

Lesson 3: Refine your pronunciation

As you explore the infectious rhythms and springy accents discussed in the previous lesson, you may notice two challenges: making accents where you want them and avoiding them where you don't. Let's examine this topic in more detail.

Any continuous stream of notes in a Bach passage teems with small, articulate motives. To be recognised, these motives must be clearly pronounced. Take Example 5, from the Allemanda that opens the Second Violin Partita. This fine mesh of semiquavers incorporates a number of three-note stepwise figures, on the beat and (on the violin) bowed as one smooth gesture.

Example 5 Violin Partita II, BWV 1004, Allemanda, bars 4–8



Bach's slurs imply both perfect legato and a slight diminuendo from first note to third. To achieve this, follow these five steps:

- 1 **Scoop.** As you pluck the first note, give it appropriate emphasis by putting pressure on the string at the beginning of the plucking action (a 'scoop').
- 2 **Slur** the second note with the left hand. Make the slur very clear. Remember that a hammer-on is a fast tapping motion, while a pull-off is a pluck with the left-hand finger (see p.71).
- 3 **Skim.** Pluck the third note with the right hand in such a way that it is no louder than the slurred note: compared with the first note, play more over the top of the string (a 'skim').

- 4 If the third note is on a different string from the first two, allow the second note to ring very slightly into the third. Wherever convenient, organise your fingering to enable this effect, which further helps to mask the attack of the third note. Think ‘scoop–slur–skim’.
- 5 Compare the result with what you don’t want: accents on both the first and the third note.

Be ready to create the same smooth effect for longer figures, such as the five notes in Example 6.

Example 6 Allegro from BWV 998, bars 33–36



Notice the basic template here:

- 1 A string of short notes, terminating in a long note
- 2 One of the short notes falls on a main beat: a point of arrival that invites a springy accent
- 3 The long note at the end is not to be accented – indeed, it may often be the lightest of the entire gesture

To pronounce these simple ‘words’ is to use our muscles in an unfamiliar way. By default, our right hand would much prefer to play lightly through the short notes and punch out the long note at the end. It is particularly challenging to take hold of one note inside a group of semiquavers and make it the focus of the group, giving it a clear accent. These considerations suggest an exercise that might be daily practice for anyone working on Bach (Example 7).