

Style & Idea
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“Put a hundred chicken eggs under an eagle and even she will not be able to hatch an eagle from these eggs.”ⁱ Thus wrote Arnold Schoenberg in his discussion of style and idea. The “chicken” is the *style* of which the “chicken egg” is the *idea*. An idea, then, unfolds in a style intrinsic to the idea; it’s counterproductive to work on a style separately from its animating idea.

Schoenberg again: “I was inspired by poems of Stefan George, the German poet, to compose music to some of his poems and, surprisingly, without any expectation on my part, these songs showed a style quite different from everything I had written before.”ⁱⁱ Without any expectation on your part, let the ideas themselves guide your stylistic choices and the technical skills and tools that you need to embody the ideas.

idea >> style >> technique

Before you develop an idea, however, you must “lay” the egg that is the idea. If your imagination and creativity aren’t open, you won’t have an idea to begin it. Freedom implies suspending judgment or censure, and allowing new things to pass through you. Inevitably, the new might challenge or offend the old. The ultimate difficulty for most of us is to agree to the new, and to allow the creative process to follow its course.

freedom >> idea >> style >> technique

Obey this natural order and organic results will flow from your imagination to the public. The primary theme of my talk is the freedom that precedes the idea and allows it to come into being in its own style.

1. The first task is to free your mind from believing (perhaps unconsciously) that your instrument “exists to be played in a certain way,” that is, the normal, ordinary, mainstream manner we are all familiar with. The cello, for instance, is tuned (from top to bottom) A D G C, and the cellist sits in order to play Bach, Beethoven, and all the greats. The very object (the cello) seems to dictate your behaviors, as if there were no other possibilities. Needless to say, it isn’t the object itself who dictates your behaviors, but your thoughts and emotions regarding the object. So, transform the object, or, more precisely, transform your perceptions of the object. Ways of doing so include new playing positions and new tunings (scordatura).
2. New playing positions.
 - There’s a natural link between a playing position and the music that issues forth from that position. If we compare the playing positions of Artur Rubinstein and Glenn Gould at the piano, for instance, it becomes clear that Gould wouldn’t be able to “play like Rubinstein” as long as he retained “Gould’s playing position.” Naturally enough, playing positions that aren’t habitual will suggest ways of playing that are also not habitual.
 - In my presentation I included playing standing up while holding the cello under the chin; playing seated, but without a spike; standing and walking around while holding the cello upside down against the chest; playing seated, with the cello upside down, its shoulder on the right thigh, its body against my chest.
 - Check these links on YouTube for unorthodox violin playing positions and the music making that results logically from these positions:
 - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rUtB9KFei9Q>
 - http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oUvixV_0o-0
 - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GaZu0HShhgA>
 - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y2CAq9ZO5Go>

3. Employ scordatura (non-orthodox tunings).
 - In my presentation I tuned the cello's C and G strings up a semitone (to a D-flat and A-flat) and the D and A strings down a semitone (to a D-flat and A-flat). From top to bottom, the cello was tuned A-flat D-flat A-flat- D-flat.
 - Scordatura is a rich subject for string players. The cellist Nathan Cook has written an informative doctoral thesis on it. On the Internet, look up "Nathan Cook scordatura thesis" or use this link: <http://scholarship.rice.edu/handle/1911/1875>
4. Use percussion techniques.
 - Your instrument can become several different types of percussion instrument, depending on the techniques that you employ—for instance, striking the wood parts of the instrument only, or the strings only, or wood parts and strings in alternation; or using your fingertips only, or using open palms.
5. Use the instrument as a resonating box.
 - In my presentation I sang into the cello, with my mouth very close to the f-hole.
 - Talk, sing, shout or whistle into the violin or viola. You'll trigger some very interesting vibrations within the instrument. Or you can simply become aware that the violin and the viola, in their habitual playing position, amplify the vibrations of your voice when you speak normally.
6. Use the instrument for theatrical effects.
 - In my presentation, I did "unspeakable things to my cello."
 - Instruments can be used for drama and comedy, sometimes not involving sound or music at all. The late Victor Borge was a master of piano- and music-related comedy. A French string quartet called Le Quatuor has built a successful career on string-instrument comedy. The instrument can become just a prop, triggering not only your imagination but your audience's as well.
7. Combine singing, talking, whistling, howling, or other vocal and sonic effects with string playing.
 - Play a sustained open string and sing a sustained note at the same time. To begin with, any note will do . . . remember, the main difficulty is psychological and lies in "agreeing to do it," as the act of playing and singing, in itself, doesn't present big technical difficulties. Play an open string, then sing a simple melody in tune with it. Consonance, dissonance, back to consonance. If you really don't want to sing, play and talk. And if you really don't want to sing, talk, howl, or whistle, delegate these activities to a partner, student, or friend. It's still going to be fun.
 - Many cellists these days play and sing. With the violin it's a bit less common, but look up Iva Bittova on YouTube for some impressive feats of coordination and music making.
8. Employ non-tonal techniques.
 - Mainstream music education has tended to "format" musicians' minds to dwell in tonality first and foremost, making non-tonal music a somewhat foreign (and, for some musicians, threatening) territory. But if you wish to explore the intrinsic potential of new musical ideas, you'll need to explore whole worlds different from your more familiar ones. In fact, each idea arises from a cultural context that includes linguistic, imagistic, sonic, rhythmic, and structural features that you'll need to internalize. If you're playing the cello as an *atabaque*, for instance, it behooves you to enter the *atabaque* universe of discourse.

When your ideas have come out of their hiding place in your imagination, then you can start shaping them in practice. Enjoy exploring and mastering the instrumental gestures that your idea's style requires.

ⁱ "Folkloristic Symphonies," in *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*, edited by Leonard Stein, translations by Leo Black (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, 165).

ⁱⁱ "How One Becomes Lonely," in *Style and Idea*, 49.