

On Improvisation

By Paul Anastasio

The Swinging Style of Svend Asmussen

I'll never forget the day roughly thirty years ago when Paul Shelasky took out a rare Svend Asmussen LP and played it for me. From the first notes I was mesmerized. Svend's solos had the intensity of a coiled spring, with the kind of rhythmic and melodic drive that made me arch my back and grit my teeth.

It was clear that here was a man to be reckoned with — a brilliant and exciting player with a unique vision of how the violin could be used in jazz.

I was not really new to jazz violin at that time. I hadn't yet met the daddy of them all, Joe Venuti, but I had listened at length to his recorded work. I had also heard others who had distilled their own versions of jazz violin from Joe's definitive 1920s and early '30s waxings. Stuff Smith had grabbed the baton from Joe and run in the direction of Louis Armstrong, while Stéphane Grappelli and Eddie South had run more in a rhapsodic direction, playing Ravel-like flurries of notes in places where Stuff might only have played two.

Svend, however, was a jazz violinist totally different from the rest, a player with a frighteningly clear knowledge of all facets of his craft and a sound like no one else. Every aspect of his sextet recordings had been honed to a razor's edge and each three-minute 78 was like a miniature gem. What was this new hero of mine doing in these remarkable solos, and how could I incorporate his genius in my own soloing? Thirty years later, I am still stealing ideas and puzzling over Svend's ability to make such magic.

Many of Asmussen's techniques can be explained using the language of jazz, but, just as X-rays of a model can't begin to reveal his or her beauty, the whole of Svend's solos will always be greater than the sum of their parts.

That being said, however, let's explore the technical underpinnings of a great solo chorus Svend played on the old tune "Put on Your Old Grey Bonnet." The recording from which I drew this solo was recorded on July 26th, 1940, by Svend's sextet. Fortunately, it is included on a currently available CD re-release on the Phontastic label. The CD, *Svend Asmussen - Musical Miracle Volume 1: 1935-'40* (PHONTCD 9306) is well worth purchasing, as is the companion *Volume 2: 1941-'50*, entitled *Phenomenal Fiddler* (PHONTCD 9310). Svend's solo is shown on page 46. I've printed up two lines, with Svend's solo on the top line and the melody on the bottom line.

Several of Asmussen's trademarks are evident here. He starts his solo early, before the beginning of the 16-bar chord progression. This technique "grabs" the listener from the very start and gives a propulsive drive to the solo.

Let's take a look at the notes he uses in bar 1. Leaving off the root and starting with the third scale degree, he arpeggiates a C7 flat 9 chord. Three of the four notes in the arpeggio are in the underlying C7 chord, and the fourth, the flat 9th, adds a delightful degree of semi-dissonance, clashing a little with the root of the underlying C chord.

Bar 1 ends on a Bb, which is a note in the C7 chord, but Svend ingeniously follows this Bb with a G and G#, ending on the "target tone" of A, which is the third scale degree of the new F chord. This melodic device (the Bb, G and G# leading to the A) is called a triple neighboring tone. It introduces a fair bit of dissonance into the solo while eventually serving up a "happy ending" in the form of a resolution to a consonant chord tone.

At the end of bar 2 and in the first half of bar 3, Svend lets his solo breathe by resting for a bit, coming in on beat 3 of bar 3 with a bluesy Ab, the flat 3rd scale degree of F, which then slides down to the F.

Bar 4 begins with G and E, a double neighboring tone to F, the 5th scale degree of the new Bb chord.

A Db starts bar 5. It functions both as a blue note over the Bb chord and as the first of three neighboring tones to the C note on beat 3. Now the C isn't really in a Bb chord, but Svend is using a traditional jazz technique, treating the C note (the 9th) as if it were a chord tone. The Db, Bb and B natural in this bar are triple neighboring tones to the 9th.

In bar 7 the "chord of the moment" is G7. Svend begins with a G#, the chromatic lower neighbor to A (the 9th of G). Again, he treats the 9th scale degree as if it were a chord tone, just as he did in bar 5. He then works his way down the fiddle, playing descending fourths from A (the 9th) to E (the 13th) and B natural (the 3rd). Both the 9th and the 13th are not in the underlying chord but instead are what we could call "tidbits of outsideness."

Bar 8 finds Svend arpeggiating from E, (the 3rd of C) up to the 5th, the flat 7th root and the flat 9th. He then jumps to the flat 13th (Ab), showing why he earned the title of "the man of the odd interval" from Stéphane Grappelli. He works his way down as he approaches bar 9, running from E (the 3rd) to the 9th to the flat 7th, back up to the root on beat 2 and then descending chromatically to the flat 7th.

Bar 11 begins not with a chord tone but with the chromatic lower neighbor to the A. Just as he did in the first note of bar 7, he empathizes a relatively dissonant note by playing it on the strong part of the beat. The last beat of bar 11 finds him encircling a target that doesn't appear until the following bar — the D that begins bar 12. This double neighboring tone, often heard in swing and bebop, effectively creates and then resolves dissonance. The fact that Svend ends bar 11 by using this technique around a chord tone (the D) that won't be played until bar 12 adds to the forward motion of his line.

Bar 13 begins with another blue note, the Ab (the flat 7th of Bb). He moves down the scale through G to F, touching on the B natural that's included in the B diminished chord. Here again Svend is

linking his chords, as the B natural and D that are part of the diminished chord played over the last two beats of bar 13 also serve as double neighboring tones to the 5th scale degree of F (the C) which begins bar 14.

In bar 15, Svend superimposes the notes of a C7 flat 9th chord over the G7 that the guitar is playing. This device — ignoring the chord of the moment while building a solo section based on the chord tones of the chord that will soon follow — is a very effective method of driving a solo. It serves to introduce dissonance that is resolved only when the rhythm section moves to the next chord. To conclude the bar he uses the Bb, G and G# as triple neighboring tones to the “offscreen target” of A (the third scale degree of F) which begins bar 16.

During this entire solo, although the piece is in swing style, Svend is using a straight eighth note feel. This was the rhythm favored by the great guitarist Charlie Christian in his solos, and it can be heard as well in much of the playing of Johnny Gimble, Randy Elmore, and other fine Texas swing fiddlers. Although swing drummers usually play the two eighth notes on beats 2 and 4 with a lilt rather than straight (think of the stereotypical “boom, chick-a, boom, chick-a” swing drum sound found on cheesy electronic keyboards), some players, Svend included, favor a straight eighth note approach to their solos.

Another common swing violin technique, pioneered by Joe Venuti, is the use of slurs from the “ands” of beats into the following beats, as is heard in the first section of “Humoresque.” Venuti, Stuff Smith, and others used this device to maintain a swingly feel as tempos increased and the “loping” eighth note feel of slower solos streamlined out. Svend, although comfortable with this technique, chose to use it only sparingly in this particular solo, preferring instead to play more in a single note per bow stroke style.

Svend is without a doubt one of the world’s greatest jazz violinists. For my money he’s the best living jazz fiddler, bar none. I had the distinct pleasure of hearing him perform live in Denmark in 2003. Over breakfast and late night snacks we visited several times. A charming, gracious, and funny person, he was more than willing to discuss his work and that of the other jazz violinists. His personal favorite is Stuff Smith, and he told me of his first meeting with Stuff, in a Harlem club where Smith and a washtub bassist played till dawn.

Thanks, Svend, for your friendship and your wonderful music!

[A former student of Joe Venuti, Paul Anastasio is a veteran of the bands of Merle Haggard, Asleep at the Wheel, Larry Gatlin, and Loretta Lynn. For information about Swing Cat recordings and opportunities to study with Paul, please see his ad on page 47, or his website at www.SwingCatEnterprises.com]