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# BASICS

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# Staying free

You do not need to try to develop ‘flexibility’ in your hands and fingers. You already have it most of the time. Whenever you are not playing the violin, whenever you are engaged in ordinary, everyday activities, your hands are relaxed, soft and pliable. What you must do is keep that softness and flexibility when you play the violin.

One of the things that athletes and musicians alike must constantly guard against, is that in the fraction of a second before performing an action they tense up in preparation for it. It is essential to avoid going through the following sequence:

Before you pick up the violin and bow, your hands and fingers are soft and flexible, i.e. no muscles in the hands or fingers are in a held state of contraction. You get into playing position. Even before your left hand has reached the neck of the violin it has already become tighter. Then, every time you are just about to start to play anything, first you tighten (i.e. contract) the muscles in your hand, fingers, wrist and arm, so that they feel hard and inflexible.

- Your hands are soft and pliable before you pick up the instrument; keep them like that as you go to pick up the violin and bow; then keep them soft and pliable as you move your fingers around the fingerboard.
- Before you play any note release the hand and fingers and keep them soft, balanced and free of any sort of pressing or counter pressing.

## Muscle tone

A common image for the right degree of ‘muscle tone’ is that complete relaxation (floppy and limp) is at one end of the spectrum, tension is at the other end, and somewhere in the middle is a balance-point where you have enough muscle tone to be able to hold and manipulate things, and perform all the various actions that we need in our daily activities.

However, this image does not suit the light, quick actions of violin playing: a middle-point between the two extremes is already far too much tension or over-use (over-contraction) of the muscles. Instead, think of the amount of muscle tone required to hold and move the bow, to move the fingers up and down on the violin, change position, stop the strings, vibrate, and so on, as being only just past the point of floppiness:



This immediately produces a wonderful sensation of lightness and ease. An extraordinary new aliveness and alacrity immediately comes into every action. You may need to move the point-of-use further to the right for certain bow strokes, but make it a rule always to stay as far to the left as possible.

- A surprisingly effective and immediate way to find a new feeling of complete lack of effort in the left hand is simply to practise fingering a few notes on the back of your hand (Example 1).
- Touch your thumb against the palm as lightly as a feather; finger on the back of your hand so lightly that the fingers tickle the back of your hand rather than press into it. See how much you can relax every muscle in the hand while continuing to move the finger up and down. Then find the same feeling playing the violin.

