



BASICS

Localising actions

The ideal, achieved by many players, is that the arms, hands and fingers remain free from any tension or 'locking', without any strain or pain, so that by the end of playing a symphony or a concerto they feel as light, balanced and easy as at the beginning of the performance.

Playing with less effort involves localising actions. This means that you do as little as possible to play each note: the absolute minimum that is required to perform the specific left- or right-hand action, and nothing else. The action takes place in one locality, without all sorts of unnecessary simultaneous actions happening elsewhere.

Minimising left-hand effort

To play the first three notes of the Tartini Sonata (example 1) all that needs to happen in the left hand is that the second finger lowers on to the string from the base knuckle joint. It then lifts again from the base knuckle joint. The shape of the finger stays basically the same before, during, and after playing the note.

Example



Nothing else needs to happen while the second-finger actions take place:

- All the fingers remain relaxed, particularly at the base knuckle joints.
- The fingers do not squeeze together sideways. This particularly applies here to the first and second fingers, since they are the ones being used, but the fingers not in use must also remain independent and released.
- The first finger does not press harder into the string.
- The thumb remains relaxed, without pressing harder against the neck or squeezing backwards in the direction of the pegs.
- The wrist maintains a straight line from the elbow to the base knuckle joints, without pushing in or out.
- The upper arm moves neither to the left nor to the right. Pulling the upper arm in tightly at the shoulder is a common cause of major left arm tension that works its way right down to the fingers.
- The head and left shoulder does not squeeze the violin tightly.
- The left hand/arm does not move the scroll of the violin.
- The face, lower jaw, tongue and throat remain relaxed.
- The muscles in the back or front of the body do not contract, causing the spine to bend forwards or backwards, to the left or right.

BASICS

Pulling down

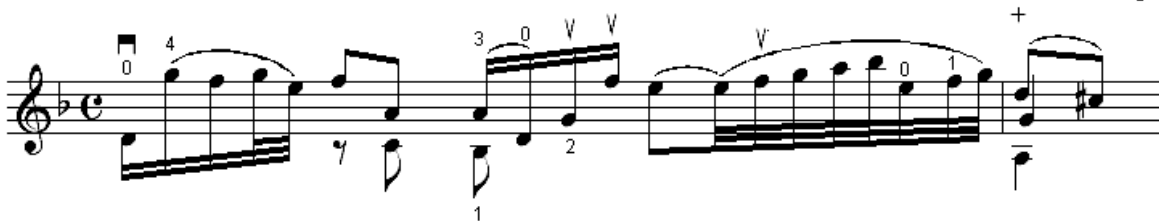
Of course, eliminating unnecessary movement does not mean standing or sitting stiffly, blocking the sympathetic movements that happen naturally throughout all playing. Although many of the action of the arms originate in the back, the bow arm in particular sends a flow of movement down the back and legs and into the feet that is an essential element of playing.

It is especially important not to 'pull down', i.e. the chest is brought down and the scroll of the violin visibly lowers. Lengthen the back when playing the fourth finger G (+ in example 1). Rather than pulling down, you may wish to raise the scroll imperceptibly, producing a feeling of the string coming to meet the bow hair.

Pulling down often happens during string crossings. The fourth finger C (++) in example 1) is a typical example where it is important to avoid bending forwards slightly as the fourth finger reaches over and the bow arm makes the string crossing. Instead, great stature and control instantly come into the playing when only the finger moves, and when the movement of the right arm is independent of the shoulder and spine.

The faster and the wider the string crossing, the greater the temptation to pull down:

Sonata in G minor, BWV 1001, J. S. Bach
Adagio



Example 1

Be especially careful at the crossing from the E string to the bottom of the chord (+), to move only the arm, not the back.

Pulling down and all the other extraneous movements are also common in other big actions like a long shift or powerful accent:

Sonata in D, op. 12 no. 1, Beethoven
Third movement



Example 2

There may be a tendency at each sforzando to pull down. Instead, lengthen the back as you make the attack with the bow (watch the scroll to see that it does not move down); feel the right upper arm moving in the shoulder socket as it takes the bow from one string level to another. The extra weight and speed in the bow stroke needed to produce the accent must not be mirrored by extra effort or extra actions in the left arm, hand and finger.

- Practise playing at a slow tempo – or even dealing with a passage note by note – while being acutely aware of the physical movements you are making. Stop any movement that is not directly related to whatever note you are playing or action you are performing.
- Try practising phrases, passages or whole movements with the scroll of the violin resting against the wall to fix it in one place – you may find it revealing.

When all actions are performed in this way the greatest economy of movement and energy comes into the playing, leading to ease and relaxation. The ideal is always maximum result, minimum effort; effortless power, not powerless effort.

Next month's **BASICS** looks at how to place the chin on the chin rest.