

Common String Articulations

C.M. Sunday © 2011

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NOTE: Musicians can argue endlessly about these meanings; many definitions are dependant on the stylistic practices of any given era, or even a specific composer. This is by no means a complete list. Links are to brief audio recordings (mp3's) with violin and viola examples from the literature.

Also see: [Mute photos](#) | [Sound Files Library](#) | [Non-Traditional String Sound Resources](#)

Arco: Italian for bow. Written in after passages of pizzicato (plucked) notes. Means to return to playing with the bow.

Articulation: Shape of a note or phrase. Basically three marks (and combinations thereof). The dot (.) which is staccato (short); the line (-) which is tenuto (stretched); and the accent (>) which is like a little punch at the beginning of a note. (Accent marks are the chevron pointing to the right.) Sometimes in an otherwise more or less staccato passage, the articulation line (-) is meant to give the note full length, where it is equivalent to tenuto. Sometimes, in combination with a slur, it means the notes are detached although played without a change in bow direction. Sometimes the line implies that some sort of weight should be given to the note. Sometimes it's composer-defined.

Bariolage: A passage, often in Bach but in Brahms and elsewhere, where the fingers are held down over several strings and the bow oscillates between the several strings. The Bach E Major Partita is a notorious example. Very impressive sounding; not so hard once you get the trick of it. [Bariolage](#).

Bartók pizz: Also called snap pizz. Right hand pulls the string away from the fingerboard and releases, causing a snapping sound. [Bartók pizz](#).



Bouncing bow: This is not just spiccato, which is an off-the-string, at-the-sounding-point technique of very small up and down bows, originating from the wrist, but a host of other definitions with very fine distinctions as to their meanings. See: [What is the best way to develop a reliable spiccato?](#) [Worthy of further study are: saltando, saltante, saltato, saltellato, saltellando, sautellé.] [Spiccato](#).

Bow Direction: With many, many exceptions, the heavy part of the measure (normally the first beat) starts with down bow, where the hand pulls the bow down, toward the right. Single "pickups" nearly always start with up bow, where the hand pulls the bow upward, toward the left. Again, with many exceptions, groups of (say) four 16th notes always start down bow. See also: [Rule of Down Bow](#).

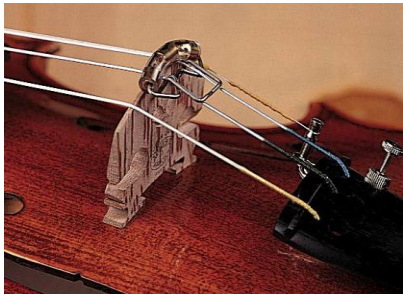


Collé: "Chipped" bowing. Normally at the frog but may be articulated in any part of the bow. Created by setting the bow on the string and then playing a short stroke by springing the bow, about two inches from the string. Thumb and little finger should be curved, with the elbow as high as the top of the hand.

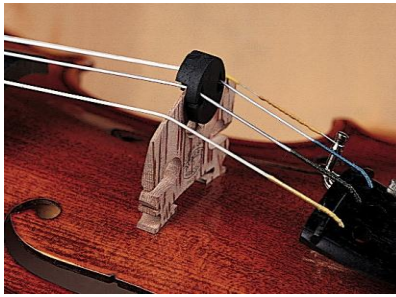
Col Legno: Passage where the sound is produced by striking the wood of the bow against the string(s). One should not use one's best bow in this type of passage, particularly if the bow is expensive. To end the passage in col legno, Kurt Stone's [Notation in the Twentieth Century](#) uses normale and ordinario (abbreviated norm. and ord.) [Col legno](#).

Con sordino: With mute. Passages with mute end with the phrase "senza sordino" which means to remove the mute. There are several varieties of violin mute. One is a "Sihon" or slide-on mute, often used by students, which slides up upon the bridge, from between the end of the tailpiece and the bridge. Costs about \$2-\$3US. There is the Tourte mute, which also can hang behind the bridge in that area. There is a Heifetz mute, which clips on rather snugly and has to be put on by hand. There is also the heavy practice mute of silver or gold, which is not used in

orchestral studies, but to practice without disturbing neighbors or roommates. Con sordino.



Sihan Mute



Tourte Mute



Heavy Practice Mute



Gliesel Practice Mute



Ebony Violin Mute

[Click on photograph to purchase on Amazon](#)

Contact point: Also called sounding point, the explicit part of the bow hair which touches the string. In Suzuki parlance, related to the "Kreisler Highway," or the effort to play perfectly parallel between the end of the fingerboard and the bridge at the optimal spot which will produce the best sound.

Détaché: Impossible to define this, as there are so many varieties. Basically, up and down; a change of bowing direction with some articulation. Does not necessarily mean staccato (though sometimes defined as such); can be heavily accented or not.

[It should be noted that détaché does not mean "detached." Détaché is in French what is called a "false friend"; it looks like an English word (remember that about 80% of the words in French are also in English), but is not at all the same thing. Détaché simply means separate bows. Another example of a "false friend" is the verb in French, demand. If you say, "Je demande" you only say I ask, not I demand...which has been known to play havoc with diplomatic translations!]

Flautando: Flute-like sound produced by deliberately playing over the fingerboard.

Harmonics: Bell-like tone created by lightly touching the string with the flat part of the left finger, which breaks the string into partials. The first harmonic learned by students is the one mid-way between the nut and the bridge, at about an inch or so above (towards the bridge) where the body of the violin begins. Indicated by a 4 and a 0 fingering. Used by composers for affect. Harmonics.

Jeté: Individually produced or "thrown" series of notes, produced at the same part of the bow.

Left hand pizzicato: pizzicato created by a sharp plucking of the string with the violin (left) hand. Common in Paganini.

Legato: Smooth, tied together. May be indicated by a slur mark. *Legato*.

Marcato: Unclear term. Accentuated in some fashion, as détaché or martelé.

Martelé: Staccato (short) with heavy accent.

Parts of the bow: Frequently in printed scores there will be indications of what part of the bow should be used. Teachers use these markings also:

| | |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------|
| WB = Whole Bow | UH = Upper Half (Tip end of bow) |
| MB = Middle Bow | LH = Lower half (Frog end of bow) |

Pizzicato: Usually written as "pizz" in the parts, and "arco" when the pizz section is meant to end. Plucking the string with the right hand. Technique may be done in several ways with respect to the holding of the bow in the right hand: (a) for very quick notes in pizz, the right index finger may be extended, and the pizz done without much changing the shape of the bow hold; (b) the bow may be grasped by the fist and the thumb balanced against the corner of the fingerboard with the index finger pizzing; and (c) the bow may be set down in the lap or on the stand for extended passages in pizz. There is also the virtuosic technique of left hand pizzicato, found, for example, in Paganini Caprices, where the left hand does the plucking of the strings in conjunction with or interspersed with bowing. *Pizzicato*.

Ponticello: Orchestral technique of playing on the bridge (sul ponticello). "Dietro il ponticello" is playing behind the bridge. These and much more unorthodox techniques may be found in Penderecki's "Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima." End of ponticello passage may be indicated by "ordinario," often written as "ord." *Sul ponticello*.

Portamento: An audible slide from one position to the next. As modern stringed instrument technique developed in the later part of the 20th century, players tended to be less and less "smaltzy," and portamento used more carefully. But in the performances of Yo-Yo Ma (for example) you will be surprised to discover a lot of portamenti, but they do not sound syrupy at all. This is a matter of "taste," that longed for but often hard to define characteristic of great string playing. *Portamento*.

Richochet: Fast bounces, similar to spiccato but in the U.H. (upper half of the bow).

Rule of Down-Bow: Notion that the first beat of every measure should start down bow. Usually this feels right, but there are many exceptions, when up is more appropriate. Sometimes you have to work back from materials in upcoming measures to make sure the movements of the bow serve the phrase. Geminiani called this "the wretched Rule."

Slur: A curved line, below which or above which, all the notes are smoothly articulated together. Phrase breaks occur outside the slur. The primary distinction between a slur and a tie, is that a tie unites one or more notes of the same pitch, requiring that the pitch not be replayed but held the time required. Slurs slur notes of different pitches, as a rule.

Son filé: Fr., "filimented sound" or the sustained legato. See: Son Filé and the Bow Stretcher, to study the production of this sound. Another method is as follows:

Ex: Starting at the tip, keeping the bow parallel between the end of the fingerboard and the bridge, move the bow as slowly as possible to the frog (and back) making a nice sound and counting. See how long you can make this last. Very good for developing the small muscle control needed to play with sensitivity.

Sounding Point (or "point of contact"): String articulations are controlled from the second joint of the left, "bow hand": the middle joint of the index finger. [See: Finger names] This is the spot where the index finger sits, bent, on the top and side (away from the player) of the bow.

The bow needs to "cut the string" at the sounding point ("point of contact")— the feeling is centered in that spot on the index finger, at the middle joint. The sounding point is a concept from Galamian: this is the exact spot where the bow hair "cuts" the string. This, really, is the secret of good sound on the violin.

Spiccato: See Bouncing Bow.

Staccato: Generally, short. Spaces between the notes. An important articulation developed by the control of the bow from the second joint of the bow hand on the stick. [For further study: martelé, jeté, slurred staccato, flying staccato.] Staccato.

Sul tasto: Playing over the fingerboard (which produces a softer sound). Okay as an orchestral technique, not okay as a bad habit, due to lack of bow control or the affect of gravity if the violin is not held parallel (or above) to the floor. End of sul tasto passage may be indicated by "ordinario," often written as "ord."

Timbre: The quality of a sound, which distinguishes one sound from another; e.g. the violin versus the viola. Violin timbre; Viola timbre.

Tremolo: Orchestral technique of many small and measured or unmeasured up and down bows, accented or unaccented, at various dynamics, as indicated by the composer. Often used to fill the sound more full, or to create excitement or tension. Tremolo.

Vibrato: An oscillating of the sound, used to provide warmth to a note. Basically three kinds of vibrato: finger vibrato, hand vibrato, arm vibrato, with string players tending to use one or more of these according to their own propensities. In the Baroque period vibrato was considered an ornament. In contemporary technique, continuous vibrato can be a problem and has to be controlled. Vibrato should not be used during the practice of scales, unless one is

specifically using the scale to practice vibrato. Vibrato can also be a sign of nervousness and should be calmed, in that case. Judiciously used vibrato and portamento contribute to the emotional appeal of a performance.