

Kreisler and the Soap

Fritz Kreisler was one of the most important musicians of the 20th-century; he was one of an age of heroes, an age when all the famous players had distinct, inimitable musical personalities which towered above the crowd—unlike today's current collection of soloists, a homogenized blob who all sound the same. Kreisler's individuality as a player is preserved for all time on some of the first classical music recordings ever made. His contribution to the violin literature of the 20th-century, as a composer, of a large group of very worthy encore pieces, has proven to be of inestimable value to several generations of music students, and listening amateurs. Kreisler has recorded, perhaps not the definitive, but certainly one of the great performances of the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto; every violin student ought to hear this recording.

But that's not what this story is about.

One night Kreisler was in his dressing room preparing for a performance of the Paganini Violin Concerto. He had just put his violin down, after practicing for a bit, and he was now shaving. His jaw was covered in shaving soap, and as he turned to answer a knock on the door, he accidentally flicked a tiny speck of soap onto his bow—right in the middle of his bow. Well, he didn't think anything of it, he just blew off the bubbles, picked up his violin, and walked out to play the concerto, one of the most difficult in the 19th century literature.

At his first stroke of the bow, he knew something was wrong. There was a dead spot in the middle of his bow that would not play, so he had to work through the entire concerto skipping over the middle of his bow, playing only at the frog and the tip. The difficulties of this maneuver, especially on the fly as it was, cannot be described: he would have had to play long flowing and passages with only a half of a bow, and he would have had to execute a huge number of bravura passages all over the violin, avoiding the very place on the bow where these types of passages are usually played.

Needless to say, he did it, by the skin of his teeth to be sure, but he did it. The next day, the newspapers came out with a host of rave reviews of

the concert, extolling Kreisler's revolutionary new way of playing the Paganini Concerto at the frog and the tip of the bow!

The point of this story is that, if you practice your Sevcik bowing book, and learn to play in all areas of the bow equally well, which is the goal of violin bowing, you too can deal with any bowing problem in any piece.