

THE V.R. - THINK METHOD

A PRACTICE METHOD FOR TECHNIQUE FOR

ALL INSTRUMENTALISTS



Jan Dash

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NOTE TO TEACHERS

The VR- THINK Method, described in the following pages, is best when applied by the student himself. It should be approached through a process of discovery rather than blind assignment, through which the student himself also invents exercises of his own. Obviously different students will have different reactions to it, generally becoming more favorable as the level of maturity increases. Younger students should be exposed to it slowly, emphasizing the "primary exercises" which are in large part standard anyway, and the double starred ** "secondary exercises". The techniques of mental visualization and concentration can be greatly enhanced by this method; it is virtually impossible for a student who really uses the method to "fall asleep when he practices". The worth of the complete method can only be appreciated once it has actually been used in a serious way. Section III describing the actual method can be read by high school or even junior high students, who can then use it as a reference in practicing.

MESSAGE TO THE STUDENT

This method was written for you. I wrote it because when I was a student I made a lot of mistakes that I don't think I would have made if I had been able to read something like this. It is mainly a method to get your brain going, and to help you think and visualize when you play. What that means will become clear when you study the method.

Playing music is supposed to be fun. Before it can be really fun, however, you obviously have to be able to play with some technical skill. This method will help you get that skill.

Now a few words about the essay. Actually this particular essay was written for people like your teachers, and so it contains a lot of pedantry (i.e. dullness). However the information is there- so I hope you will read it, especially part III. Naturally you will have to read it slowly and carefully a few times (perhaps once a week for several months and once a month after that) to get the idea. You shouldn't try to get it all at once, and you shouldn't worry if you don't understand some of it. Ask your teacher about the parts you don't understand. Even using a small part of it can help you. The best parts are marked with **. If you will use the method when you practice and concentrate and think about what you are doing, it will help you play much better and help you learn music much faster in less practice time. Of course the method will only help you if you use it- and that means more than just once in awhile. The more you use it, the better it works and the more it will help. But if some of it bugs you,

or if you can't stand practicing with some of the exercises,
then don't use those particular exercises.

You can even make up your own exercises.

The most important thing is to enjoy playing the music. I
hope the VR- THINK Method will help you get the technical skill
so that you will enjoy it more.

THE VISUALIZATION-RHYTHMIC (VR) METHOD FOR TECHNICAL CONTROL

Also known as the THINK Method

I. Introduction

The student who knows how to practice efficiently and effectively is uncommon, and the student who in fact does so is rare. The VR (Visualization-Rhythmic) or THINK Method¹ is a practice aid, designed explicitly for students and musicians generally as a guide through which solutions to technical problems can be found. The method is sufficiently general to be applicable to a wide range of problems on all instruments and in many types of musical passages, although it is unnecessary to state that no method can be effective for everyone. The effectiveness of the method depends critically on the concentration and mental attitude of the student or performer, and generally requires some patience, discipline, and practice before it becomes really useful. On the other hand, the method is designed to help create exactly those desirable habits of concentration and creative thinking needed to solve technical problems. Once the mental concentration and familiarity with the method have been achieved, the results can be astounding, both in terms of the shortness of the practice time required for mastery of a technical passage, and in the net result. The aims of the VR method are limited. A comprehensive methodology is not sought after, questions of musicianship are not considered, and no technical problems specific to any particular instrument are dealt with.

This last point is important. It means that the method should if possible be used with the help of a private teacher who must be the constant guide regarding points of technique specific to the individual instrument and also regarding points of musicianship. None of these are considered specifically in this method, which is limited to an aid in mastering general aspects of technical control. The desirability of technical control needs no elaboration; many students never get past it far enough to feel comfortable solving problems of musicianship, and many never arrive at it at all. It is perhaps the single most important reason for student disillusionment and failure. Unlike the bleary prospect of practicing difficult passages for hours without results, this method, if properly used, almost guarantees results in a much shorter practice time, but only if the student is willing to concentrate wholeheartedly on the method during the time he does practice seriously. The method is most useful in its complete form for more advanced students, but less advanced students can also profit greatly through its use. The pedagogically worthwhile aspects of the method will become more and more apparent as the performer uses it daily. The practice time spent on technical problems which can be saved by serious application of this method can then be used for more enjoyable pursuits.

The widespread areas of application of the method must be emphasized. In no sense is it limited merely to getting scale

or arpeggio passages even and in time, although it will suffice rapidly and efficiently for that important purpose. It can, for example, be used with profit as a teaching supplement by providing extensions to exercises in any good exercise book. Application of the method to such an exercise yields a variety of exercises emphasizing many more technical aspects than were present originally, and also greatly facilitates the learning of the original exercise. However the real importance and the primary function of the method lies in its application to technical problems in musical compositions of all types. It can be used with profit in tough orchestral and band passages for all instruments, and parts of it can be used in group rehearsals on difficult passages, for example on traumatic runs in (e.g.) the second violin section. It can be used in oboe sonatas, violin cadenzas, horn calls, and piano concerti. It can be applied whenever any passage of any composition is technically not under control, and it usually works.

The basic ideas of the VR method are not new, and many of them have no doubt been developed more or less independently many times in the past, as they were by the author. In particular, I am told that the use of various rhythms as practice aids goes back to the famous 19th century pianist Leschitzky. This usage continues to many pianists teaching today. Some of the best woodwind players employ parts of the method. For example, the clarinetist Mitchell Lurie uses the "important note" concept

as one of his chief aids in playing. The most widespread and complete usage of the method by orchestral musicians is currently found among many professional string players in New York who have come under the influence of Prof. Ivan Galamian of the Juilliard School.² Thus it can be said that many of the finest artists on many instruments and their students know of and utilize the method to a greater or lesser extent. Unfortunately this is not the case with many of the teachers in the public schools, as well as with many professional, semi-professional and most amateur musicians and their students. Even those musicians who know something of the VR concepts do not appreciate their value well enough to use them to the most beneficial extent. In particular, although simple dotted rhythms are universally known and applied, the more complex exercises are not used widely (one example is the use of triplets in passages grouped in four). The concept of the "important note" is also not widely known, and the important specific technique of achieving visualization and mental co-ordination through the use of short groups is hardly ever used.

The motivation for writing this essay, then, is to provide an explicit and systematic presentation of the philosophy and application of the Visualization-Rhythmic (THINK) Method which will hopefully prove useful for students and performers alike.

This work would certainly be incomplete without acknowledging those musicians whose influence on my thinking finds

reflection here. Among them, I would like to single out Lura Soderstrom of Long Beach, California, who as pianist, teacher, and friend was responsible for making me aware of many of the ideas that stimulated the method. I also wish to thank Prof. Mitchell Lurie of UCLA for his friendly and indispensable guidance on the clarinet. I thank Paul and Martha Katz of the Cleveland Institute of Music, Jean Sell of the California School for the Blind in Berkeley, and Francis Walton of Seattle for helpful conversations which resulted in improvements in various aspects of the paper.

II. Philosophy of the VR (THINK) Method

If the general causes for mistakes that a performer may make in attempting to play a technically difficult passage are analyzed, two primary factors stand out:

1. Lack of concentration and mental visualization necessary to achieve the correlation of the printed notes with the technical and mechanical procedures of playing.
2. Apparent lack of the physical ability necessary to perform some aspect of the mechanics, given the existence of proper concentration.

Common specific examples of defects (especially those related to uneven playing or faulty intonation) which result from these causes include:

1. Weak notes-- that is, isolated notes that are slighted, missed, played out of tune, or articulated incorrectly.

2. Weak transitions-- that is, transitions between notes that are not well mastered.

The rationale behind the VR method is that greater visualization and technical ability are achieved through a process of abstracting out of a given passage all individual notes and transitions in a complete, comprehensive way, forcing concentration on weak notes and weak transitions. Attention is thus focused on troublesome spots, and corrective measures are automatically applied. In applying the method, the performer must listen constantly and critically to ferret out any weak notes or weak transitions.

Some readers may take exception to this highly mechanistic approach. It should be remembered that the aims of the VR method are limited to corrective and developmental aids to technique and control. The pianist Ernst Bacon put it very well: "It is a matter of fire in the heart and ice in the mind".

Finally, a word of warning. The material in the next sections is highly condensed, and should be carefully read over periodically and digested thoroughly; otherwise important aspects of the method will be missed.

III. Description of the VR (THINK) Method

For convenience, the VR method is first illustrated in the accompanying manuscript using a C major scale, though we again emphasize that the method can be used on a great variety of technically difficult passages, if not to some extent continuously.

The amount of time that should be spent on the exercises (particularly the "secondary" exercises) obviously depends on the amount of trouble the performer is having with a particular passage. Thus, it may be that some compositions will require application of the exercises to only a few runs; on the other hand other compositions may require extended usage. The various exercises comprising the method are labeled, e.g., 4a,4b,4c,... . Where several exercises are labelled as one, they should be practiced successively for greatest benefit. The following key can be used as a general guide:

* = good exercise (generally speaking)

** = best exercise (generally speaking)

It must be recognized that the most useful exercises will vary according to the individual passage that the performer is in the process of mastering. Once familiarization with the VR method is obtained, the performer will easily be able to pick out the pertinent exercises to apply to a given passage (any group of notes, no matter how small, may constitute a passage to which the method can be applied). We recommend that some of the ** exercises be applied at first; if these do not suffice, go on to some of the others. The performer is encouraged to make up his own exercises. In particular, various bowings, articulations, and touches provided by strings, winds, and pianists respectively will provide variations on all exercises. These variations are of the utmost importance in

practice. The use of various dynamic levels consistent with proper and relaxed technique provides further variations. The ambitious student can try transpositions of troublesome passages to other keys. Most important is the only Fundamental Rule of the method: At no time should any exercise be applied repetitiously and without thought. It takes intestinal fortitude of high order to apply this rule conscientiously, but it pays off.

A. Primary Exercises

The Primary Exercises are for the most part standard practice methods, many of which exist as natural instinct in many musicians. The critical concept of the "important note" is introduced in Exercise Ib.

- **1a. Slow and Even Tempo. The tempo must be slow enough so that it is possible to think about every note; thus the tempo may have to be very slow indeed. Repeat the passage several times, with the following variations:
 - Concentrate on each note individually as it is played.
 - Concentrate simultaneously on all notes in short groups (e.g. 2,3, or 4 note groups).

- **1b. Moderate and Even Tempo, visualizing Important Notes. Repeat the passage several times in a comfortable tempo, concentrating on "important notes". A-priori, any note may be an "important note". Important notes may be the first notes of certain groups, pivot notes that lie at a turning point of the melodic line, notes occurring just after or prior to a difficult leap, certain notes contained in some difficult group of notes, notes within recognizable patterns, or notes at points where repetitive patterns change. They are very commonly the weak notes, i.e. notes that are chronically missed, slighted, badly articulated or bowed, or played out of tune.

It should be mentioned that the notes which the performer considers "important" in the above sense may and probably will change as he practices the passage. Notice also that notes which are important in the above sense may or may not be notes which are important in a musical or aesthetic sense. In fact it is often the case that the notes which are missed, slighted, badly articulated or bowed, or played out of tune are precisely those which are musically "unimportant", and it takes constant alertness and a critical ear to find these notes and then concentrate on them.

In any case, the performer decides for himself which notes are important when he practices. The "secondary" exercises in the next part of the VR method are helpful in making this decision, for these exercises serve to point out the weak notes and weak transitions. If the performer is having control problems with a passage and still cannot decide which notes are important, it is advisable to go through the passage several times choosing different random notes as important each time until the best ones are found.

A most important alternative version of this exercise is to stress, accent, or slightly lengthen the important notes, especially weak notes, in addition to concentrating on them. In the case of weak notes, this serves as a compensation mechanism, and is an especially useful exercise at more rapid tempi. Note that it may be necessary or possible to consider only a few notes in a given rapid passage as "important" for this purpose. The net effect of course should not be that the performer become mentally unaware of the rest of the passage, only that he become more aware of the critical "important" notes.

The concept of concentrating on certain important notes or transitions and even slightly stressing or lengthening them is an extremely useful device in performance, as well as in practice.

****1c. General Mental Visualization.**

The performer should form a mental picture of as much of what he is playing as possible. He should be aware of the shape of the melodic

line, of note patterns, and of scale fragments, chords, and arpeggios. This picture should be formed as much as possible at the outset. The various types of recognizable patterns, points where patterns change, and repetitions of patterns of notes should be noted carefully in approaching a piece of music for the first time.

This attention should of course also extend to the technical aspects specific to the individual instrument, including a constant awareness of fingerings, and of articulations, bowings, or touches. It goes without saying that the performer must listen constantly to tone quality, intonation, dynamics, and of course the style and interpretation of the music itself. He should strive to think out all aspects and details of the music in his practice and to know exactly and explicitly what he is doing at all times; this is the backbone of confidence.

In this regard, the following exercise is of the utmost importance:

EXERCISE:

Think out the passage and visualize the fingerings, recalling the way it feels to play the notes, without actually playing. This can, if desired, be done with the eyes closed. The important notes should be especially concentrated on.

This exercise is an extremely useful one to perform on entire compositions, i.e. to visualize mentally the playing of the whole composition without actually playing, thinking of the notes and their fingerings. This mental thinking-through of a piece is most useful when done away from the instrument, although it can also be done while silently fingering the instrument. It is also useful to practice speaking the names of the notes while silently fingering a difficult passage.

The value of this exercise is that the composition becomes much more easily learned and memorized through the mental visualization gained. Instead of merely memorizing "through the fingers", the piece is indeed etched in the memory.

- **1d. Playing as Written. The entire passage (or the part of it under consideration) can and should be practiced and played as written, but only after the performer has some control over what he is doing. To maintain control it may be necessary to play slower than the indicated tempo.

In general, playing as written should be interspersed with the other exercises at intervals so that the continuity of the passage is not lost sight of, though as mentioned, usually infrequently and at a reduced tempo until some mastery is achieved. The mental picture gained from the use of the other exercises should be maintained as much as possible.

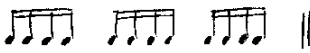
B. Secondary Exercises.

The Secondary Exercises of the VR (THINK) Method contain the real heart of the method. Generally speaking, these secondary exercises should be used whenever the use of the primary exercises alone fails to yield technical control. They should be used judiciously; proper choice of appropriate exercises will come with experience in using the method. They should be interspersed at intervals with the primary exercises in practicing a difficult passage. The performer may find that for many passages, he need not use any of this part of the method, while for other passages considerable usage of these exercises over a period of time may have to be employed to achieve the desired control. The performer will also find that use of these exercises will further strengthen the existing control that he possesses over a passage, even if it is not giving him any apparent trouble.

The bowings, articulations, or touches may be modified from those of the original passage to facilitate the use of some of these exercises (especially the short-group exercises), and this is left to the discretion of the performer (and teacher). On the other hand, useful variations of the exercises may be obtained by purposefully varying the bowings, articulations, or touches in

different ways. The original markings should be kept for at least some part of the practice with the secondary exercises. With proper attention, problems specific to string bowing, wind articulation, and pianistic touch technique can in fact be solved using these exercises.

The dynamic levels used with these exercises should always be chosen consistent with the absence of tension, and they should be varied over a range so that the technical control can be made flexible, and so that the performer can gain control over the dynamic contrasts so essential for musical performance.

In applying the Secondary Exercises to a given passage, the passage should be considered as having notes all of equal value, e.g.  . In general, passages that are long should at first be broken up into shorter ones for application of the method.

In the manuscript that follows, notes that appear in parentheses indicate omitted notes. Thus (♩♩) appearing in an exercise indicates that the exercise commences on the third note of the passage.

The essential role of concentration while using these secondary exercises cannot be overemphasized.

Short Group Exercises

Many of the secondary exercises consist of short fast groups followed by pauses or holds. The purpose of these groups is to isolate all transitions, and to provide mastery of each transition.

The pauses (or holds) must be strictly observed and used to completely visualize and form a mental picture of the next group, keeping the interval relations of successive notes and their fingerings in mind. Often the pauses must be long ones so that this can be accomplished. This will eventually enable the performer to gain an overall mental picture of the entire passage. More generally, it will facilitate his ability to "think ahead" as he plays, a skill which is indispensable in sight reading. The short groups must be played completely evenly and in tune; the performer should be aware of any notes that are slighted or out of tune even within these short groups; if any are present in some group, the group should be repeated several times (along with the pause). Generally speaking the speed of the short groups should be at, or better still, considerably faster than the tempo indicated for the passage, though only as fast as control allows. The shortness of the groups makes this possible, and enables mastery of individual groups to be even more complete than might appear necessary, thus ultimately rendering the entire passage easier and controllable. Generally it is advisable to begin with the dotted rhythm, progressing afterwards to groups with more notes. No unnecessary tension should ever be present when playing these fast groups. On the contrary, appropriate relaxation must always be maintained.

Accented Pattern Exercises

Other exercises in this section contain accented notes with no

holds, rather than containing groups and pauses (or holds). The accents should never be harsh or played in a tense manner; they may be thought of as stresses. These accented notes are defined for the purpose of each individual exercise as "important" in the sense used in Ex. 1b, and the performer should play relatively slowly, concentrating on them. Alternatively, the passage may be played at tempo (as control allows), visualizing patterns of notes while retaining the stresses. Eventually as the exercises are applied, every note in the passage is at some time considered as an "important" note on which attention is focused. It should be noted that the triplet exercises (e.g. 3a) are among the most useful for the practice of passages grouped into four note groups (as well as for those passages grouped into triplets); similar remarks hold for the other exercises.

C. Example of Application of the Method.

An explicit illustration of the use of the method is difficult to present since the flexibility of the method is essential, and the exercises to be used depend on the problems of the individual performer. In this sense a demonstration is far superior to any written illustration; nevertheless I will try to illustrate its use. Consider, for example, the third Fantasy Piece by Schumann (Op. 73), marked "Rasch und mit Feuer" (see manuscript). It begins with a difficult eighth note run (we consider only the melody line played for example by a student of intermediate grade on some arbitrary instrument). Let us assume that having looked the passage over carefully for recognizable note patterns (scale

fragments and chords for example), the student plays the run unevenly, particularly slighting the first F#, and further missing the high D#, playing D⁴ instead. After playing the passage slowly (Ex. 1a), the measure should be repeated using Ex. 1b, defining F# and D# as the important notes. Thus the student plays the measure (including the first note of the second bar), concentrating on these two notes and even stressing them. Assume that the D# is now played correctly but the F# is still slighted. Repeating again, the student now thinks of holding on to the F# as he plays (i.e. making a slight tenuto on the F# to compensate for his tendency to play it too short). He should also become particularly aware of the two surrounding notes, which form a B major triad. Assume that the student still plays the run unevenly after having applied this exercise, now slighting the B and missing the D# again. Proceeding with the Secondary Exercises, he first could apply the dotted rhythm (2c), and then fast 3 note groups (3e), making sure that each of the pauses has been used to visualize the next group of notes before playing. Next, he might apply Ex. 3a. By this time the student has concentrated on every note in the passage, and has played every isolated transition faster than necessary. The student should now stop, perhaps close his eyes, and try to visualize the whole measure, thinking of the fingerings, and perhaps saying each note aloud while fingering the passage.

We assume that the student now has mastered the first measure

(which is repeated nine more times in the piece) and probably memorized it as well. Let us assume that the next error occurs in the fifth measure, where the student has trouble making the fast transition from the D# down to the low Cx. Here, short groups are in order (e.g., Ex. 2g, 3d, 4d, 3c, 3h), after having looked the notes over carefully and having played it through slowly, as usual. The short-group exercises could start halfway through the fourth measure and stop halfway through the fifth. Here, of course, the important notes are the D# and Cx, although the notes surrounding these should be kept carefully in mind. Finally, we assume that our hypothetical student has trouble making the successive fingerings in the second measure after the first double bar. Following the procedure of the method, we first consider the measure as if it had six eighth notes (thus making eighth notes out of the G# and C#), and proceed, e.g., with dotted rhythm, two note phrases, or accented triplets.

This example has illustrated a common way in which the method might be used. It must be emphasized again that only with repeated exploration and use of the VR (THINK) method will the performer learn which exercises will likely yield the maximum progress per unit time to a given technical problem. Every exercise will eventually prove itself useful in some context or other. Finally, we repeat our plea to the student to think creatively while using the method, and to make up his own exercises and his own variations of the exercises in the method,

FOOTNOTES

1. The terminology "Think Method" was first coined in Meredith Willson's musical The Music Man by a musically illiterate salesman, who I believe was actually a wise sage in disguise, for he believed in thinking about the music, a phenomenon which is all too rare in the practice habits of many students.
2. After writing a preliminary draft of the VR method I learned of the teaching and of the excellent books of Prof. Galamian, written for violin. He recommends mixing up rhythms, for example combining duplets and triplets in succession. These rhythmic exercises eventually get very complicated. I have also been informed of work of a nature similar to this method by the cellist Janos Starker, although I have not seen it.

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VR METHOD ①

2 NOTE GROUPS

2a** 2b* 2c** 2d* 2e* 2f* (also undotted) 2g 2h 2i

3 NOTE GROUPS

3a** 3b* 3c** Held notes d. may be articulated to form 3d** (The quarter notes may be played or omitted in 3d, 3e) 3e** 3f 3g 3h 3i* 3j 3k* (or: repeat each group)

3l 3m

Handwritten musical notation for groups 3l and 3m. Each group consists of a sequence of eighth notes with accents, followed by a dotted quarter note and a half note, with 'etc' indicating continuation.

Handwritten musical notation for groups 3l and 3m, showing a variation with different articulation.

4 NOTE GROUPS 4a**

Handwritten musical notation for group 4a**, consisting of four groups of four eighth notes with accents, followed by a dotted quarter note and a half note, with 'etc' indicating continuation.

4b*

Handwritten musical notation for group 4b*, consisting of four groups of four eighth notes with accents, followed by a dotted quarter note and a half note, with 'etc' indicating continuation.

4c** (Held notes ♯ may be articulated to form ♯)

Handwritten musical notation for group 4c**, featuring held notes and accents, with a note indicating that held notes may be articulated to form a specific rhythmic pattern.

4d** (The quarter notes ♯ may be played instead of the pauses in 4d, 4e)

Handwritten musical notation for group 4d**, featuring quarter notes and accents, with a note indicating that quarter notes may be played instead of pauses in groups 4d and 4e.

4e** 4f** (n.b.) 4g 4h*

Handwritten musical notation for groups 4e**, 4f** (n.b.), 4g, and 4h*, each consisting of a sequence of eighth notes with accents, followed by a dotted quarter note and a half note, with 'etc' indicating continuation.

4i* 4j 4k*

Handwritten musical notation for groups 4i*, 4j, and 4k*, each consisting of a sequence of eighth notes with accents, followed by a dotted quarter note and a half note, with 'etc' indicating continuation.

4l (n.b.) 4m (n.b.) 4n (n.b.) 4o* (n.b.)

Handwritten musical notation for groups 4l (n.b.), 4m (n.b.), 4n (n.b.), and 4o* (n.b.), each consisting of a sequence of eighth notes with accents, followed by a dotted quarter note and a half note, with 'etc' indicating continuation.

6 NOTE GROUPS (n.b.), (n.b.) 6a** 6b* 6c* 6d**

Handwritten musical notation for groups 6a**, 6b*, 6c*, and 6d**, each consisting of a sequence of eighth notes with accents, followed by a dotted quarter note and a half note, with 'etc' indicating continuation.

(n.b.) Higher order groups (e.g. 8 note groups) should also be practiced.
 (n.b.) Variations can be made by omitting or accenting notes as above.

ADD TO EXERCISES

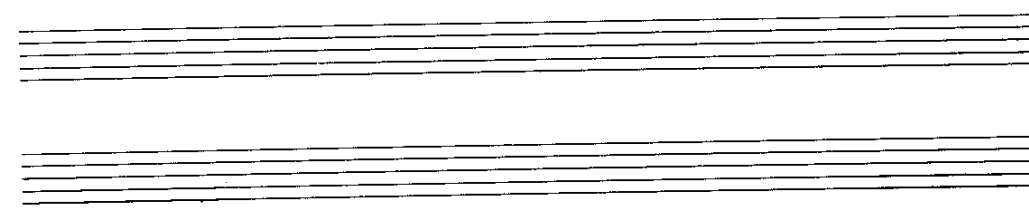
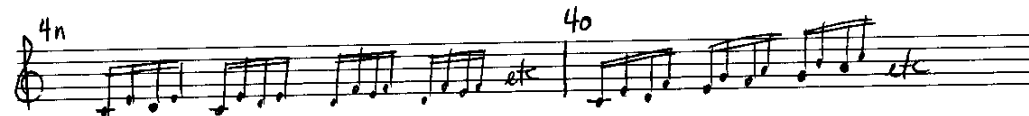
2f* (also undotted or double-dotted)



4l (Ex. 4l → 4o also with rhythmic variations) 4m



4n 4o



Rasch und mit Feuer (♩ = 160)

3.

Robert Schumann Op. 73
ed. by Eric Simon

Handwritten musical score for three staves. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#), and a common time signature. The music consists of eighth and sixteenth notes with slurs and accents. Dynamics include 'f' (forte) and 'dim' (diminuendo). The second staff continues the melodic line with similar notation and dynamics. The third staff concludes the piece with a double bar line, a repeat sign, and dynamics including 'f', 'p' (piano), and 'dim'. The piece ends with a fermata over the final note.

