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# BASICS

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# Bow hold

## Naturalness

A correct bow hold is one that feels entirely natural and comfortable, so that you simply forget about it. You are in complete control of the bow as it dances over the strings, but without being particularly aware of holding it.

If you find yourself continually conscious of holding the bow – and especially if the bow hand feels uncomfortable in any way – it may mean that you have an idea of how to hold it that is at odds with what your hand (or the bow) is telling you it wants. Naturalness must always win over reason or theory.



(a) Note the natural spacing of the fingers

## How to set up the basic bow hold

Begin with a pencil; then repeat using the bow.

- Hold your forearm level with the floor and allow your hand to flop limply from the wrist (a).

Make sure the fingers find their own natural distance from each other.

It may encourage the hand to be completely loose if you shake the hand vigorously first, before allowing it to drop limply from the wrist.

- Place the pencil slantwise across the fingers, from the tip of the little finger to a contact point with the first finger at the crease of the first joint (b).

Note how the natural spacing of the fingers has not changed.

- Place the tip of the thumb almost opposite the second finger, but slightly to the right of centre.
- At the same time lower the knuckles (c). At this point it may be natural to push the first finger up a little further away from the second.

Repeat with the bow:

- Place the bow slantwise across the fingers, from the tip of the little finger to a contact point with the first finger at the crease of the first joint (d).

Make sure the natural spacing of the fingers has not changed.

Note the continuous line made by the edge of the little finger, and the edge of the frog (e). Contact the bow on the upper, inside edge of the octagonal.

Note the contact point of the first finger with the bow, at the crease of the first joint (f).

- Place the tip of the thumb in its normal position, half on the bow and half on the thumb-piece (g). At the same time lower the knuckles (h). Again, you may wish to adjust the position of the first finger as before.

## The bow hold changes constantly

What is the best way to hold the bow? There is no single answer since the exact bow hold changes constantly according to what you are playing. What is the best way to hold the bow to play *what*, exactly?

- To play very heavily or strongly, you might grip the bow quite solidly, and spread the fingers more widely to get more leverage.
- To play with more delicacy, or to make a particular *dolce* or special ‘feathery’ quality of stroking the string, you might hold the bow so that there is barely any feeling of contact at all, between it and the



(b) Place the pencil slantwise across the hand



(c) Place the thumb opposite the second finger and flatten the knuckles



(d) Place the bow slantwise across the hand



(e) Note the continuous line down the edge of the little finger and the edge of the frog

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fingers; and allow the fingers to remain a normal, natural distance apart rather than ‘spreading them out’.

- It is difficult to play a *sotto voce*, *dolce* tone, like the one at the opening of the Brahms D minor Sonata, if you hold the bow with a ‘strong’ bow hold:

Hold the bow lightly

Sonata No. 3 in D minor, op. 108  
Brahms

*p* sotto voce ma espressivo



(f) Note the contact point of the first finger with the bow

- Similarly, it is impossible to play a strong *martelé* if you hold the bow as if to play *piano dolce*. At the beginning of each *martelé* stroke you have to hold the bow very firmly in order to bite the string. After the bite, the fingers release, only to grip again ready for the next stroke:

Firm bow hold, spread fingers

42 Etudes ou caprices, No. 6  
Kreutzer

*f*



(g) Contact point of thumb with bow]

- To play *spiccato*, the fingers may be more upright on the bow, to allow a little space between the first finger and the top of the bow (j).
- To play *sautillé*, the fingers may be more leaning on the bow, and the fourth finger (and at times, even the third finger) may come off the bow entirely.



(h) The basic bow hold

## Pronated and supinated

Part of the non-fixed, ever-changing and ever-adapting nature of the bow-hold, is that at the heel the hand is more upright or ‘supinated’ (j), balancing the bow with the little finger; at the point the hand leans in the direction of the first finger (‘pronated’).

Since the change happens gradually, centimetre by centimetre up the bow, from more upright to more leaning, the exact bow hold is slightly different at every place in the bow.

As part of this, the exact contact point of the first finger changes: at the heel the contact-point is further in the direction of the nail, and at the point it is nearer the middle joint.

Since the contact of the first finger on the side of the bow remains constant, this changing contact point of the first finger on top of the bow does not cause any instability in the bow hand.

Despite the constant change, and although there is not one bow hold but several, and nothing must be ‘fixed’ in one place, there is still a basic finger placement, a basic bow hold, from which you start and to which you return.



(j) Supinated



(k) Pronated