

Bow hand (2)

Flexibility exercise

The bow hand is commonly likened to a system of springs, the fingers and thumb acting as 'shock absorbers' to all the different types of contacts of the bow with the string.

In order to have this springiness the fingers must be curved, and for them to be curved the exact placement of the fourth finger and thumb is important:

If the tip of the fourth finger or thumb contacts the bow, the finger is more curved; if the pad contacts the bow, the finger is straighter.

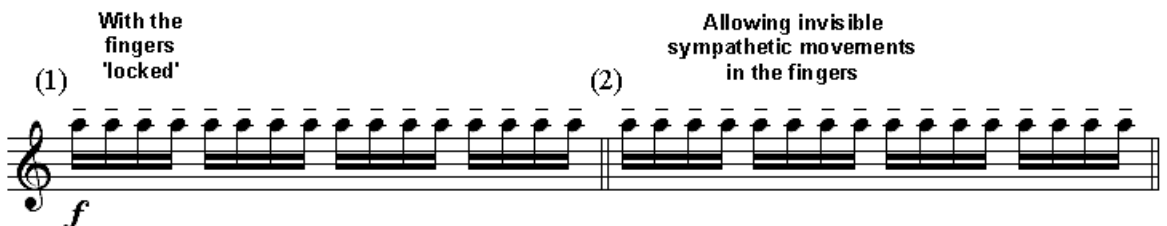
- Play slow whole bows on one string. Slowly bend and straighten the thumb and fourth finger ten or twelve times in each bow.
- Feel the thumb and the fourth finger move together. When one bends, the other bends; when one straightens, the other also wants to straighten.
- Feel the knuckles lowering as the fingers curve, raising as the fingers straighten.

Exaggerating the give

Sometimes the fingers, thumb and knuckles in the bow hand seem not to move at all. At other times the movements are visible and obvious. How much movement there should be depends on each stroke and the individual hand. In one player, no visible flexibility in a particular bowing action could mean stiffness, while in another player the same apparent lack of movement might be entirely natural and in fact contain plenty of invisible give.

Play Example 1 first with stiff fingers holding the bow, and then with lighter, giving fingers which have an invisible degree of 'sympathetic movement' or give. Note how there are lots of 'clicks' at each bow change when the fingers are locked, and the tone may be harsh; note the smoothness and sweetness of tone when the fingers give.

Example



(1) With the fingers 'locked'

(2) Allowing invisible sympathetic movements in the fingers

To make sure that there is a give in every joint in the bow hand, with no resistance or tension anywhere, exaggerate the natural movements of the fingers and knuckles by making them conscious and larger-than-life.

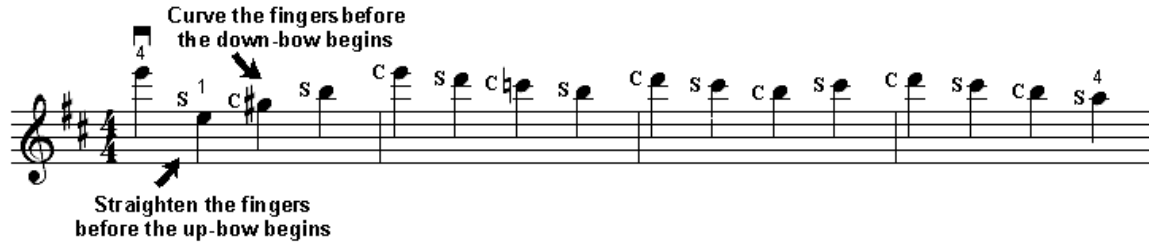
- Just before each up-bow, straighten the fingers and raise the knuckles.
- Just before each down-bow, curve the fingers and lower the knuckles.
- If necessary, play much more slowly than normal, taking the time to feel the give in every joint.

Example



Violin Concerto in D, op. 61, Beethoven
First movement

S = Straighten the fingers C = Curve the fingers



Releasing the hand: flat or tilted hair

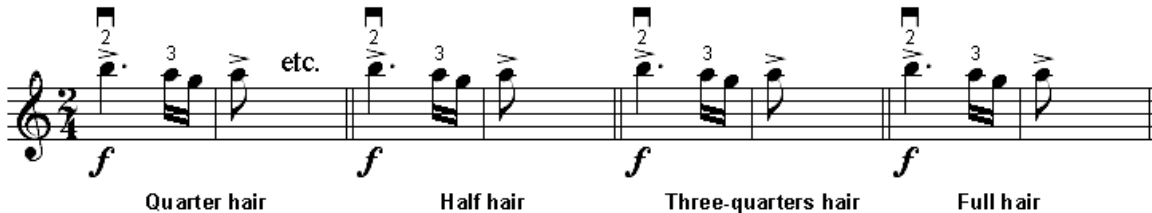
Playing *f* with only half the hair (the wood of the bow tilted too much towards the fingerboard) takes double the effort for half the result. Even if you work hard to make up for it the tone may remain thin, with the added danger of the wood of the bow scraping against the string.

Playing with full hair, or nearly full, produces a fatter tone as well as a feeling of effortless power.



Example

- Play a phrase or passage several times, each time experimenting with a different tilt of the bow to find exactly the best tone and feel in the bow and the hair, and with the least effort in the bow hand.

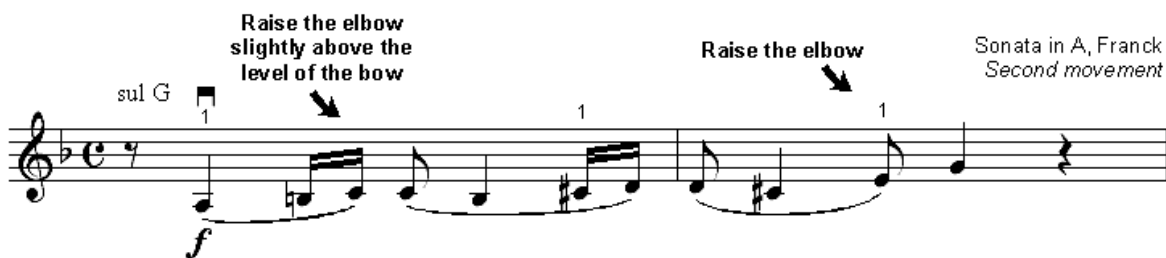


'Full hair' means that the wood of the bow is directly above the hair. 'Quarter', 'half' and 'three-quarters' are loose terms since more hair than that may contact the string, depending on how strongly you play; but because of the tilt of the bow the weight is not divided evenly across the whole width of the hair.

Releasing the hand: levering with the elbow

For extra power when playing *forte* in the upper half, raise the right elbow slightly above the level of the hand. Feel the elbow levering weight directly into the hand and from there into the string. The correct amount of raising the elbow is usually so slight as to be unnoticeable. If you can see it, it is probably too much, but without it there may be a feeling of unnecessary effort as you try to find the power by other means (e.g. over-pressing with the first finger on the bow).

- Practise levering the weight into the string by exaggerating raising the elbow. Afterwards, a normal amount of leaning will feel perfectly natural.



Example