
BASICS

Holding the violin

Fit the instrument to you, not yourself to the instrument

The first principle of holding the violin is to arrange the instrument, chin rest and shoulder rest (if you use one) to fit and suit you, rather than trying to fit yourself to them.

Similarly, you have to bring the instrument up to you, rather than taking yourself forwards to the instrument.

The French cellist Paul Tortelier was once staying with a friend who was a flautist. One day Tortelier came downstairs and said: 'I've had enough of practising the cello today. Will you show me how to play the flute?'

As he picked up the flute and began to bring it towards his mouth, he pulled down in his upper chest and bent forwards slightly; thrust his head as far forwards as it could go while sticking his chin out and slightly up; and raised both shoulders as his hands moved upwards.

His friend immediately scolded him. 'Paul!', she said. 'You would never go to play your cello like that. You bring the instrument to you! You don't take yourself to the instrument!'

Tortelier pretended to look shamefaced, like a child who has been caught doing something naughty.

Shoulder-instrument players are particularly prone to pulling down and leaning forwards as they pick up the instrument.

- Find a posture where you are upright and balanced, whether standing or sitting. Lengthen your back and raise your chest, and feel your head sitting balanced on top of your spine.
- Practise raising the violin and bow without moving your back or altering the balance of your head.

Starting from above

A traditional way to get a feeling of the violin being light, rather than it feeling like a heavy weight that you somehow have to keep in the air, is to start with the violin held high above your head. Begin as in Fig. 1 but with your hand directly above your shoulder with your arm straight.

When you then descend from there into playing position, the violin feels light and buoyant.

Raising the violin quickly

If you raise the violin to your shoulder quickly, the instrument feels much lighter – once it arrives on your shoulder – than if you raise it slowly.

- Starting with the violin hanging down vertically from your left hand (Fig. 2), there is a kind of a 'flick' you can do with the left hand that throws the violin up, and into position, in one go.

It is almost the same movement as when you lift the violin up slowly, except that you make the beginning of the movement very quickly, and then *follow* the violin up into playing position.

The violin feels light because after the initial lift, or push, you really are not lifting the weight of the violin – it travels under its own momentum – and you really are just lifting your arm into the air.

Lifting with the right hand

Although you may not do this during the normal course of playing (though you might), you can get a clear feeling of lightness, and of the instrument 'floating', if you 'flick' the violin up into position using the right hand. The left hand feels light and easy because it has nothing to do with raising the instrument into position.

- Starting in the position shown in Fig. 3, use the right hand to flick the violin up into position.

Because the violin travels with its own momentum the left hand merely follows, and there is no sensation of the left hand lifting any weight whatsoever.



Fig. 1 'Throw' the violin onto your shoulder with a flick of the left hand



Fig 2 'Push' the violin onto your shoulder with a flick of the right hand

BASICS

Adjusting the 4 planes

1 Scroll up or down.

It is not so usual to see the scroll of the violin held too high, but a too-low scroll is not uncommon. This is bad for posture since it encourages pulling down with the instrument; tone may weaken as the bow constantly moves towards the fingerboard; and most bow strokes feel best when the string is not sloping down away from the bridge.

Since the neck of the violin slopes down from the body, if you want the strings to be flat the scroll has to be raised so that the instrument itself is at a slight angle.

The angle also affects the workings of the bow arm: the higher the scroll, the further forward the upper arm has to push to keep the bow parallel with the bridge at the point. Raising the scroll is like shortening the arm.

- To form the habit of keeping the violin up, practise with a music stand under the scroll (Fig. 4). Keep the scroll hovering just above the music stand, without ever touching it.

2 Scroll left or right

The correct angle of the violin to the body depends firstly on the length of your arms: shorter arms, point the scroll more to the right; longer arms, point the scroll more to the left. Ideally, when the bow is on the string at the point, the right arm ends up neither too straight at the elbow, nor too bent, but somewhere in between.

The correct angle also depends on where in the bow you are playing: an extended passage at the heel is often more comfortable for the right arm if the scroll moves slightly more to the left; playing at the point, it may be more comfortable with the scroll pointing slightly less to the left.

3 Chin rest left or right

A small change at the chin rest end of the violin affects the path of the bow more than a small change at the scroll end:

- Shorter arms: violin higher on shoulder, so that the chin is nearer to, or directly above, the tail piece. This shortens the distance the bow arm has to move, and helps avoid ending up with an entirely straight arm at the point.
- Longer arms: violin lower on shoulder, so that the chin is further to the left of the tail-piece. This lengthens the distance the bow arm has to move, and helps avoid ending up with nearly a right angle at the elbow when playing at the point.

4 Tilt

- The more tilted the violin the easier it is to play on the G string, but the worse it is to play on the E string because the bow is too vertical. Then it feels as though you are bowing against the side of the string. The string lends no support to the bow, and the arm cannot relax into the string.
- The flatter the violin, the easier it is to play on the E string. The bow movement is more horizontal, the string supports the bow and the bow arm can relax into the string. However, the flatter the violin, the higher the right arm has to play to reach the G string.

Therefore, the best possible tilt is one where you can reach the G string easily enough, while at the same time having enough support when playing on the E string.

Violinists who always play second violin (perhaps in an orchestra or a quartet) often hold their violin with an exaggerated tilt, while those who play first violin tend to hold it flatter.

This makes sense because if you play second violin you usually spend more time playing on the lower strings than on the upper strings. You can always flatten the violin more during phrases or passages on the higher strings.

If you play first violin you often spend more time playing on the upper strings, and you can always tilt the violin more during passages on the lower strings.

The Russian violinist Jascha Heifetz said that when you shift up, you should actually be shifting 'down' – because of the downward slope towards the bridge when the scroll is held up.



Fig 3 Hover just above the stand without touching it