

ÄNNCHEN'S ROMANCE AND ARIA FROM WEBER'S DER FREISCHÜTZ: VIOLA SOLO

VIDOR NAGY gives his advice on how to negotiate issues of dynamics, fingering, phrasing and articulation in one of opera's most demanding viola solos



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Ännchen's Romance and Aria from Act III of Weber's *Der Freischütz* includes one of the most notorious viola solos in the operatic repertoire. During my three decades as principal viola in the Stuttgart State Theatre Orchestra, I performed this solo countless times. However, I never stopped working at it and polishing it.

On the viola you have to articulate much more clearly than on the violin in order to project, even more so when you are playing in a theatre pit. The violas often sit against the wall, on the conductor's right. In our section, we reversed the position within each desk, so that the principal sits inside, gaining a small advantage: at least you are not directly against a wall.

[1] Bars 1–5, with annotations by the author

The musical score shows the first five bars of the solo. It is in G minor, 2/4 time, and marked 'Andante'. The first bar is piano (*pp*). The second bar starts with a 'Solo' marking and a forte (*f*) dynamic. The score includes various articulations such as slurs, accents, and a trill (*tr*) in the fourth bar. The dynamic reaches fortissimo (*ff*) in the fifth bar.

The first section of the solo accompanies a romance in which Ännchen tells her cousin Agathe a ghoulish story with an absurdly funny ending: a nightmarish monster with flaming eyes and rattling chains turns out to be the family dog, coming into the bedroom from the cold outside. The orchestra sets the scene with a Hitchcock-like tremolo in G minor, and the viola comes in after one bar (**example 1**). I let myself be 'inspired' by the atmosphere that the orchestra is creating, and if necessary I wait a fraction longer before coming in. There is no dynamic marking in Weber's autograph manuscript. Most editors write 'piano' (above the strings' pianissimo), but this will never work.

The first crotchet (♩) should be a solid forte, played with the whole bow. Conversely, in spite of the crescendo you don't need the whole bow for the demisemiquavers (♩); I arrive at the top E flat at the middle of the bow, and stop the bow for a micro-second before attacking the note (I picked this trick up from one of my teachers, Bruno Giuranna). Then I have the whole bow for the downward run (the diminuendo here should not become too soft) and the F sharp, on which I already start a crescendo after the accent. Bar 4 starts at the frog, but don't try to use up the whole bow for it: use just as much as you need, but with maximum contact. Don't make a fuss over the grace notes after the trill, and maintain the last note with full volume until the end. I like to think of these opening gestures as 'lightning' (bars 2–3) and 'thunder' (bar 4).

During the romance there are two short sighing interjections from the viola, which illustrate the text being sung ('she groaned, she moaned'). Concentrate on making the short note clearly audible; the long one will sound anyway.

After the mystery is revealed, there comes a 'liberating' G major chord, and the atmosphere changes completely. The viola has three short cadenzas, punctuating Ännchen's consoling words to Agathe (**example 2**). The first note should be held until the orchestra stops. Then, after a short diminuendo, the cadenza starts. The original slur includes the first three beats. I divide it asymmetrically to make it more interesting. Don't slide with the first finger between C sharp and D. That always sounds like stepping on a banana skin and is the kind of thing that gives the viola a bad name. Play in half position, using open strings, and do a slight crescendo going up. The first quaver (♩) (G) is the 'arrival point'. I either play this note and the one that follows with an up bow, and in the next bar slur the grace notes to the final note, or use all separate bows. The first version sounds more 'normal', while the second one is more unusual.

The orchestra comes in on top of the grace notes, which have to be played out, like a triplet. The viola holds its last note after the orchestra has finished, as a kind of 'composed diminuendo', but don't bring this out demonstratively. The second cadenza (bar 45) is similar, just slightly longer. Note that this time the orchestra has a dotted crotchet, instead of a regular one. For this reason, here I do a slight

[2] Bars 43–53, with annotations by the author

[3] Bars 73–80, with annotations by the author

crescendo on the first note, varying the dynamics of the following passage accordingly. Again I divide the original long slur asymmetrically. As opposed to the first two cadenzas, the third one (bar 47) is not marked *a piacere*. It should accordingly be more in tempo, leading the way into the Allegro. The orchestra has an even longer note this time, and the viola starts its passage while the orchestra is still playing. I play a crescendo on the E, and a similar bowing as the first two cadenzas. Make sure there is no break between the E and the rest of the phrase. This time the viola's last note is not longer than the orchestra's, because the soprano continues even before the orchestra has stopped.

The Allegro begins with a two-quaver upbeat for the viola, continuing the soprano's cadenza. It is best when the conductor just lets you play and take over from the singer, without interfering. Interestingly, Weber, who in his autograph had put the Allegro marking at the bar change, wrote an additional one for the viola player, above the upbeat. This should accordingly be already in the new tempo, but it is nice to ease into it from whatever tempo the soprano cadenza has taken us to. Play these notes from the string, with good contact, exaggerating the articulation.

The autograph score doesn't have any slurs at all in this section, but this surely doesn't mean that Weber expects the whole of the Allegro to be played spiccato. I find it easier to play colourfully when slurs are included, because otherwise you are always in the same

part of the bow. I slur the semiquavers (♪), making sure I clearly articulate the quavers that follow them, stopping the bow the better to attack them. I think it was Casals who pointed out that you can often use the shape of a melody as a cue for its phrasing. This is a case in point: the phrase goes to the high G. I play the whole passage on the third position, going down at the F in the third bar.

In the next passage (**example 3**) I slur the first two semiquavers of each group and make a little crescendo on the second bar. The chromatic sequence at the end of the bar should be played 3–2–1, to avoid the banana-skin effect. I pause for a tiny moment before the third bar (making sure that the first note isn't unduly accented), and play the fourth bar in fourth position, in order to have two notes on each string. I play two of the semiquavers slurred and two separated, thus anticipating the phrasing of bars 78–9. The second note in bar 77 is originally a crotchet, but I play it as a quaver; this is more elegant, and also allows time for articulating the semiquavers that follow. In bars 78 and 79 I alternate the phrases between the D and A strings for maximum contrast. The last group should be *molto deciso*, but avoid an exaggerated accent on the very last note: what happens before is more important.

In the next solo passage (**example 4**, page 91) I go gradually from separated semiquavers to a dotted minim (♪) by way of ever longer slurs (again, the original has none). The opening low C should be fortissimo (it comes after a loud tutti). In the second bar I go down ▶

[4] Bars 88–91, with annotations by the author

[5] Bars 100–109, with annotations by the author

[6] Bars 134–154, with annotations by the author

in the dynamic, in order to make a crescendo towards the long note. Stop the bow minimally before the high E flat.

Example 5 starts in a similar way to example 3. Again, I pause for a tiny moment before the third bar, then play two down bows in order to arrive at the fourth bar in a convenient part of the bow. The fingering in the chromatic scale is again asymmetric – first three notes, then three groups of two notes; this achieves a sort of ‘acceleration’. I propose two different fingerings for bar 104; the main thing is to hide the position change. When this phrase is repeated an octave lower, the articulation should be even more exaggerated, with a very distinct first note, for it to sound clear. Use first position – it is the most sonorous.

Example 6 should start from the string, without accentuation and not too much spiccato. I play it in first position, aiming to make it sing. I make a tiny pause after the first bar, and keep my left hand vibrating during the slurs. After the first, introductory bar, the phrasing goes in groups of two bars. When the trills start, I stop the bow before each of them. I make the second trill bar (bar 140) an echo of the first (bar 139). The fingering 3–3 for the semitone from G flat to F is the surest one.

The downward scale is *detaché*, with a vibrato accent on the D. After the repeat, make sure to play fortissimo when you go down to the C string in the last bars. The last note must be an up bow to keep up the tension, because the music continues in the soprano part. I go up to second position in the penultimate bar, thus having four notes on each string.

The aria’s coda is identical to the first 3 1/2 bars of example 3. Make sure to start the third bar without an accent, and prolong the last note until the orchestra comes in with the concluding chords.

This aria was an afterthought of Weber, who, wishing to give a certain singer an additional number, composed it just weeks before the first night. Coming as it does after a sublimely beautiful aria featuring a solo cello, it could be seen as a sort of ‘viola joke’. It is up to the viola player to prove that it is not. ■ Interview by Carlos María Solare

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