
BASICS

Balance

Now, the thing that all living things have to cope with... is the force of gravity. The force of gravity is the constant in our environment. It is the one unvarying thing, because air and food and everything else varies, but gravity doesn't vary... The first requirement of living things is to come to terms with this constant in their lives. As we all know, there are considerable degrees of gradation in how well or how badly we adapt to it.

Walter Carrington

All our lives we are weighed down by the force of gravity. It acts only in that one direction, pushing down against us. From your very first attempts to stand up, as an infant, you need to learn how to rise up against it.

Understanding the effect gravity has on you in maintaining posture and keeping your arms, violin and bow up in the air is the first issue on the path to finding good posture and freedom from aches and pains.

Not pulling down

'Pulling down' means to contract the muscles in the front of the body so that the upper chest is lowered in the direction of the stomach (Fig. A). This also has the effect of making the shoulders want to pull in towards each other in front of the body.

The tell-tale sign to look for is the hump or curve at the top of the back. This posture leads to a catalogue of problems in the back and in the position of the head, which causes tension in the arms and hands and finally the fingers

Instead there needs to be a feeling of lengthening the back and raising the chest (Fig. B). Then, as the centre of balance changes, your head takes a position of balance on top of your spine instead of wanting to push forwards. Your shoulders, instead of pulling in as you pull the upper chest down, naturally ease back into their correct position. This in turn brings a feeling of balance and freedom in the working of the upper arms, which then feeds down into the hands and fingers.

Trying to squeeze the shoulder blades closer together in the back, to stop the shoulders from pushing forward and pulling in, leads to a distorted posture. The only way to do it is by lengthening the back, widening at the shoulders and at the top of the chest, and then simply letting the shoulders sit back naturally.

Pulling down in the upper chest is one of the 'occupational hazards' of playing the violin or viola, and is often the very first thing to change in a student. It is often possible to bring about a complete transformation of the overall playing by correcting this single factor.

Pulling down in playing

It is all-too-easy to link many different kinds of bowing and left hand actions, and musical feelings as well, with a simultaneous pulling-down – so that the scroll is always brought down lower whenever a particular note or phrase is played.

When you cut the link between these actions, so that (say) playing a strong accent with the bow does not automatically trigger shortening the muscles in the front of the body, an extraordinary new sense of economy, freedom, control, focus and stature immediately enters the overall playing.

Watching some players performing some large string crossings, and pulling down as they did so, the Alexander teacher Walter Carrington observed: 'You've got to go up to go up, and you've got to up to go down!'

(1) Lengthen the back and keep the violin level

(2) Lengthen the back and keep the violin level

(1) Suppose you play up from the A string to the E string: you've got to go up to go up. If you pull down as you go up, the tone may weaken; the bow may slide away from the bridge; your body contracts and your breathing is constricted, and so on.

Instead, lengthen the back as you crescendo up the arpeggio, with a feeling of raising the chest and becoming taller. Keep the scroll still, or allow it to rise slightly, with a feeling of buoyancy in the

A Pulling down

B Lengthening the back and raising the chest

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instrument so that it floats on a cushion of air without any hint of dropping with gravity. Feel the strings wanting to meet the bow hair as much as the hair wants to meet the strings.

- (2) Suppose you play down from the A string to the G string: you've got to go up to go down. Lengthen the back, raise the chest, keep the scroll still or allow it to rise slightly, just as when playing ascending.

Another effect of pulling down is that the violin becomes too tilted as you draw the shoulders in. One way to avoid pulling down is to link lengthening the back, or raising the chest, with flattening the violin. Instead of them being two unrelated subjects, see them as two parts of the same thing:

- Use a certain amount of lengthening your back in order to flatten the violin.
- Flatten the violin in order to lengthen the back.

Swaying around a centre of balance

Not pulling down does not mean that you have to hold yourself still. Experiment with swaying and rotating in order to find a middle point of balance, freedom and naturalness:

- (1) Rotate upper body to the right Rotate left Rotate right Rotate left

- (2) Lean whole body to the right, onto right foot Lean on to the left foot Lean right Lean left

- (1) With your feet not moving from a neutral playing position (i.e. level with each other, slightly apart and turned slightly outwards), turn your upper body almost 90° round to the right as you play the down-bow, and the same round to the left as you play the up-bow.

Arrive at the point as you finish turning to the right; at the heel as you finish turning to the left.

Rotate 'all-of-a-piece', i.e. do not move the violin round with the left arm. The relationship of the bow to the violin, and the speed of the bow, should stay the same as when you remain still.

Look for a feeling of smoothness and flow, and of 'going with the bow'.

- (2) Instead of rotating, lean your whole body to the right during the down-bow, so that your left foot almost leaves the floor; lean on to the left foot during the up-bow.

Feel your whole body as one piece, with your weight going heavily into the floor through your feet.

- (3) Combine (1) and (2) so that while rotating you lean your whole body to the right during the down-bow, so that your left foot almost leaves the floor; rotate and lean on to the left foot during the up-bow.