
BASICS

Bowing

Playing from the back

There is a typical mental picture of the bow arm, shared by many players, that at first sight seems entirely natural and logical, and yet which may not in fact be helpful at all.

The ‘natural and logical’ picture is as follows:

- 1 The shoulder is a ball-and-socket joint: the rounded ball at the end of the upper arm fits into the shoulder socket and can move in any direction (unlike the elbow joint which works like a hinge and can only open and close). Do you have a picture of your bow arm ‘beginning’ in the shoulder socket?
- 2 Your back and shoulders should remain entirely still while you are moving the bow (apart from any obvious ‘follow-through’, sympathetic motions). There should be a feeling of only the arm moving, entirely independently of the rest of the body. Do you keep everything else ‘still’ and try to move just your arm?
- 3 The muscles in the upper arm and shoulder are the main ones working to move the arm. Do you think of those muscles as being the ones that hold the arm up in the air, as well as being the muscles that move the bow?



Fig. 1 Feel bow strokes originating from here

Of course you are right if you answered ‘yes’ to these three questions. However, there is a certain type of awkwardness, or woodiness of movement, that comes from thinking of the bow arm like that. The muscles are all continuous and connected right across the back, and the movements originate much lower than the arm or shoulder. You can easily get a new picture of ‘playing from the back’ by doing the following simple experiment:

- 1 Place the fingers of your left hand on your left hip joint. Push your thumb into the large muscle that is on the left of your spine in the lower back (Figure 1).
- 2 Then make a window-cleaning movement with your right arm. Feel the muscle under your left thumb contracting and releasing as your right arm moves in circles. (Make sure you move your right *upper* arm, not your forearm.)

Of course, you are not going to be thinking about this muscle in the small of your back while performing; in fact, having once gained the picture of the arm not ‘beginning’ at the shoulder, but working from lower down in the back, you barely need ever to think about it again; yet simply by once experiencing the contraction and release in the lower back, it is often possible to bring about an instant transformation of the bow arm.

BASICS

Bowing out to the side

Your mental picture of what to do affects your actions and the results that you get. Many people have an unhelpful mental picture of the right arm moving to and fro from left to right. This results in an awkward, cramped bowing action since most of the time the right arm does not so much move to the right and left, as much as *forwards and backwards*.

- Draw the bow to the point, keeping the bow parallel with the bridge, and stop there with the bow on the string.
- Leaving your right hand where it is in the air, put the violin down and take the bow out of your right hand.

Note where your hand is: directly in front of the shoulder, not out to the right.

Drawing a straight bow

There are three 'levers' in the arm: the upper arm, the forearm, and the hand. Each moves in an arc: the largest is the upper arm, the smallest the hand. In bowing, if any one lever is used alone the bow moves in a circular motion. It is easy to see this in a simple experiment:

Without the bow, hold your right arm horizontally in the air, with a right angle at the elbow, and with your fingers pointing straight forwards.

- Imagine that your arm is a huge compass. Your shoulder is the fixed point of the compass, and the pencil that draws the line is attached to your elbow. Imagine that there is a large sheet of paper under your arm.
- Move your elbow to left and right. The pencil draws a large arc.
- Then imagine that the fixed point of the compass is the elbow, and the pencil is attached to your wrist. Keeping the elbow still, move the wrist to left and right. The pen draws a smaller arc.
- Then imagine that the fixed point of the compass is the wrist, and the pen is attached to your fingertips. Keeping the wrist still, move the hand to left and right. The pen draws the smallest arc.

To draw the bow parallel to the bridge, different combinations of these arcs must be used at the same time.

The best straight-bow exercise

The first thing is to know what drawing a straight bow feels like, and this is very easy to achieve. With someone holding the bow for you, parallel to the bridge, simply run your hand along the stationary bow. Since the bow is parallel to the bridge, your arm is forced to perform the perfect combination of movements to draw a straight bow.

Instead of the bow being straight because the arm movement is perfect, the arm movement is perfect because the bow is straight.

The most important thing is for the assistant to keep checking that the bow is parallel to the bridge. They should hold the bow sometimes on one string, sometimes on another.

- Lightly run the hand many times up and down the entire length of the bow.
- Make sure you hold the violin in a position that allows the arm to be neither too straight nor too bent at the elbow when you are playing at the point.
- Make sure you keep your hand in a proper bow-hold shape. The proportions of the movements of the bow arm are different if the hand is held at an abnormal angle to the bow.

This exercise is excellent because you learn by feel instead of by learning a set of rules. Your body learns how to do it. It is ideal for children who can develop their bow arm without needing an intellectual understanding of the principles, but it is just as good for adults too, for the same reason.