
BASICS

Right elbow

When playing in the lower half of the bow, how high should the elbow be in relation to the hand? The views of the established 'schools' of playing have covered both extremes, from very low to very high.

The low elbow

The idea of the low elbow goes back to the eighteenth century. In 1756 Leopold Mozart's instructions to keep the elbow quite near to the body are clear, and he provides illustrations of a correct (low) elbow and one too-high. In the Campagnoli Violin School there is an illustration of a violinist with string tied from his right upper arm to a button on his jacket, to help him keep the arm low.

Although this idea has survived through to modern times, it was already being criticized as early as 1905. Andreas Moser said that although keeping the elbow lower than the hand was justified 150 years earlier, when it was the custom to place the right side of the tailpiece under the chin, 'with our different method of holding the instrument the same rule must not only be meaningless, but must constitute an absolute impediment to the acquisition of a free style of bowing.'

The high elbow

According to Moser, the high elbow of the Franco-Belgian school was a reaction to the eighteenth-century ideal. In 1924 Carl Flesch stated that 'the transfer of strength occurs most naturally when the elbow part lies above rather than below the level of the fingers.' Some have taken this to mean keeping the elbow sharply higher than the bow at all times.

Keeping the elbow level

Between the extremes are those who, including Moser, have kept the elbow more on the same level as the bow. The best approach is to allow all three possibilities, depending on what you are playing. However, there are specific advantages to keeping the elbow on a level with the bow, when playing in the lower third of the bow.

During a whole-bow up-bow, according to Flesch, from the middle of the bow onwards the elbow raises above the level of the bow, and begins to drop again as the heel is approached. There is then a follow-on movement of the wrist and fingers.

The possible disadvantage is that if the elbow is much higher than the bow hand, and starts to move lower while the right hand moves the bow to the right, it means that the elbow and the frog of the bow do not move in the same direction. Then it is very much harder to control the speed of the bow and get absolute evenness.

Prove this by experimenting without the bow:

- Hold an imaginary bow in front of you, with the arm in the heel position, with the elbow more or less on the same level as the hand (Fig. a).

Move the imaginary bow in short, horizontal, up- and down-bows at the extreme heel. Move the upper arm only, without opening and closing the arm at the elbow. Notice how the elbow and the hand move in the same direction.

- Then make the same short bowing movements with a high elbow. Exaggerate the height of the elbow so that the difference in the direction is clear (Fig. b).

As the down-bow begins, you can keep the elbow at the same height above the bow, without allowing it to move vertically down; or as the down-bow begins, you can allow the elbow to move down at the same time as the hand moves to the right. Whichever you choose, the elbow and the frog of the bow no longer move in the same direction or at the same speed.

All kinds of different strokes in the lower part of the bow feel much easier to control when the elbow and the hand do move in the same direction. However, sometimes it might feel very comfortable to move the elbow in a way that breaks the connection between the elbow and the frog. If the elbow starts off higher than the

'It seems as though in the eighteenth century some evil sorcerer had banned the upper arm with a curse destined to endure until the seventh generation: "Thou shalt not function!"'

Carl Flesch

(a) The elbow moves at the same speed as the hand

(b) The elbow moves at a different speed to the hand

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bow hand, you can get a feeling of ‘gearing’ where a faster downward movement of the elbow happens at the same time as the bow moving more slowly, producing a feeling of flow.

Generally, however, there is more control if the elbow and frog move in the same direction; and for that the elbow needs to be more or less on the same level as the hand.

Making invisible circles at the bow change

The idea of raising and lowering the elbow at the heel may be partly to do with the fact that using a circular movement at the change of bow adds smoothness to the change of direction.

When you are coming up towards the heel near the end of an up-bow, and you are going to change direction and begin a down-bow – and you want the connection between up-bow and down-bow to be as smooth and seamless as possible – it is much easier if there is an element of a circle in the change of direction, rather than the bow coming to a dead halt and then going back the other way.

However, the circular movement does not have to be so big that it is obvious; an almost undetectable amount is enough to add the same degree of smoothness in the bow change as a much larger movement.

Find this invisible amount by beginning with an exaggerated amount of raising and dropping the elbow.

- Staying in the lower half of the bow, play repeated up- and down-bows:



- Begin the up-bow in the middle of the bow. Begin with your elbow and wrist on the same level as the bow.
- During the first part of the up-bow, move the elbow higher than the level of the bow.
- During the second part of the up-bow, move the elbow back down to almost the same level as the bow, but slightly higher.
- Continue the downward movement of the elbow so that it is still moving down as the bow changes from up-bow to down-bow.
- During the first part of the down-bow, continue the downward movement so that the elbow reaches the same level as the bow. It doesn't matter if the elbow goes very slightly lower than the level of the bow.
- During the second part of the down-bow, move the elbow back up so that you arrive at the beginning of the up-bow with the elbow very slightly above the level of the bow.
- Continue the upward movement of the elbow so that it is still moving up as the bow changes from down-bow to up-bow (in the middle of the bow).
- Feel the smoothness the circle adds at the bow change, in contrast to the ‘stop’ that must happen if the bow moves ‘in a straight line’, comes to a halt, and then starts off in the other direction again.
- Repeat several times, each time making the movement of the elbow smaller and smaller. In the beginning the path the elbow travels in the air may be almost a full circle.

As you make it smaller, the arc becomes flatter and flatter until finally the elbow appears to stay more or less on a level with the bow throughout.

Notice how the smoothness at the bow change remains, despite the fact that the curved lines are now invisible.