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# BASICS

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## Bow hand (1)

### Placement of the first finger

If the first and second fingers are positioned so that the thumb is in the middle between them, there is an unbalanced distribution of the fingers on the bow with three fingers one side of the thumb and one finger the other side. A further disadvantage is that the first finger is too near the thumb. *Any downward pressure from the first finger has a greater effect the further away from the thumb it is.* A simple experiment illustrates this clearly:

- The teacher holds the violin in playing position with the middle of the bow resting on the D and A strings (so that the bow is horizontal), meanwhile supporting the bow at the other end with only the thumb. (If necessary place the tip of the first finger on top of the bow, opposite the thumb, to help steady the bow and prevent it from falling.)
- The student slowly presses the teacher's bow down towards the hair (pressing at the place where the bow is resting on the string) until the wood touches the hair; then slowly releases it again, repeating several times and noting exactly how much weight is required to make the two come together. Repeat lower and lower in the bow, until the pressing finger is right next to the thumb supporting the bow.
- At the middle of the bow, very little pressure is needed to make the wood touch the hair. Pressing a couple of centimetres lower, a little more weight is needed to make the wood in the middle of the bow touch the hair.

More and more weight is needed as the student presses lower and lower on the bow, until the student's finger is right next to the teacher's thumb. Here an enormous amount of weight is required to make the wood in the middle of the bow touch the hair. Naturally, downward pressure directly *above* the supporting thumb has no effect at all.

The see-saw provides a helpful image: a smaller person sitting at the extreme end can easily balance a far larger person on the other side who is sitting closer in to the centre. Similarly, a door handle is positioned on the opposite side to the hinges: great effort would be required if the handle were to be placed close to the hinges.

The danger of playing with too much effort, or of playing with a pressed, choked tone, is much greater in a bow hold that places the first finger near to the thumb. Not forgetting darker, more depressed colours, the ideal 'singing' tone generally comes more from speed of bow than from pressure.

### Placement of the second (middle) finger

When the first finger is positioned a little higher up the stick, away from the thumb, the second finger can sit opposite the thumb but slightly to the left of centre (from the player's viewpoint), instead of slightly to the right of centre.

Then part of the job of injecting weight into the string can be taken from the first finger and given to the second, creating a more 'spread-out' feeling rather than merely 'pressing' with the first finger.



Figure 1

Figure 1 shows how part of the second finger contacts the bow much higher up the stick than the thumb.

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## Holding the bow without gripping

The fingers sometimes hold the bow quite strongly, for example when playing strong chords, or a stroke like martelé that begins with a sharp bite. Other strokes require more of a bow-*balance* than a bow-*hold* or bow-*grip*. It is easy to get the feeling of balancing the bow in the hand:

- 1 Without the violin, tilt the bow over as though playing on the outer edge of the hair. Place the fourth finger on the *upper, inside edge* of the bow. Take the second and third fingers off the bow.

Notice the weight of the bow resting on the pad of the first finger, and balanced by the fourth finger and thumb. All three support the bow - if any were taken off, the bow would fall. In this position, the bow is balanced in the hand, and does not need to be 'held'.

- 2 Put the second finger slightly more to the left of the thumb than usual. Take the first finger off.

Now the bow is balanced by the second and fourth fingers, and by the thumb. Feel the weight of the bow resting against the second finger.

- 3 Put the first and third fingers back on the bow and hold it normally with all the fingers. Find the same feeling of weight and balance in each finger, without gripping the bow with the fingers.

## Sinking the hand into the bow

A feeling of 'give' in the bow hand can help in producing a soft, deep tone, without any hardness or edge. Play the following pattern in different parts of the bow, exaggerating by letting the knuckle joints collapse completely as you pronate the hand during each *forte* down-bow (Fig. 2a). During each up-bow, return to the supinated position shown in Fig. 2b.

Fig. 2a      Fig. 2b



Figure 2

The positions of the hands shown in Fig. 2 are extreme and included only for illustration, but it can make a big difference to the roundness of the tone even if the actual amount of give is so slight as to be invisible.