

---

# BASICS

---

## Right hand sensitivity

### Understanding curves

No bow stroke on the violin moves in a straight line: every stroke curves or moves in a slight arc. The bow plays *around* the string even if this is so slight as to be imperceptible. Watch the path that the right hand and frog takes through the air:



It is obvious that a note pattern like the one shown in (1) is a series of curves and circles; and that the pattern shown in (2) produces a wavy line; but the crucial point is that two long notes played on one string (3) are not in a straight line either, but actually form a figure eight.

As a pair of notes, the two short *martelé* strokes shown in (4) form a figure eight, and each stroke has its own curves within the overall figure eight as well.

#### True story: Joe

One of my first pupils was a boy of 9 who I taught until he was 12. In those three years he developed from a rather poor elementary standard into a rather poor intermediate standard. He always had a ‘wooden’ bow arm and was never able to find that sensuous quality of bowing that distinguishes a natural string player.

We worked together constantly on his bowing, with no real progress except that as time went by he was able to play more complicated pieces – but still with the same wooden tone and tension. He practised various tone production and flexibility exercises, but nothing seemed to help much, or for long.

Finally, in an everyday conversation about playing or technique, a new fragment of thought came up which explained why progress had been so limited. *He had always thought that the bow moves in a straight line.*

Perhaps the very first time he saw someone playing a violin, he unconsciously registered the impression of the bow moving in a straight line as a fact. Or perhaps his first teachers, in trying to get him to draw the bow parallel with the bridge, had unintentionally communicated the idea of a straight line. Wherever it had come from, this single erroneous idea of a straight line, hidden at the back of his mind but active there, short-circuited his every effort to play.

If you want to demonstrate a tense and awkward bow arm, you do not need to try to be tense and awkward. Instead, all you need to do is to try to draw the bow in a straight line, and the symptoms appear at once with startling naturalness.

With sufficient will-power and determination many players can reach quite a high standard even with such a crucial deficiency as trying to play in a straight line – but there will always be an element of strain or ‘something not quite right’ about their playing.

The moment you encourage more curves into your bowing, every stroke immediately feels more natural and flowing, and free of tension. But how to do this?

#### Encouraging more curves into your playing

The simple realisation that even one note, played on one string, consists of a curved line, is often already enough to bring about a change: a new physical freedom, and more sense of naturally singing through the bow, often immediately enters the playing.

- Feel the hand playing deeply into the curve of the bow, e.g. following the stick down to the middle of the bow, and then raising again during the last part of the down-bow in the upper half.
- At the heel the hair gives and the wood of the bow is rigid; at the point the wood gives (in the middle of the bow) and the hair is rigid. In the middle of the bow, both the hair and the wood give.

This adds to the feeling of the hand ‘curving down’ into the bow during the down-bow from heel to middle, and the feeling of ‘ascent’ in the curve as you continue from middle to point.

---

# BASICS

---

Exercises such as the following can help very quickly:



- Feel the curve as the bow travels towards the D or E string while sustaining the A string.
- Continue to make the double stop shorter until you end up sustaining one long A, down-bow and up-bow, while still feeling the arcs in the path of the frog rather than straight lines.

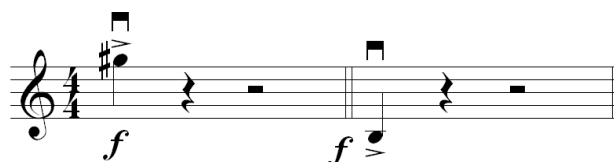
These are not the actual arcs that the bow travels during one long down or up bow, since they depend on what you are playing; but they help in getting away from any feeling of a straight line.

## Being sympathetic to the string

When you stroke a cat it is not enough that you *wish* to stroke the cat, or that you enjoy stroking it; you must understand *what it feels like to be the cat being stroked by you*.

When you apply the bow to the string, you must understand what it feels like to be the string being played by you.

Instead of 'playing the violin' the way you think best, look at it more from the violin's point of view: how would it like to be played? Consider any attacks like the following on the E string or G string:



When a pupil brings the bow down towards the string to play notes like these, it often seems as though they are not considering what the string itself might like. The gesture they make with the bow is what they think they should do, or what they have been taught to do.

But if you look at the event – the moment the hair of the bow impacts on to the string – from the string's point of view, you use the bow differently as you consider different questions: what sort of impact might the string prefer? At what angle might the string wish the hair to meet it (more rounded or more vertical); how weak or strong is the string at the point of impact; how far from, or close to, the bridge might the string prefer the contact, the impact?

Picture the moment that the hair lands on the string as though through a strong magnifying glass. See it very close up and with every detail enlarged enormously. Picture it in slow motion, as though you are watching the action-replay of a moment in a sports event on television.

How exactly would that event appear magnified? Imagine the vast bow moving through the air and landing with a tremendous impact on the string. How would the hair and the string behave at the moment of contact? How would the string most like to be approached and landed on by the bow?

What is the difference between what the E string might like, and what the G string might like? The taut, thin, highly-strung metal E string feels happiest with a stroke that is quite different from the one which the slacker, thicker G string would most like. What is the difference at the moment of impact, seen from close up and in slow motion?

---

Next month's BASICS returns to the left hand with helpful exercises for freeing the finger action.