

# Bow hand (1)

How exactly the bow is held depends not only on the individual hand, but on where in the bow you are playing, the type of stroke, and the dynamic. Different schools of playing promote subtly different approaches to holding and manipulating the bow, yet certain features remain common to them all.

## Balancing with the fourth finger

The fourth finger balances the weight of the bow. This is particularly so in the lower half, where it sits on the bow as on a see-saw, but also in the upper half, where it acts as a counterbalance to the first and second fingers (helping to avoid squashing the tone with too much downward pressure into the string). Sometimes it sits directly on top of the stick, sometimes on the upper, inside edge.

Balancing the bow with the fourth finger is also a major part of all lifted bowings.

- Playing a passage of lifted strokes, take the second and third fingers off the bow to highlight the feeling of balancing with the fourth finger. Make sure you have the tip, not the pad, of the fourth finger on the bow so that the finger naturally curves.

Example

*spiccato*

The fourth finger balances the weight of the bow whenever the bow is lifted from the string:

Example

Partita no. 3 in E, BWV1006, Bach  
Gavotte en Rondeau

- Play once or twice without the second or third fingers on the bow. At each '+', where the bow is momentarily in the air, feel all the weight balanced by the fourth finger.
- Afterwards, playing with a normal bow hold, feel the same amount of weight going into the fourth finger.

## Spreading the fingers for leverage

The part of the first finger on top of the stick helps to produce tone. The default position is neither too close to the second finger (leading to loss of leverage), nor too far from it (leading to tension in the base joint of the thumb). The louder the playing = the further the first finger from the thumb = the most leverage.

- Experiment with different positions of the first finger while playing powerful, sustained strokes on one note.
- Move the finger slightly further away from the thumb, and slightly closer to the thumb, until finding the place that gives the greatest power with the least effort.

Example

Violin Concerto no. 3 in B minor, op. 61, Saint-Saëns  
First movement

## Playing without the first finger in *f* passages

Over-using the first finger to press the bow into the string can cause tight, pressed tone production. This is less often a problem in the lower half, but when playing *f* in the upper half it is sometimes helpful to practise passages without the first finger on the bow:

- Position the fingers on the bow so that the second finger is able to exert a little leverage (very slightly in front of the thumb rather than opposite it).
- Notice how you can produce a good tone without needing the first finger at all.
- Then play the same passage with the first finger sitting lightly on the bow. You will find that much of the feeling of playing without the first finger remains.

### Playing without the first finger: lifted strokes

During any lifted strokes – spiccato, *sautillé*, ricochet and so on – the bow makes an almost-invisible seesaw movement, pivoting around the thumb.

The first finger must remain entirely loose and ‘giving’ at its base joint. If it remains tight at the base joint it will restrict this natural see-sawing of the bow.

- To make sure that the bow-hand is allowing these tiny, natural movements to happen, practise a phrase of lifted strokes without the first finger on the bow. Feel how the bow has a natural ‘swing’ within the hand.
- Then play the phrase with a normal bow-hold, feeling the same almost-invisible movements of the bow within the hand.

Violin Concerto no. 5 in A, K219, Mozart  
First movement



Example

### Pulling in with the third finger

At times the bow is held firmly, at times quite loosely. ‘Gripping’ the bow is not in itself bad so long as it is not a fixed state, and is always followed by immediate release when no longer required.

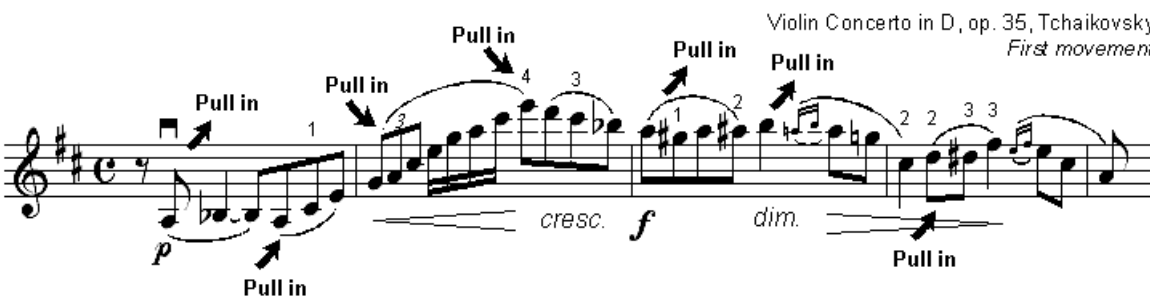
In many strokes, particularly when a deep or firm tone is required, pull the third finger in against the side of the bow. This helps maintain a feeling of balance in the hand, and helps to avoid over-pressing with the first finger. Notice the thumb, and the first and third fingers on either side of the thumb, opposing each other so that you very slightly squeeze the bow between them.

In the lower half feel the *pad* of the third finger firmly contacting the frog of the bow. In the upper half, depending on the length of arm, it may feel awkward to keep the pad of the finger on the frog. Then the contact point of the finger is around the crease at the first joint of the finger, contacting the bow on the upper, outside edge of the bow.

- Practise phrases or passages without the second or fourth fingers on the bow. Feel the third finger pulling in firmly against the bow.



Example 11



Example

Next month's BASICS looks at further aspects of the bow hold