
BASICS

Undoing tension

Chain reactions

For want of a nail the
shoe was lost
For want of a shoe the
horse was lost
For want of a horse
the rider was lost
For want of a rider the
battle was lost
For want of a battle
the kingdom was lost
And all for the want
of a nail
Rudyard Kipling

When you feel tension or other blockages in your arms, hands and fingers, there are usually a multitude of interrelated factors responsible.

Many of these factors are subtle or imperceptible aspects of technique which, although seemingly insignificant, set off chain-reactions of tension that spreads throughout the entire playing. To paraphrase Rudyard Kipling:

Because the fingers pressed too hard into the strings, the hand was tense
Because the hand was tense, the intonation was unreliable
Because the intonation was unreliable, the player held back and became over-cautious
Because the player held back, the audience was not moved
And all just because of pressing the fingers too hard.

Playing too far from the bridge is the direct cause of many different types of problem in violin playing:

Because the violinist played too far from the bridge, the string was too soft to take the weight of the bow
Because the string could not take the weight of the bow, there was no attack and the tone was small
Because there was no attack and the tone was small, there was no excitement
Because there was no excitement, the audience was not excited
And all just because of playing too far from the bridge.

There are likely to be many separate chain-reactions all occurring at the same time, starting in different places and reinforcing each other in a complex network of cause and effect.

Pressing and squeezing

Any degree of pressing causes knock-on effects because where there is pressure there must also be counterpressure, which may lead to a feeling of squeezing. Squeezing requires muscle contraction, which leads to loss of elasticity or springiness; and with the loss of springiness, the loss of unconscious instantaneous adjustment and mobility.

Here are some of the most common examples of squeezing:

- Squeezing together the base of the left thumb and the base of the first finger (Ill. 1), rather than keeping a degree of space and neutrality (Ill. 2).
- Squeezing the left fingers together (Ill. 3). Whether or not there is any space between the fingers makes no difference, and anyway depends on the shape of the fingers and the particular notes that are played. The single thing to avoid at all times is any degree of sideways squeezing together.
The ideal is that when using one finger, the other three remain entirely neutral without any reaction of tightening, pulling together, curving or straightening.
- Squeezing the neck of the violin between the fingers and thumb through over-pressing the strings. The less downward finger pressure, the less counterpressure is required from the thumb. The right degree of finger pressure is usually 'only as much as necessary to make a pure tone and no more'. However, since pressing the string harder creates different tonal colours – and since no colours should be ruled out – there is no harm in using heavier fingers when desired. The important thing is to release the fingers again afterwards, and never to allow something like over-pressing the string to become a rigidly fixed way of playing.
- Squeezing the violin between the neck and collar bone. For most playing, the weight of the head alone is enough to keep the violin securely in place. However, during descending shifts it is often necessary to hold the violin more firmly for a brief moment. Again there is nothing wrong with that, and it is a natural, instinctive thing that most players do automatically without realising that they are doing it. But a fixed state of pressing down into the chin rest inevitably creates tension in the neck and shoulders.

PHOTO 1
Caption:
Do not squeeze
the thumb and
first finger
together

PHOTO 2
Caption:
Keeping a space
between the
thumb and first
finger

PHOTO 3
Caption:
Squeezing the
fingers together

PHOTO 4
The fingers
remaining
neutral

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- Squeezing the bow between the fingers and thumb. One ideal is to be able to balance the bow in the hand rather than 'hold' it; but again this depends on what you are playing. The louder the dynamic or the stronger the attack, the more firmly you may need to hold the bow. Holding the bow too tightly is a cause of problems for many players, but again there is nothing
- Pressing upwards with the right thumb while pressing down with the first finger. The thumb should never actively press upwards into the bow.

Curing the problems is usually surprisingly easy

Although you can have an endless number of chain-reactions occurring all at once and tangled up together, in fact they all stem from a limited number of areas.

By making sure of only one thing – such as no longer over-pressing the left fingers and thumb – you prevent all the possible chain-reactions that require over-pressing in order to start in the first place. By not over-pressing the chin into the chin-rest, your neck and shoulders remain free; they in turn do not reduce the freedom of the upper arms, which then help keep the lower arms and hands free, and so on.

Here are some other common first causes of chain-reactions that may lead to tension or awkwardness:

- Angling the scroll of the violin too much to the left or to the right. At the point of the bow, the ideal is that the right arm is neither too straight nor too bent at the elbow. Positioning the scroll too much to the left makes it difficult to reach the point. Positioning it too much to the right causes a cramped feeling when bowing at the heel.
- Tensing and raising the shoulders. Keep the shoulders free – neither raising them or holding them down unnaturally.
- Locking the left upper arm. The upper arm should change its position depending on the string: more to the left for the E string, more to the right for the G string; more to the right in higher positions.
- Locking, or pushing out, the left wrist. Keep a feeling of giving in the wrist.
- Tension in the left base joints. Keep the palm of the hand soft.
- Left finger on the wrong part of the tip, disturbing the correct angle and balance of the hand. The great Armenian-American teacher Ivan Galamian said that if the fingertip placement is correct, the rest of the hand and left arm automatically falls into the correct position. When working on technique and general set-up, many players are unsuccessful in trying to make changes in the position of the hand and arm because they do not at the same time allow a different part of the fingertip to contact the string.
- Vibrato finger pressure equal during the forwards and backwards movement. There should be an infinitesimal release of the string during the backward movement of the finger. The finger leans slightly more into the string during the forward movement of the vibrato, which goes to the in-tune pitch, and releases during the backward, flattening movement. An equal pressure backwards and forwards – and especially if the finger is over-pressing in the first place – is alone enough to make the entire left hand feel heavy and cumbersome.
- Right first finger placed too close to the thumb, reducing the natural force of leverage. There should not be one, fixed bow hold since different dynamics and different strokes require different approaches in the right hand. How you hold a spade depends on the type of ground you are digging. But in forceful playing it helps if the first finger is moved slightly further away from the thumb, and the second finger may move a little up the bow with it.
- First joint of the first finger curling in too forcibly against the bow.
- First joint of the second finger on the bow not remaining neutral, but pulling in towards the thumb.
- Thumb or fourth finger contacting the bow on the pad of the finger instead of on the tip.
- Thumb bending inwards instead of outwards.
- Wrist too high or too low.
- Blocked forearm rotation. Forearm rotation is a similar movement to that of turning a key, and a small amount is part of many bow strokes and other actions of the right arm. The forearm should turn anticlockwise during one simple bow stroke from heel to point, with more turning naturally happening on the upper strings and less on the lower strings.