

Locating Bad Tone

A correspondent writes: "I wish to ask you a question about some trouble I have with my playing, as well with my new violin as with the one I used before. The tones are not as pure as I would like them, especially when playing softly. And sometimes the trouble is worse than at others. I washed my bow (I must say it is a cheap one) and got a better grade of rosin. Do I perhaps use too much rosin? The violin is in the best condition, so far as I can judge, and I am inclined to settle the trouble on the bow and rosin. I tune my violin to high pitch, as our piano is so tuned; perhaps this has a tendency to make an easy and pure tone harder to produce. Any suggestion tending to remedy this condition would be of great service to me."

THE ETUDE receives many letters similar to the above, and it is very difficult to answer them in a satisfactory manner at long range, without personally examining the violin and bow, and hearing the player. Bad tone in violin playing may spring from any one of a great variety of causes, and it would be pure guess-work to try and locate the trouble for our correspondent. The bad tone may be the fault of the player, the violin, the bow, the rosin, the hair of the bow, the strings, or the adjustment of the violin, including the proper position of the sound-post, bass-bar, etc. The nut may be too low or too high, or the fingerboard warped and uneven. If the constant action of the fingers in pressing down the strings has worn little gutters in the fingerboard, a good tone would be impossible.

If the bow hair is kept clean it is not necessary to wash it. I never washed a bow in my life. Possibly our correspondent's bow needs re-hairing. Old worn-out, lifeless hair cannot produce a good tone. A good tone cannot be produced either if the bow hair and strings are clogged with too much rosin. After a bow has been rehaired or washed, the hair must first be treated with powdered rosin before being rubbed on the cake. If it has been well rosined at first it will not require much rosin. Drawing it over the cake of rosin a dozen times or so will be sufficient. An experienced violinist knows by the "feel" of the bow

when playing, when rosin is required, and how much to put on. If the string becomes caked with rosin it should be carefully scraped off with some blunt instrument, taking care not to scratch the string.

No one in this day and age should have a piano tuned to high pitch. All the most important music of the world to-day is done at low pitch. Only here and there do we find a country brass band with antiquated high pitch instruments, or venerable high pitch organs. It is harder to produce a good tone at high pitch than low pitch, in the case of the violin, and our correspondent should lose no time in having his piano tuned to low (international) pitch, if he expects to tune the violin to the piano.

Strings which are false, worn out, or of bad quality would account for a bad tone, also a bridge which was not correctly fitted to the violin. It takes an expert violin repairer to select a bridge and fit it to the violin. The height of the bridge must be gauged so that the strings will be the correct distance above the fingerboard. Our correspondent had best put his violin and bow in the hands of an expert repairer to be put in first-rate condition, and he will be astonished at the change in tone.

Very often the fault lies in the player. If the bow is not drawn exactly at right angles with the string, a bad tone will follow. The distance of the hair from the bridge is also of prime importance. When pressure is applied to the bow for a loud tone the hair should approach close to the bridge, and when the pressure is very light and a soft tone is required the hair should approach the fingerboard. Some of the worst tones of which a violin is capable, are produced by applying strong pressure when the hair of the bow is too far from the bridge.

The most frequent cause of bad tone comes from the lack of preparation of the muscles of the right arm and wrist. When these muscles are stiff and lack elasticity, the resulting tone must be inevitably harsh and rasping. When our correspondent has had his violin put in perfect condition by a skillful repairer, he would find it an advantage to take a course of lessons from a first-rate violin teacher.