rigorous technical demands. The purpose of my lecture recital is to
demonstrate how one can apply Otakar Ševčík’s analytical method of creating original
exercises to conquer the technical and musical challenges of the first movement of the
Brahms Sonata in F Minor.

I will perform all four movements of the Brahms Viola Sonata in F Minor. Then
I will demonstrate and discuss original exercises I have created in the spirit of Ševčík to
address specific challenges of a select number of excerpts from the first movement. The
tempo and character markings of each movement are as follows:

I. Allegro appassionato
II. Andante un poco adagio
III. Allegretto grazioso
IV. Vivace

I hope you enjoy my performance of the Brahms Viola Sonata in F Minor.

Performance of all four movements

(Approximately 22 minutes)
Discussion of Excerpts and Exercises, Group 1

Now that you have heard me perform the entire Brahms Viola Sonata in F Minor, I will discuss a sampling of difficult passages from the first movement and exercises I created for addressing the challenges of these passages. Please reference the handout I have distributed titled Selected Excerpts & Exercises for Preparing the First Movement of the Brahms Viola Sonata in F Minor. I have divided the excerpts and exercises into Group 1, Group 2 and Group 3. I will refer to rehearsal letters from the exercises as I describe each exercise. Along the way, I will make general comments about strategies for developing a robust viola technique I have gleaned from Otakar Ševčík.

The first passage I would like to discuss is the very first entrance of the viola with the primary theme beginning in measure 5 and continuing through measure 16.

Example 1. Excerpt 1.1 Brahms Viola Sonata in F Minor (mm. 5-16)

There are many fingering choices for this passage. The fingering I have chosen begins in fifth position with the third finger on C an octave above the open C string. The first challenge is finding this pitch. One can find this pitch easily by playing C as a harmonic with the third finger in fifth position. It is important for violinists and violists to know
they are in fifth position when they play a harmonic an octave above any open string with the third finger. It follows then that if the same note is played with the second finger, one is in sixth position and if with the first finger, seventh position. This type of knowledge is necessary to have a satisfactory fingerboard cognizance to play advanced viola pieces like the two Brahms sonatas for viola.

After finding C with the third finger in fifth position, the next challenge is shifting from fifth position to third position for the A-flat on the third beat of measure 5 and then back to fifth position for the third beat of measure 6. Exercise 1.1 Part A addresses this.

Example 2. Exercise 1.1 Part A

You will notice that I have printed the words closed and open below the first and second measures of Exercise 1.1 Part A. In later examples, I simply print a C for closed or an O for open. What this refers to is the feeling of the left hand. When one feels the interval of a major third between the first and third fingers or second and fourth fingers on the same string, the hand experiences an open feeling. When one feels an interval of a minor third between the first and third fingers or second and fourth fingers on the same string, the hand experiences a closed feeling. When the hand has an open feeling, there are whole steps between the first, second, and third fingers or second, third, and fourth
fingers. When the hand has a closed feeling, there is a whole step and a half step between the first, second, and third fingers, or the second, third and fourth fingers.

You will also notice I have printed Pattern 2 and Pattern 1 directly above the first two measures of Exercise 1.1 Part A. These labels of Pattern 1 and Pattern 2 come from the labels I have given to the four most common four-note finger patterns played by violinists and violists with the fingering 1-2-3-4. Bear in mind that these labels are not the same from one teacher to another. I have listed the labels I use to describe these patterns in Example 3 below.

Example 3. Four-Finger Patterns in A-Flat Major/F Natural Minor

<table>
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<th>Pattern 2</th>
<th>Pattern 3</th>
<th>Pattern 4</th>
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<tr>
<td>W W 1/2</td>
<td>W 1/2 W</td>
<td>1/2 W W</td>
<td>W W W</td>
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If one plays four-note scales, also known as tetrachords, with the fingering 1-2-3-4 on each subsequent scale degree of a major or natural minor key, only four unique finger patterns are used. Patterns 1, 2, and 3 consist of two whole steps and one half step where the half step is between 3 & 4, 2 & 3, and 1 & 2 respectively. Pattern 4 consists of all whole steps. One of the challenges of playing in different positions is the need for one to toggle between these finger patterns appropriately. I have included movable do
solfège syllables to aid one in singing each of these tetrachords; singing will often improve one’s ear for pure intonation. If one plays the notes of Example 3, beginning on the first finger in first position in the first measure, and shifts up one position to begin on the first finger for each subsequent measure, notice how the patterns proceed in order—Pattern 1, Pattern 2, Pattern 3, Pattern 4. In the fifth measure, the patterns reset to Pattern 1, Pattern 2, and Pattern 3 for the tetrachords beginning on the fifth, sixth, and seventh scale degrees of the A-flat major scale. In the eighth measure, we are back to where we started one octave higher. An effective practice strategy for preparing to practice the Brahms Viola Sonata in F Minor is to play through Example 3 as printed and then to scramble the order of each measure and finally to change the order of the pitches in each measure. This point is supported by a disciple of Ševčík named Robert Dolešjí. In the introduction to his book, Modern Viola Technique, which is dedicated to Ševčík, Dolešjí writes that

\[ \text{[In] the entire technique of the viola there exist only the following finger combinations in their ascending and descending form:} \]

\[
\begin{align*}
1-2, & \hspace{1cm} 2-3, \hspace{1cm} 3-4, 1-3, \hspace{1cm} 2-4, 1-4 \\
2-1, & \hspace{1cm} 3-2, \hspace{1cm} 4-3, \hspace{1cm} 3-1, \hspace{1cm} 4-2, \hspace{1cm} 4-1
\end{align*}
\]

Therefore it is but natural to believe that, if these finger combinations are developed to the highest degree of perfection in all the positions normally used on the viola, an impeccable technique is attained.\(^1\)

This knowledge of the finite number of possible finger combinations in viola playing is liberating to the violists who have been practicing with only a vague understanding of their left hand technical problems. Understanding the specifics of one’s technical challenges is of utmost importance in order to improve technique. As it pertains to the

first movement of the Brahms *Viola Sonata in F Minor*, the violist who practices scales, arpeggios, and Dolešji’s list of finger combinations in first through seventh positions in the key of F minor will have a supreme advantage over the violist who only practices the notes of the sonata.

In measures 4 and 5 of Exercise 1.1 Part A, you will notice guide notes, A-flat and F respectively, printed as diamond shaped grace notes. Ševčík used guide notes in many of his exercises. The guide notes help one measure the distance one’s left hand must move from one position to another. Ševčík believed in the efficacy of practicing a difficult skill, including shifts, forwards and backwards. In this case it is effective to practice shifting up and down from the note before the guide note and back to the note you came from. The goal of Exercise 1.1 Part A is to solidify one’s shifting skills between third and fifth position by gaining knowledge of appropriate guide notes and knowledge of which hand positions one must toggle between in order to be ready to play the notes in each position with ease, consistency, and perfect intonation.

In Exercise 1.1 Part B, I wrote double-stops in third position and fifth position in order to help me gain confidence as to whether I should have a closed or open hand feel based on the diatonic pitches in each position.

Example 4. Exercise 1.1 Part B

![Example 4. Exercise 1.1 Part B](image-url)
I also indicated the intervals of each double stop (i.e. M3 for major third and P5 for perfect fifth) to help improve my intonation and knowledge of the topography of that particular range of the viola. It is significant to observe that a closed hand feel when playing double stop yields a major third. This is the inverse of the closed hand feel on one string, which creates the interval of a minor third as we discussed a moment ago.

With all of these exercises, I recommend repeating each section within double bar lines until the targeted skill is executed satisfactorily just as Ševčík recommended with his exercises. This is in line with the Ševčík approach of building up to a successful performance of a work by practicing exercises for difficult passages one small segment at a time. Listen to Ševčík in his own words:

An analytic study of the separate parts of a work is essential to guarantee a safe reproduction of the whole...Great worlds of new unthought-of possibilities will then be discovered...After having studied the separate interval and analytic studies, always observing the dynamic signs of execution, one may immediately turn to the respective group of bars of the solo voice; thus an inspired, absolutely perfect and ideal execution, rid from technical difficulties, is obtained. Good will, perseverance, and zeal are the soul of the work. The scrupulousness of the analysis shall not frighten the player, but rather awaken in him a desire for solving further problems, thus enabling him to distinguish the better the nature of the musically beautiful in its subtlest components...Detached stones out of the great magnificent mosaic of the masterpiece, cut with diligence, may resplend in the bright sunny radiance of the inspired soul...If some players approach this opus with the same zeal, deliberation and ennobling love as I have been guided by at the making of the work, I shall be sufficiently rewarded.²

Next, let’s move on to discuss Exercise 1.1 Parts C, D, and E. These exercises aim at solidifying intonation when playing in fifth position across the width of the viola on each string. Being able to play in tune on one string is not sufficient in this Brahms

sonata. One of the greatest challenges of this sonata is moving the fingers of the left hand laterally from the C string to the A string without compromising intonation. Practicing double-stops in first through seventh positions during one’s early training would be an important strategy for minimizing the challenge of works like the Brahms in advanced repertoire.

Exercise 1.1 Part C addresses the double string crossing from the second finger B-flat on the C string to the third finger D-flat on the D string. It is paramount for the player to adjust both the right arm and the left elbow to the optimal places for playing on each of these strings.

The keys of F minor or A-flat major with their four flats (B, E, A, and D) are not particularly idiomatic for viola. The D-flats and A-flats exclude the use of the open D and open A strings. Furthermore, in fifth position one must toggle between the open hand feel of the third finger C on the C string and the third finger G on the G string and the closed hand feel of the third finger D-flat and third finger A-flat on the D and A strings respectively. On the middle two strings, there is a tritone relationship between the third finger G-natural on the G string and the third finger D-flat on the D string. In Exercise 1.1 Part D, playing the grace notes in the first measure helps one to feel the open hand position of the first two beats and the closed hand position of the third beat. The next measure with three groups of descending eighth-note couplets is broader rhythmically, which helps the left hand feel the intervals in a different way. In exercise 1.1 Part E, the shift from the third finger D-flat in fifth position down to the first finger E-natural in first position is targeted. Once again, there is a guide note G-natural, which
helps the player know they need to shift from their third finger D-flat in fifth position to their third finger G-natural in first position.

Example 5. Exercise 1.1 Parts C, D, and E

The guide note in the fourth measure of Exercise 1.1 Part E is a first finger on a D-flat fourth position. In the next measure, my fingering calls for G-natural played by the first finger in fourth position on the C string. It is advisable to practice toggling between these two notes, the D-flat and G-natural in fourth position on the G string and C string respectively.

Next, I will discuss Exercise 1.1 Parts F, G, H, and I. These exercises are focused on the challenges of measures 12 through 16. The first notable challenge in these measures is the jump from the first finger on G-natural in fourth position on the C string in measure 12 to the first finger on E-natural in fourth position on the A string in measure 13. This is quite a jump. The left elbow must rotate to the left of the body from very far under the viola where it is optimal to be on the C string to where its optimal to be on the A string.
The purpose of Exercise 1.1 Part F is to practice the slight rotation of the left arm in fourth position from the C string, to the G string, to the D string, and to the A string.

Example 6. Exercise 1.1 Parts F and G

By practicing this exercise of ascending and descending fifths, one gains a better sense of the optimal balance and angle of the left arm on each string. Exercise 1.1 Part G provides an opportunity to practice the arm movement from the C string to the A string as in the actual passage. One should notice marked improvement and smoothness in their arm motion and consistency of intonation after practicing these exercises.

In Exercise 1.1 Part H, I added passing tones, an F and a G, between the E-natural and the A-flat in order to practice the feel of these notes playing in fourth position on the A string using the fingering 1-2-3-4. These particular notes create a left hand finger pattern unique from the four patterns already discussed in Example 3 above. The new pattern, which I call Pattern 5, consists of a half step followed by a whole step followed by a half step. Please reference Example 7 below showing all five four-finger patterns. Example 7 illustrates the five four-finger patterns beginning on the same pitch, E-natural. As I mentioned before, Patterns 1 through 4 occur within scales with a standard key
signature. However, Pattern 5 only occurs when a note from outside the key signature is included.

Example 7. Five Four-Finger Patterns

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<th>Pattern 4</th>
<th>Pattern 5</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>W-W-1/2</td>
<td>W-1/2-W</td>
<td>1/2-W-W</td>
<td>W-W-W</td>
<td>1/2-W-1/2</td>
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In this case, the E-natural in measure 13 is the altered note. Practicing Exercise 1.1 Part H helps one measure the distance between the first finger and the fourth finger, which is a diminished fourth. This is in contrast to Patterns 1 through 3, which create the interval of a perfect fourth between the first and fourth fingers, and Pattern 4, which creates an augmented fourth between the first and fourth fingers. Exercise 1.1 Part H approaches changes in the order of the pitches so that one experiences the balance of the hand, first beginning on the first finger, then the fourth finger, then the third finger, and finally the second finger in each successive measure.

Example 8. Exercise 1.1 Parts H and I

Half/Whole Pattern

Pattern 3
In an interview published by *Etude Magazine* in 1923, Otakar Ševčík made remarks germane to this topic. Ševčík said:

The student should have all the good instruction that is possible; but on the other hand he should also develop as far as possible the ability to teach himself. By that I mean that he should, when he makes a mistake, try to figure out why it was made, and then with intelligence invent exercises to correct that mistake before proceeding further. There is too much blind repetition, and too much rapid playing during study. By rapid playing the pupil thinks to save a few minutes; but in reality he loses years.³

This quote by Ševčík reminds me of a popular definition of insanity, namely, repeating the same thing over and over again expecting different results. I confess that I have been guilty of mindless repetition over the course of my practicing life. At those times, I have hoped against hope that I can overcome difficult passages by mere repetition and perseverance. It turns out that the famous statement, “practice makes perfect,” is not completely accurate. If you practice poorly, you are sure to become a poor musician. The correct slogan for success is “perfect practice makes perfect.” In other words, practice smartly. Ševčík is correct in his assessment that one potentially loses years of accelerated progress when one practices mindlessly without engaging in creative and analytical thinking.

**Discussion of Excerpts and Exercises, Group 2**

Next, I would like to discuss Excerpt 2.1 and in particular the challenges of the last two measures of this excerpt. The second to last measure is in fifth position and the

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last measure is in third position. Both measures contain a G-flat, which serves as a clue that the music is modulating to a key with five flats, D-flat major or B-flat minor.

Example 9. Excerpt 2.1 Brahms *Viola Sonata in F Minor* (mm. 26-35)

It is helpful to play a scale in fifth position beginning with the first finger on E-flat on the G string in D-flat major up to the fourth finger B-flat on the A string to gain a feel and intellectual understanding of the finger patterns on each string in fifth position. It is also helpful to play a scale in third position beginning with the first finger on C on the G string in D-flat major up to the fourth finger G on the A string to feel the contrasting finger patterns required in third position. Example 10 shows where the half steps are in fifth position and third position respectively. Labeled four-note finger patterns are indicated as well. What makes these scales difficult is the tritone between the C and the G-flat. Once again, I recommend applying Dolešji’s finite list of four-finger combinations with the notes of these scales to preemptively prepare one for practicing this passage from the Brahms viola sonata. It has been a breakthrough for me to understand how breaking down technical challenges to this level of detailed analysis helps one improve exponentially.
Example 10. Scales in Fifth Position and Third Position

One day while I was considering how to practice the last two measures from Excerpt 2.1 from the sonata, I decided to improvise a melody using the notes from this passage. Please reference Example 11 and Example 12 to review the material I composed using these notes from the last two measures of Excerpt 2.1. In both Exercise 2.1 Parts A and B, I quote the measure I was concerned about in the Brahms first and then I extrapolate an improvised melody that suits my musical and technical strengths while helping me address the weaknesses exposed in the excerpt from the Brahms. My melody in Exercise 2.1 Part A helps me work out the technical challenge of toggling between Pattern 2 and Pattern 3 in fifth position on the D and A strings respectively. One of the secrets to executing this is anticipating this pattern change so that one’s mind is a step ahead of the fingers. Notice that on the second line of Exercise 2.1 Part A I inserted a trill to help one solidify the half-step relationship between D-flat and C-natural on the D string in fifth position.
Example 11. Exercise 2.1 Part A

A 5th pos. Improvisations Using Notes from the Passage

C half-diminished 7
On the next line, there is a turn on the G-flat on the A string which aims to have one feel
the relationship of G-flat to its upper and lower neighbor tones, A-flat and F-natural
respectively. In this case, the A-flat is a whole step from G-flat and the F a half step from
G-flat, hence the Pattern 3 label. I also employ double stops and bariolage to address the
need to feel the finger patterns of fifth position laterally across the viola.

Surprisingly, the final measure of Excerpt 2.1 is often more consistently out of
tune than the previous measure even though the penultimate measure is in fifth position
and the last measure is in third position. One would think third position is easy and well-
trotted territory for violists.

Example 12. Exercise 2.1 Part B

The reason it is difficult is because training on the violin and viola emphasizes the perfect
fourth hand frame, but this passage deviates from that hand frame. One must toggle the
first finger from C in third position on the G string to G-flat on the D string (one half step
lower). Then from the first finger G-flat on the D string, one must feel Pattern 4 in the
hand to play C with the fourth finger on the D string, an augmented fourth (tritone) from
the G-flat. The challenge is not over yet. Continuing from the D string to the A string, the player must play a diminished triad (C, E-flat, G-flat) with the fingering 4-2-4. It is quite difficult and puts one’s left-hand elasticity to the test.

Next, let’s turn our attention to Exercise 2.2 and Exercise 2.3. The first challenge of both of these excerpts is finding the first note after resting in the previous two bars.

Example 13. Excerpt 2.2 Brahms *Viola Sonata in F Minor* (mm. 69-76)

Exercise 2.2 Part A addresses the challenge of how to find a perfectly in-tune A-flat on the A string with the third finger in fifth position. I have always found it difficult to find notes in fifth position and higher by mere muscle memory. Exercise 2.2 Part A calls for one to find the C harmonic an octave above the open C string with the fourth finger and then the G and D harmonics also with the fourth finger an octave above the G and D strings. For most violists, it is easy to find these harmonic notes with the fourth finger an octave above the open strings. Then it is quite simple to find the A-flat with third finger on the A string by feeling its tritone relationship to the fourth finger D harmonic on the D string.
Example 14. Exercise 2.2 Parts A, B, C, and D

Exercise 2.2 Part B allows one to experience the closed hand feel of fifth position when playing the notes A-flat, G, and F in contrast to the open hand feel of fourth position when playing the notes G, F, and E-flat. Part C of Exercise 2.2 is the notes from the first three measures of Excerpt 2.2, but with a bowing where two notes are paired in the first measure followed by one beat with a separate bow followed by six quarter note beats slurred in couplets. I recommend practicing these measures with as many different bowing combinations as possible. The idea behind practicing different bowings is that the left hand becomes independent of the right hand. Exercise 2.2 Part D focuses on the third and fourth measure of Excerpt 2.2. The first measure of Part D includes two grace notes, which serve as guide notes for the shift from the first finger C in second position to the fourth finger A-flat and from the fourth finger A-flat back to the first finger C. This helps one gain greater control and accuracy in executing the shift from second to fourth position in the fourth measure of Excerpt 2.2.

In Excerpt 2.3, finding the high D-flat is scary. One must find a practice strategy to remember what it feels like to find this pitch.
Example 15. Excerpt 2.3 Brahms \textit{Viola Sonata in F Minor} (mm. 184-191)

In the first two measures of Exercise 2.3 Part A, one can practice shifting from the third finger on F in third position to the third finger on C in seventh position by thinking of the melody “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star.” I often use children’s melodies to work on intonation and shifting in the upper registers of the viola. Once one finds the C with the third finger, the D-flat is easily played with confidence a half step higher. Measures 3 and 4 of Exercises 2.3 Part A are played with a closed hand feel and open hand feel in seventh and sixth position respectively.

Example 16. Exercise 2.3 Parts A and B

On the third beat of the second measure of Exercise 2.3 Part B, there are sixteenth notes inserted to solidify one’s understanding of the diatonic notes in that register.
Another approach to finding the D-flat is to play it in sixth position, thinking of it as a C-sharp. The advantage to this approach is that one has already played this very same C-sharp in measure 124 earlier in the first movement.

Example 17. Excerpt 2.4 Brahms *Viola Sonata in F Minor* (mm. 123-127)

To find the C-sharp, one can find the harmonic A-natural with the second finger (sixth position) an octave above the open A string. Then finding the C sharp with the fourth finger a major third above this A is simple when one thinks of an open hand feel.

**Discussion of Excerpts and Exercises, Group 3**

The last two excerpts I would like to discuss are arguably the most difficult passages in the first movement of the Brahms *Sonata in F Minor* because of the complexity of bow distribution and string crossings. For both of these excerpts, I recommend practicing open strings without the left hand. In Excerpt 3.1 and Excerpt 3.2, the open strings are written out for this purpose.
Example 18. Excerpt 3.1 Brahms Viola Sonata in F Minor (mm. 60-67)

Example 19. Exercise 3.1

Practicing the right arm alone is an effective strategy for quickening one’s right arm reflexes. Often we are fixated on the difficulties of left hand technique and neglect to consider the problems of the right arm.

Example 20. Excerpt 3.2 Brahms Viola Sonata in F Minor (mm. 175-182)
Example 21. Exercise 3.2

As you can see the rhythm of the string crossings when playing only open strings is complex. Practicing the right arm alone allows one to concentrate completely on developing smooth and rhythmically accurate string crossings. In classic Brahms fashion, the rhythmic feel toggles between a duple meter when there are sixteenth notes and a triple feel when there are sextuplets.

The bow distribution challenge of Excerpt 3.1 and Excerpt 3.2 is formidable. Beginning in the third measure of each passage, one needs to draw a slow down-bow for approximately two beats and then a fast up-bow for just shy of the remaining one beat of the measure. Then one must draw a slower down-bow in the next measure for the duration of three beats of the measure. In the following measure, one must execute the opposite bowing. Usually one can change a bowing to suit what feels more comfortable, but in this case there is no choice but to learn how to execute the passage beginning with an up-bow and beginning with a down-bow.

**Conclusion**

Thank you for coming to my lecture recital. My goal was to demonstrate how one can apply the Ševčík method of creating original exercises to overcome selected technical
and musical challenges of the first movement of the Brahms *Sonata in F Minor Op. 120 no. 1*. This analytical and practice method can be applied to all repertoire. The end goal is to perform great works of the repertoire with ease and joy.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Baker’s Biographical Dictionary of Musicians describes Ševčík’s method as “in contradistinction to the usual diatonic system…founded on chromatic progressions, especially valuable in securing both accuracy and facility.”

I found two wise quotes published in the revised edition of Dr. Shinichi Suzuki's Position Etudes book in support of Ševčík’s prescription for slow, methodical work. "Build a stone wall on a solid foundation."5 "Advancing too quickly will make pupils fall behind."6 Just as shoddy construction leaves a home vulnerable to the destructive power of a hurricane, string players must build their technique carefully and methodically with the help of guidance from their teachers and mentors in order to withstand the stress of difficult repertoire.

Ševčík embraced the concept of creating repertoire-specific studies in order to set an example for his students of how to creatively solve technical problems. Ševčík created exercises for his students extemporaneously during their private lessons. In an article published in The Musical Times in December of 1930, Henry Joachim recounts an insightful and humorous anecdote about what a typical lesson with Professor Ševčík was like:

Having tuned, the student takes out of his music-case the Chaconne or the Tchaikovsky and offers to play it. The Professor, who has been seated at the pianoforte all the while, has already summed up the capabilities and possibilities of the pupil, and to the great surprise of the latter drily

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6 Ibid., 8.
ejaculates, 'Uebungen' (Exercises). He then takes him through a group of them (many of which he invents on the spot to suit the individual needs of the pupil), and then produces a dilapidated copy of Ernst's Hungarian Airs, which he places before the terrified player. Here again the pupil is somewhat surprised, for he is not asked to play the composition at sight, but is taught the gist of an ingenious method, namely, to practice each bar separately backwards and forwards with all possible combinations and permutations of rhythm, fingering, and bowing.\(^7\)

This last sentence by Joachim succinctly summarizes Ševčík’s method. I also teach my private students with a similar analytical spirit and keen eye to design exercises tailored to the student’s particular needs. I am inspired by Ševčík’s commitment to detail and excellence. Earlier in the same article, Joachim also mentions that a lesson with Professor Ševčík was frequently more than two hours in length. I expect his students felt very special to receive so much time from him.

A second notable article about Ševčík by Henry Joachim, “Otakar Ševčík: His Spirit and Teaching,” appeared in the January 1931 issue of *The Musical Times*. In this article, Joachim explains how Ševčík did not think of “talent as the *sine qua non* of success; rather does he [Ševčík] consider the power to concentrate and to work with a cool and analytical mind the only way to obtain a great technique.”\(^8\) Ševčík demystified the virtuosity of Paganini by inventing “a methodical means and way to acquire a stupendous technique such as hitherto Paganini had alone possessed.”\(^9\) The effectiveness of Ševčík’s method was proven by the tremendous success of his pupil Jan Kubelik. Prior to Ševčík, there was mysterious aura surrounding renowned soloists because they had an uncommon talent. Ševčík created a meritocracy, believing earnestly in the significance of logical methodology and good teaching. Joachim elaborates further:

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\(^9\) Ibid., 27.
Ševčík’s aim is to teach technique; and, as he himself maintains, the method manifests its true value with the physically untalented pupils rather than with the more gifted ones. However, there are surely plenty of musicians who have not had a chance of laying their technical foundation in early childhood, and who still have an intense desire to embark on the virtuoso career. For these Ševčík is an ideal teacher.\(^\text{10}\)

A third article about Ševčík by Henry Joachim, “Violin Aesthetics of Today: The Evil of Pedagogics,” appeared in *The Musical Times* in December of 1933. In this article, Joachim changes from his previous laudatory tone about Ševčík and instead attacks Ševčík’s accomplishments as a teacher. Joachim laments the merit-based system for acquiring violin technique largely accelerated through Ševčík’s methods. Joachim writes:

His method does not take talent into account: it is a purely scientific and mechanical method of acquiring technique, and his pride is to make the untalented play like the talented. The influence of this method and its spirit has been felt in every musical institute in the world, and it is this attitude of mind that desires to produce an imitation rather than the genuine artist that pervades the spirit of the average teaching, and lays it so open to attack…History shows that every great violinist is by nature endowed with marked technical facility; and the belief that great technique can be acquired by purely mechanical means is a grave but unfortunately common error. Genuine technique is the product of the imagination—an intimate reflection of the artist's soul as well as a natural physical predisposition. The phenomena of the great virtuoso who can sway his audience with tid-bits that any violinist can rattle off, is a proof of the correctness of the argument. The thousands of concerts, which are being given yearly throughout the world by mediocre violinists, playing the same programme in more or less the same competent way, might be regarded as comical if it were not such a disservice to art. However perfect the science of teaching has become, it is only of benefit if it keeps within its proper bounds. There are already signs that force of circumstance will in time place it on the level of justified function…It is to be hoped that the days of manipulating the violin like a typewriter for the sake of making a living will soon be over. The great artist, though unassailable in his position by the violinist with 'acquired talent,' has nevertheless suffered by present-day conditions.\(^\text{11}\)

\(^{10}\) Ibid., 28.

Joachim takes issue with Ševčík’s mechanical-centered approach and feels this has led to too many violinists playing the violin as if it were a typewriter. Joachim seems to be arguing that the violin world would have been better off without Ševčík because only those with transcendent talent would attempt to perform the “sacred” virtuosic works of the violin repertory. Just about three months after this last article by Joachim, The Musical Times published Ševčík’s obituary in March of 1934. I wonder if Joachim regrets the tone of his December 1933 article in light of Professor Ševčík’s passing such a short time later.

Ten years before Joachim’s articles appeared in The Musical Times, Jeffrey Pulver wrote an article titled “Violin Methods Old and New” in which he traces the history of violin pedagogy from its beginnings until the article’s publication in April of 1924. Pulver makes many astute observations. Pulver explains how early violin methods were rare and very elementary in their level. Therefore, private instruction was the only means of advancement. Pulver writes:

The professional violinist of the seventeenth century was clearly not trained along the lines laid down in the tutors [manuals, method books, or treatises] of that century, and from the very primitive nature of these publications we must suppose that they were intended only for the amateur—and the superficial amateur at that. There can be no doubt that the serious instruction on the instrument was given solely by personal lessons, and that each teacher evolved studies for his pupils' benefit as they were needed. A daily lesson was the common practice—we know for certain that Franz Benda had a lesson every day—and the student was trained along lines which suited his individual hand and mind.¹²

The daily lesson experience is quite a contrast from today’s once a week lesson culture. With a lesson only once a week, the student is required to possess extraordinary self-

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discipline for advancement, whereas a daily interactive lesson is a much more relational experience where learning is inextricably connected with social interaction. In my experience, collaborative musical interaction is more likely to result in intrinsic joy than a solitary practice environment.

Pulver asserts two reasons for the apparent reluctance of early violin virtuosi to publish their teaching methods. First, too few people were interested in learning the violin to make sales of a method book profitable. Secondly, and more important, “the virtuosi who travelled and acquired a European reputation” were intent upon protecting “trade secrets.” Pulver continues: “It was therefore in their own interest that they kept to themselves any little tricks of technic they may have discovered.”

Perhaps Henry Joachim in the early 20th century also supported this idea of a limited disclosure of violin technique “trade secrets” as a way of keeping the most talented violinists infinitely beyond the reach of those with limited natural gifts. Pulver interjects a valid objection to this mentality by reminding the reader that “a nation is not musical in proportion to the number of virtuosi it can entertain, but rather in accordance with the number of its members who cultivate the art personally in their own homes.” I agree with Pulver that it is for the greater good of a society when knowledge is freely shared rather than hoarded. The hoarding of knowledge perpetuates inequality, elitism, and classism. Ideally, a healthy amateur musician culture supports a healthy professional musician culture.

Pulver’s commentary on the Ševčík method is insightful and relevant to my course of study. Pulver writes:

It will be objected immediately that the greatest of all aspects in music has been overlooked—the aesthetic side. True. But Ševčík aimed only at giving the violinist technical equipment with which to exhibit his musical

13 Ibid., 102.
powers. However idealistic we may be, and however much we may desire to keep from our sacred art all earthly contaminations such as mechanical studies and technical considerations, the indisputable fact remains that without a horse we cannot ride, and without technical perfection we cannot play. Of what use would be all our powers of musical expression and interpretation, if the hands be incapable of doing the mind's behests?

I know of no better studies—none better thought out for the several purposes to which they are to be put than those contained in the voluminous method under consideration. But they must be selected with care, combined with others in a rational manner that will provide variety of work and balance of programme, and, above all, they must be used in conjunction with other works—such as studies, caprices, sonatas, concerti, etc., so that the mechanical nature of the method should not cause the student to overlook the ultimate object of his labours.

If the Ševčík method has produced unmusical and soulless technicians, it is the fault of the pupil and the teacher, and not of the method. Moreover, we have all heard soulless technicians who were not trained on Ševčík’s principles. But there can be no doubt that there is a distinct danger awaiting those enthusiasts who work at the Ševčík method without imagination and without restraint. It is powerful treatment; and can be used with success only by those who understand the scientific construction of the system, and the mentality and physical equipment of the pupil…The Ševčík method, like many scientific adjuncts, can be a remarkably good servant, but an exceedingly dangerous master…That so many of the Ševčík pupils lose the broader musical outlook in their quest after technical perfection, is due more to the frailties of human nature than to any defect in the system.

The Violin-School of Joseph Joachim and Andreas Moser belongs to an entirely different category. In it we do not find a technical scheme progressively arranged to the exclusion of everything aesthetic as we do in Ševčík’s work. But we find more regard for the musical instincts of the pupil and a veritable cult is made of phrasing and dynamics. This, of course, is as it should be, and I, for one, can think of no better method for a really musically-gifted student, provided the latter has the advantage of a teacher who will know how to supplement the deficiencies in the Joachim-Moser method by the addition of certain sections from Ševčík, and the study of Kreutzer, Rode, and the rest of the violin classics.14

Pulver lays out the many variables the wise teacher and astute student must weigh in their pilgrimage towards the end goal of making music with the highest attention towards

14 Ibid., 121-122.
aesthetics and artistry without concern for technical difficulties. Pulver again reiterates the obvious point: “One man’s meat is another’s poison, and nowhere so much as in the exercises for the violin.”

Moving in time more than sixty years from when Pulver wrote about Ševčík, Sarah Mnatzaganian documented the opinions of leading performers and teachers regarding the use of Ševčík exercises in an article titled "Ševčík's Legacy" in the September 1998 issue *Strad Magazine*. Renowned violinists Ivry Gitlis, Itzhak Perlman, and Victor Danchenko and violists Bruno Giuranna and Kim Kashkashian all endorse and highly revere Ševčík exercises. Danchenko says “Ševčík can be damaging - as can any other study - only if a student is practising thoughtlessly and without proper control.” Kashkashian says “the studies build up a natural balance in the hand, but they must be executed with elastic use of the muscles and tendons.” Giuranna writes:

Ševčík was the first pedagogue to rationalise the mechanical aspects of violin playing. The goal of his bow exercises is to give the player the skill to equally master the middle, frog and tip of the bow as far as sound and agility are concerned. His idea of the semitone system is the most effective method of teaching basic left-hand technique ever devised. Average violin playing has certainly improved thanks to it. Practising each of the four possible applications of the fingers on the fingerboard (semitone between 1st and 2nd, 2nd and 3rd, 3rd and 4th fingers) separately not only makes it easier to play in tune, it also introduces the idea of playing groups of notes instead of single ones. This is the principle of organisation in the left hand.

Gitlis expresses interest in a revival of Ševčík’s repertoire-specific studies:

Ševčík has published several volumes showing detailed ways of practising certain violin concertos, which are interesting in that they are conducive to

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15 Ibid., 123.
17 Ibid., 948.
inventing one's own Ševčík exercises. These editions are unfortunately unavailable today - perhaps someone will find a way of re-editing them.\textsuperscript{18}

This quote by Gitlis further supports my perspective that composing one’s own “Ševčík” exercises is a worthy pursuit.

Fortunately, since the time that Gitlis lamented about Ševčík’s repertoire-specific studies being unavailable several of Ševčík’s repertoire-specific studies have been republished by Endre Granat and Stephen Shipps. In his article, "Playing Concertos the Ševčík Way," published in \textit{Strad} magazine in December 2009, Endre Granat announces his republication of Ševčík’s repertoire-specific studies and articulates a persuasive argument for the efficacy of these studies. Furthermore, at the end of the article under the heading “Applying Ševčík’s Method” Granat encourages students to create their own repertoire-specific studies. Granat says that “his [Ševčík’s] method can be applied to any work after the student has established bowings and fingerings. Then, appropriate exercises to overcome the difficulties can be devised.”\textsuperscript{19}

In a January 2010 published letter to the \textit{Strad} editor titled “Don’t Practice Ševčík for Hours”, Helen Pink expresses her opinion that practicing Ševčík was more damaging than helpful to her.\textsuperscript{20} This supports Pulver’s warning in the 1920s that Ševčík is potent medicine that must be used with discretion. The following month, \textit{Strad} published a letter from reader John Foster titled “Swallow the Ševčík Pill” defending Ševčík’s medicine as vital to curing the most common technical ailments. He asserts that Ševčík’s work is invaluable and that Pink clearly had misunderstood its usefulness.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 948.
\textsuperscript{20} Helen Pink, "Don’t Spend Hours on Ševčík." \textit{Strad} 121, no. 1437 (01 2010): 5.
In January 2011, Laurie Niles of Violinist.com wrote a positive blog piece titled “Otakar Ševčík’s Ultimate ‘Cheat Sheet’s for Violin Concertos and Works.” In this blog, Niles interviews Granat and Shipps and highlights their efforts to revive Ševčík’s repertoire-specific studies. Judging by the large number of comments in response to this blog, the violin community is bubbling with renewed interested in Ševčík and particularly his repertoire-specific studies.
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LECTURE RECITAL OUTLINE

Introduction

• Opening Remarks
• Topic and Purpose of Study

Performance of Brahms Viola Sonata in F Minor Op. 120 no. 1

• I. Allegro appassionato
• II. Andante un poco adagio
• III. Allegretto grazioso
• IV. Vivace

Discussion of Excerpts and Exercises, Group 1

• Excerpt 1.1 Brahms Viola Sonata in F Minor (mm. 5-16)
• Exercise 1.1 Part A
• Four Finger Patterns in A-Flat Major/F Natural Minor
• Exercise 1.1 Part B
• Exercise 1.1 Parts C, D, and E
• Exercise 1.1 Parts F and G
• Five Four-Finger Patterns
• Exercise 1.1 Parts H and I

Discussion of Excerpts and Exercises, Group 2

• Excerpt 2.1 Brahms Viola Sonata in F Minor (mm. 123-127)
• Scales in 5th Position and 3rd Position
• Exercise 2.1 Part A
• Exercise 2.1 Part B
• Excerpt 2.2 Brahms Viola Sonata in F Minor (mm. 69-76)
• Exercise 2.2 Parts A, B, C, and D
• Excerpt 2.3 Brahms Viola Sonata in F Minor (mm. 184-191)
• Exercise 2.3 Parts A and B
• Excerpt 2.4 Brahms Viola Sonata in F Minor (mm. 123-127)
Discussion of Excerpts and Exercises, Group 3

- Excerpt 3.1 Brahms *Viola Sonata in F Minor* (mm. 60-67)
- Exercise 3.1
- Excerpt 3.2 Brahms *Viola Sonata in F Minor* (mm. 175-182)
- Exercise 3.2

Conclusion
APPENDIX B:
SELECTED EXCERPTS AND EXERCISES

Excerpt 1.1
Mvt. 1 mm. 5-16

Exercises 1.1
Excerpt 1.3

Mvt. 1 mm. 206-218

Exercises 1.3
Excerpt 2.1

[Mvt. 1 mm. 25-35]
Exercises 2.1

5th pos. Improvisations Using Notes from the Passage

C half-diminished 7
Excerpt 2.2

[Mvt. 1 mm. 69-76]

Exercises 2.2

5th pos.

f
Excerpt 2.3
Mvt. 1 mm. 184-191

Exercises 2.3

Excerpt 2.4
Mvt. 1 mm. 123-127
Excerpt 3.1
[Mvt. 1 mm. 60-67]

Exercises 3.1
Excerpt 3.2

Mvt. 1 mm. 175-182

Exercises 3.2
APPENDIX C

EDITED BRAHMS VIOLA PART, FIRST MOVEMENT

Sonata for Viola & Piano

Allegro appassionato

Johannes Brahms, Op. 120, No. 1

Viola part edited by Ross DeBardelaben

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