Tracy Silverman

Artistic Statement

String playing must reflect our popular musical culture or risk becoming old-fashioned and irrelevant.

Driven by the desire to speak in the popular musical language of our own time and place, I have spent my career working towards a new musical vocabulary for the violin. My explorations with the electric 6-string violin have resulted in my contribution to what I call post-classical string playing, a sound as familiar as the electric guitar yet which retains the achievements and beauty of the last 500 years of string playing. Although classically trained, I’ve adopted the contemporary musical vernacular of rock, jazz, and the popular musical culture that surrounds us outside the concert hall.

All the masterpieces of classical music were written in the style of their own time and place, and I felt it was necessary for someone to update stringed instruments for today’s composers, using today’s musical styles. It’s been my mission both to bring post-classical string playing into rock and pop studios and stages, and also to bring this new pop-inflected 21st century violin style to the concert stage in the form of significant new repertoire.

It’s been my good fortune that composers such as John Adams, Terry Riley, Nico Muhly, Roberto Sierra, Kenji Bunch and others have shared this vision and have written important new electric violin concertos for me and, hopefully, other 6-string electric violinists. I have written 3 electric violin concertos of my own.

Shortly after graduating from The Juilliard School in 1980, I built some of the first-ever 6-string electric violins with the help of fellow trailblazer Mark Wood. The evolution of the instrument has spanned 30 years of research and development, experimentation, trial and error, dead ends and use on the road and in the studio with a startlingly eclectic mix of different projects. Decades of exploration with ever-changing electronics, and mountains of digital and analog gear have given me the ability to morph from one musical context to another. My demands on the instrument range from Jimi Hendrix’s wailing distortion to Miles Davis’s intimate jazz, Salif Keita’s emotional Malinese vocal style to Brazilian samba grooves, Indian classical inflections and “just” (or “pure”) intonation. Even to Bach, who was, by the way, not unfamiliar with 6-string viols, early precursors to our modern stringed instruments.

Adding 2 lower strings revealed unanticipated new possibilities. Surprisingly, the extended range, now reaching to the lowest guitar notes, resulted in new ways of using the bow. The new ability to play bass notes raised the challenge of how to play chords on a primarily melodic instrument. The style of popular music is different from the classical repertoire and the technique has to broaden as well.

My years with the jazz group, the Turtle Island String Quartet, taught me a rhythmic bowing technique called the “chop” and, after years of my own experimentation with rock music, I realized that what I had developed could best be described as “Strum Bowing.” I’ve written an educational book/video about it called *The Strum Bowing Method: How to Groove on Strings,* and now teach Strum Bowing all over the world.

As a performer I struggle to break free of the classical performance model and to try to engage the audience more directly, speaking in our contemporary vernacular, in a surprisingly familiar and accessible musical language as a guitarist or singer might, with a similar emotional edge and relevance.

I hope that I’ve helped in some way to further the evolution of the violin and, more importantly, the evolution of post-classical string technique. I put great faith in the next generation of string players and hope to pass my work along in the form of videos, recordings, clinics and lecture/demonstrations so that 21st century string players are no longer relegated to the classical sidelines but are fully participating in their own contemporary musical culture.