

Holding the violin and viola

At first sight the subject of this month's BASICS may seem to be only for beginners. Yet even professional players, however excellently they may always play, sometimes continue throughout their careers to encounter occasional or continual awkwardness and tension because of the way they hold the instrument. In many cases the tiniest adjustment can produce dramatic results.

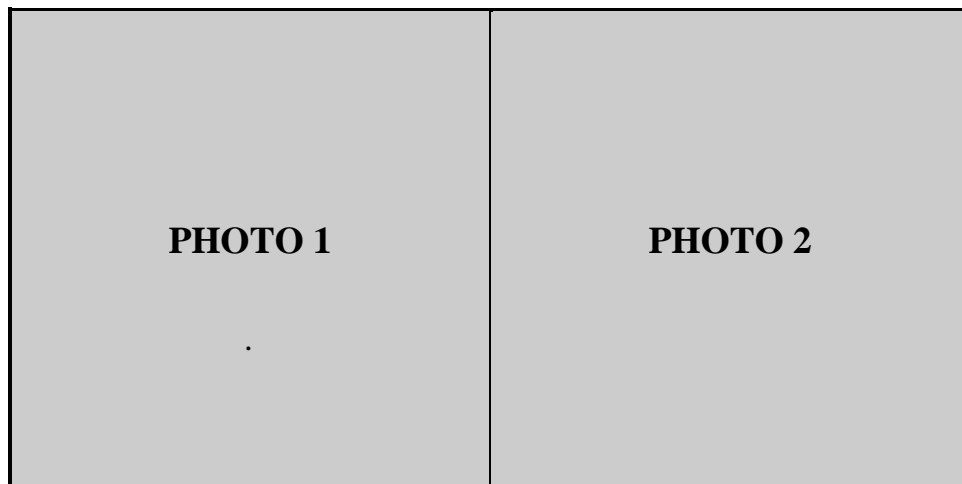
In general the violin or viola needs to be angled so that at the point, with the bow parallel to the bridge, the right arm is neither entirely straight at the elbow nor too bent. In finding the best position there are two main factors to consider: the angle to the body, and how high the instrument is placed on the shoulder. Two other factors are also important: the height of the scroll, and the tilt of the instrument.

The angle to the body

Long arms: hold the instrument more to the left. **Short arms:** hold the instrument more in front.

Ex. 1 shows how short-armed players cannot easily reach the point if the instrument is held too far to the left, and how long-armed players cannot extend the arm fully if the instrument is held too far in to the centre.

Example 1



Short arms, the violin too far to the left. The arm is too straight at the point (and still the bow is not parallel with the bridge), and in the lower half the upper arm has to reach too far forward.

Long arms, the violin too far to the right. The forearm is only just past the 'square' position even though playing at the point, and in the lower half the upper arm has to move too far back.

How high the instrument is placed on the shoulder

Long arms: hold the instrument lower on the shoulder. **Short arms:** hold the instrument higher on the shoulder

Long-arms need a chin-rest that naturally positions the chin a little more to the left of centre, away from the tailpiece, so that the right arm has to move farther to reach the point. Short-armed players often feel more comfortable with a chin-rest that places the chin directly above the tail-piece.

The height of the scroll

The higher the scroll (the more the instrument is angled up) the farther you have to reach forward with the arm to play to the point with a straight bow. With a low scroll even the shortest arms can reach the point easily.

However, the bow tends to sit more comfortably in the string when the strings are horizontal, rather than sloping down towards the scroll. Further, even when the body of the violin or viola is held parallel to the floor, the neck of the instrument slopes down anyway; so the scroll of the violin must already be slightly raised just for the strings to be horizontal. It is often better, particularly in high positions, to play with the strings sloping down towards the bridge (helping the bow keep a good point of contact), which means that the scroll has to be raised even more. Many violinists (and particularly violists, because of the viola's extra length and heaviness) play with the scroll too low, which means that the bow has to sit on a sharp downward slope and very often ends up too near the fingerboard too much of the time.

In addition, playing with a high scroll throws the weight of the instrument into the body instead of into the left hand, which then feels lighter. While it is therefore not an option to bring the scroll down to help short arms reach the point, long-armed players have to angle the scroll up enough to be comfortable drawing a straight bow in the lower half, and can extend the arm properly in the upper half.

The tilt

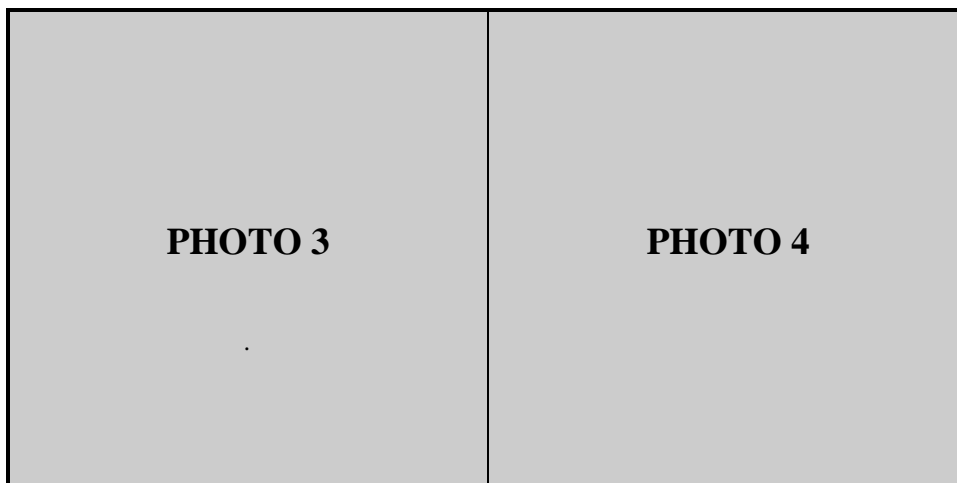
The flatter the instrument is held the more comfortable it is to play on the E (viola A) string. There is a feeling of the bow being able to rest on the string, which supports the bow. The more tilted the instrument is, the more there is a feeling of having to hold the bow *against the side* of the string (Ex.2). This is a common cause of poor tone production on the top string.

However, the flatter the instrument is held, the more uncomfortable it is to play on the G (viola C) string (Ex.3). The right upper arm has to be held unnaturally high, and the left upper arm may have to be pulled in too far to the right so that the fourth finger can reach the G string easily enough. This is a common cause of tension.

Therefore the best possible tilt is one where the top string gives sufficient support to the bow, while at the same time the right arm and fourth finger can easily reach the bottom string.

Example 2

Example 3



The violin too tilted. There is a feeling of bowing against the side of the E string, without the string supporting the bow.

The violin too flat. The right arm is too high, with power from the upper arm diminished. Also note how far the left arm has to be pulled in for the fourth finger to be able to reach the G string.

The exact position of the instrument does not have to be fixed rigidly, since what is most comfortable or appropriate in one passage may be less so in another. For example, it is often natural to tilt the violin less when playing on the E string, and more when playing on the G string. If you are playing three hours of second violin in a Mozart opera you will not want to hold the violin too flat; or if an extended passage uses only the lower half, whether you can reach the point is irrelevant. If a long-armed player particularly wants to hold the instrument higher on the shoulder (with the chin above the tail-piece), this can be compensated for by angling the instrument more to the left. But by adjusting these chief factors a player with any length of arm can feel perfectly comfortable in all the different circumstances of playing.

Next month's BASICS returns to the left hand, with the next intonation exercises of the series.