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# BASICS

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## Contacting the bow

### Holding or balancing

It has often been said that the terms ‘bow-hold’ or ‘bow-grip’ are misleading, since they may encourage the player to ‘grip’ the bow rather than to ‘balance’ it in the hand.

In fact at times the bow does need to be held firmly, while at other times you should not be ‘holding’ the bow by squeezing it between the fingers, but balancing it in the fingers with little sensation of holding. To find the feeling of balancing rather than holding, simply support the bow in the air without the second or third fingers on the bow (Figure 1).

Feel the weight of the bow pushing up into your little finger (the finger curved, the tip on the top of the bow). Feel the weight also pushing into the thumb, and into the first finger on the side of the bow. If you took any of these off the bow it would fall; but there is no feeling whatsoever of ‘holding’. It is more that the bow pushes into the fingers, than that the fingers press against the bow.

The string itself supports the bow when the bow is sitting on the string, making it even easier to balance and guide the bow within the hand instead of actively gripping it.

The moment just before the bow touches the string, before beginning to play, is an example of when you might balance the bow in the hand more than hold it. Balancing the bow often happens during the many moments between strokes, and during rests; as well as during many strokes themselves, from *spiccato* and *sautillé* to ordinary *détaché* strokes along the string.

Whether you ‘grip’ or ‘balance’ often depends on the strength or ‘bite’ of the notes. The more powerful the stroke, the more strongly you hold the bow. ‘Gripping the bow firmly’ happens only for moments at a time, against a general background of ‘balancing the bow in the hand’. To avoid tension, it must never be the other way round, i.e. odd moments of balancing against a general background of gripping.

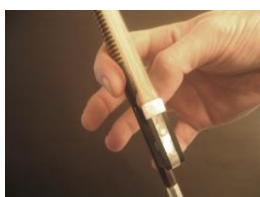
### Feeling the creases

The fingers on the bow divide into two groups: those that contact the bow on the tips of the fingers, and those that contact it on the crease at the joint nearest the nail.

- The tip of the thumb contacts the bow, one side leaning against the black thumb-piece and the other side on the bow or the thumb leather. Sometimes the tip of the fourth finger sits on top of the bow, sometimes on the upper inside edge, depending on the tilt of the bow. You cannot put the pad of either finger on the bow without the finger straightening.

The other three fingers actively and positively contact the bow at the creases:

- The only contact of the **second finger** with the bow is at the crease, opposite the thumb and countering it (Figure 2). This is the centre of the bow hold and the thumb–second contact often needs to be strong. The nail joint has no job whatsoever to do in holding the bow, and the tip must not curl in and try to touch the thumb.
- The **first finger** has two jobs to do, on top of the stick and on the side of the stick. The first finger should never contact the stick between the knuckle joint and the middle joint (unless you use the old Leopold Auer method), but between the middle joint and the nail joint. The contact points depend on where in the bow you play, but at the heel – and further down the bow as well – much of the alive contact is at the crease of the first joint.
- Playing anywhere in the bow, feel the crease of the **third finger** firmly contacting the top and outer edge of the bow. In the lower half, the pad of the third finger contacts the frog also. Playing in the upper half it is natural for the pad of the third finger to come away from the frog slightly, but the contact with the bow at the crease remains strong throughout.



**Figure 1** The bow is balanced in the hand, not held



**Figure 2** Squeeze the bow between the thumb and the second

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Holding the bow in your left hand, experiment with the sensations of firm contact at the creases:

- Without the other fingers on the bow, squeeze the bow between the tip of the thumb and the crease of the second finger (Figure 2).
- Without the second or fourth fingers on the bow, pull in with the first and third (Figure 3). Do not push with the thumb, but feel the contact at the creases as you counter the fingers with the thumb.
- Without the thumb or fourth on the bow, feel the creases of the three middle fingers (Fig. 4).

Then find the same sensations of contact at the creases while playing with a normal bow hold.

## Not feeling the contact at the creases

The alternatives to contacting the bow with the creases of the first, second and third fingers, are either for the creases to be above the upper, outside edge of the bow, or below it.

If the creases are below the edge, the hand feels too low on the bow and cramped; the ends of the second and third fingers may protrude too low below the frog; and the alive contact at the creases is lost.

If the creases are above the edge, so that you are holding the bow closer to the ends of the fingers, there is a curious feeling of insecurity and lack of easy control, and a constant need to squeeze the fingers in opposition with the thumb in order to keep hold of the bow.

## The alive bow hold

The fingers on the bow should not be static or immobile, but always alive to the bow, injecting subtle influences into the bow and into the string.

A good image for children is to imagine that there are little electronic, touch-sensitive key-pads, buttons or sensors at each of the contact points of the fingers with the bow. The slightest extra impulse from any part of the finger tips, creases or pads, is picked up by the sensor and turned into some effect on the bow.

There are 9 'buttons' to press: the first finger has three: the part of the finger on top of the bow, the crease at the first joint, and the pad of the first finger; the crease of the second finger; the crease and pad of the third; the tip of the fourth; and one on each side of the tip of the thumb.

If you only hold the bow using the fingers like pincers, and then use the arm to move the bow up and down along the string, none of the sensors register anything. Instead, use every opportunity to feel the bow at each of the contact points, and use the 'electronic buttons' in endless different combinations according to what you are playing.

## Pulling in with the third finger

Ivan Galamian might have told you to practise a piece without your second or fourth fingers on the bow, i.e. holding the bow with only the thumb, first and third fingers.

The point of the exercise was to sensitise the third finger to its contact with the bow. Lucien Capet, one of Ivan Galamian's teachers, described the role of the third finger as being the 'spiritual guide' of the bow hand. Sándor Végh called the third finger 'the tone finger of the bow'.

Feeling this sensitive contact of the third finger with the bow is a subtle detail of technique that surprisingly seems to be generally ignored by many players and teachers. Carl Flesch dismissed it entirely, saying that 'the third finger plays a subordinate part, and is passive rather than active'; yet when an active third finger is added to the bow hand, the transformation is always immediate and obvious.

In many strokes – particularly firm, deep-in-the-string playing, or for example during the 'bite' of *martelé* – a great strength, focus and control comes into the bow hand if you pull in firmly with the pad of the third finger.



**Figure 3** Pull in with the first and third, countering with the thumb



**Figure 4** Pull against the bow with the arm, feeling the creases on the bow

[The third finger] is in a sense the *Spiritual guide* in the domain of general sensitivity of the fingers on the stick. While the thumb and middle finger stay always at their post, being the very centre of all the principal movements, one must view the 3rd finger as a watchman who, by his artful presence, complements the role established by each finger; it increases the sweetness or strength, the sensitivity or assuredness. It is this finger which must bring ultimate sensitivity in this mysterious communication among the fingers which unite in the realization of an infinitely varied ideal.

Lucien Capet