
BASICS

Balancing the right arm

Finding the violin position

(1) Natural, balanced, 'middle' position

Fit the violin to the bow arm rather than the other way round. The best violin position is more the one that suits your right arm than the one that suits your left.

The ideal is to be able to arrive at the point, at the end of the down-bow, with the bow parallel to the bridge but with the arm neither too straight nor too bent. One way to find a good violin position is as follows:

1 With the right arm in playing position without the bow, make a right-angle at the elbow.

Allow the arm to find its natural, balanced, 'middle' position (Fig. 1), so that the upper arm is neither too far back nor too far forward. Keep the elbow more or less level with the bow.

2 Without moving the right arm, with your left hand place the bow in your right hand and angle the bow so that it is parallel with the upper arm (Fig. 2).

3 Again without altering the position of the bow or right arm, put the violin under your chin. Adjust the direction of the scroll so that the strings and the right forearm are parallel (Fig. 3).

Notice how there is a right-angle at the elbow, and another between the bow and the strings; and the forearm and strings are parallel, as are the upper arm and bow.

Now if you bow from this position (which the Armenian-American teacher Ivan Galamian called 'the square') to the point, you should end up at the point with the arm neither too straight nor too bent (Fig. 4).

(2) The bow is parallel with the upper arm

(3) The strings are parallel with the forearm

The tilt of the violin

- The more tilted the violin the easier it is for the right arm to bow on the G string, and for the left fourth finger to reach the G string in first position; but the worse it is to play on the E string because when the violin is too tilted the bow is too vertical on the upper strings. Then it feels as though you are bowing against the side of the E string. The string lends no support to the bow, the arm cannot relax into the string, and the tone is weak.

- The flatter the violin the more the E string supports the bow, which can rest on the string with a feeling of balance; but the bow or left fourth finger both have much further to go to reach the G string.

- Therefore, it is logical to suppose that a position midway between the two extremes - where it is easy-enough to reach the G string, and at the same time the E string supports the bow sufficiently without the bow being too vertical - must be the ideal.

However, a better approach might be to say that the best tilt is 'as much as necessary but as little as possible'. Because it is not just the E string that feels better with a flatter violin: just about all bow strokes on the other strings do too. There is a different and better feeling in the bow arm. All the lifted bowings, from spiccato to ricochet, work better too with a flatter violin.

Try it for yourself and see: keeping the elbow more-or-less on the same level as the bow, play a few strokes with the violin quite tilted (Fig. 5), and then again with the violin quite flat (Fig. 6). With the instrument flat it is like having a completely different bow arm.

Everybody has to find their own best position. Some may be less comfortable with the violin less tilted than it could be; others are perfectly comfortable with a very flat violin. But if you don't want the violin too flat, the essential thing is that it must not be too tilted.

(4) The arm is neither too straight nor too bent

(5) Playing with a tilted violin compromises the right arm

(6) Playing with an almost-flat violin liberates the right arm

BASICS

Three points of elevation

There are three places in the bow arm to consider: how high are the knuckles, how high is the wrist, and how high is the elbow. How high or low should they be?

If you asked the Greek philosopher Aristotle for his opinion, he would probably remind you that the best course usually exists somewhere in the middle between two extremes. Therefore the knuckles, wrist and elbow must not be too high, nor too low. You have to discover for yourself, through simple experimentation, where the exact 'middle' point occurs between the two extremes, and of course it depends on what you are playing and where in the bow you are.

Bowing out to the side

Many players have an unhelpful mental picture of the right arm moving to and fro from left to right. This results in bowing 'round the corner' with the upper arm too far back and the bow crooked to the bridge (Fig. 7). Most of the time the right arm does not so much move to the right and left, as much as forwards and backwards.

Experiment

- **Student:** draw the bow to the point, keeping the bow parallel with the bridge, and stop there with the bow on the string (Fig. 4).
- **Teacher or assistant:** while the student holds their position, take the violin and bow out of their hands. Fig. 8 shows the same position as Fig. 4 but with the instrument removed.

Note where the right hand is: almost or directly in front of the shoulder, not out to the right.

(7) The upper arm is too far back and the bow crooked to the bridge

(8) Having taken the instrument away

Uniting the bow arm

The different areas of the bow each require different combinations of movements in the arm - for example, there is more upper-arm movement when playing in the lower half, more forearm movement in the upper half - and each area can be practised separately. But in the end you have to find a feeling of one down-bow movement from heel to point, and one up-bow movement back again, rather than having a collection of many individual movements which you try to join together as you play.

The Russian violinist David Oistrakh's bow arm is a classic example. There is no sense of the different bits of the bow arm in his bowing: he simply moves down-bow from the heel to the point, and up-bow from the point to the heel, as one action, with all the individual actions merged into one.

This traditional exercise is a good one for finding the feeling of 'one action' to move the bow from one end to the other:

Use a mirror to check that the bow remains parallel to the bridge.

- 1 Play a very small stroke at the heel (H). Stop on the string and wait.
- 2 Make a sudden, fast movement in the air to the other end of the bow, and place the bow on the string at the point (P). Stop on the string and wait.
- 3 Play a very small stroke at the point and leave the bow on the string. Wait.
- 4 Make a sudden, fast movement in the air to the heel, and place the bow on the string..

After each wait, move the bow as fast as possible, keeping it strictly parallel with the bridge. During the journey the hand must change from heel position (fingers slightly more vertical, fourth finger curved), to point position (fingers slightly more tilted to the left, fourth finger straighter).



Next month's Basics looks at single-finger scales and arpeggios