
BASICS

Unlocking

The basis of all playing must be balance and physical freedom. All too often we spend our practice time working on problems of the left hand or right, when actually what we need to do first is to find a basic balance and freedom throughout our entire system. Then things work much more easily in the first place.

General tension throughout the body is bound to include the neck and shoulders, and tension there has to spread to the arms and then to the hands and fingers. Then it can become less and less productive to practise problematic passages over and over again, trying to get them sounding well and in tune, if the basis of the playing is not one of freedom.

While it may seem a daunting task to try to find such a basis of freedom if you do not already have it – and if it seems that you already have enough to think about just trying to get around the notes – in fact there are certain key issues which make an enormous difference and more freedom can be gained very quickly indeed.

Freeing the middle of the back and the costal arch

The costal arch is the place near the solar plexus at the bottom of the rib cage where the ribs divide. It is an essential area for violinists and violists to keep free. This becomes obvious when you consider what happens when you walk: the upper back moves in contrary motion to the lower back. As your shoulders swing clockwise your hips swing anticlockwise, and vice versa.

Next time you are sitting in a restaurant notice how waiters manage to keep trays of drinks level while bringing them to the tables. They keep their arms and shoulders, and therefore the upper body, absolutely immobile. But something has to give somewhere. So the lower half of the body, from the costal arch downwards, swings from side to side much more than normal. If this swinging motion did not occur they would simply fall over within one or two steps.

- Imagine a cross drawn on your back, one line going from left shoulder to right hip, the other from right shoulder to left hip. The point where the lines intersect is the place where the two halves of your back meet. It is essential not to tighten or 'fix' at this point, but to remain free and mobile.
- Similarly, constantly lengthen and widen and stay free in the same place in the front of the body.

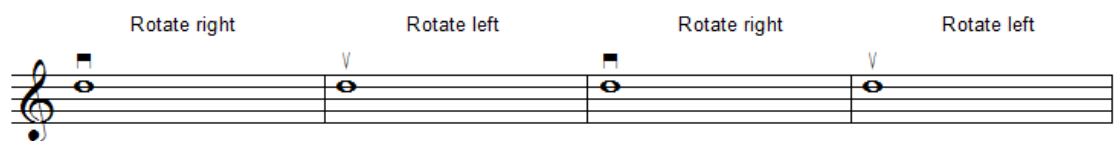
Whether playing the violin standing or sitting, rigid fixing in this area leads to loss of balance and slight stiffening through the whole back, which in turn affects how the arms feel. Keep this area free so that there is an imperceptible degree of movement there during every bow stroke. If you can see it while you are playing, it will be too much; but if you are locked there everything feels more difficult than it needs to.

Exercise

Sit down to play this exercise so that your hips do not move. Feel your sitting bones pressing into the chair without leaning more on to one side or the other.

Play simple long, slow strokes on one string. During the down-bows rotate your upper body clockwise as far as you can go; during the up-bows rotate anticlockwise.

Feel how all the give occurs at the costal arch because the hips remain still. You can simply think of moving the scroll to right and left, but make sure you do it with the whole upper part of your back rather than just moving your left arm on its own.



Then, having started off with a large movement from side to side gradually make it smaller and smaller until the movement is barely visible, i.e. you are still rotating to the right on the down bow and to the left on the up bow, but moving only a millimeter either side of the middle point.

Finally make no deliberate rotational movement at all. Think of a pendulum decreasing to a standstill and ending up at its perfect balance-point. As you continue to bow up and down notice a new sensation of lightness, balance and freedom at the costal arch. Your arms and shoulders will have a new buoyancy about them as well.

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Not twisting the back

Without ‘fixing’ yourself in place, as a general rule keep the shoulders and hips facing the same direction. Twisting the back, so that the shoulders face one way and the hips another, prevents easy spring-like mobility in the middle of the back.

A big problem for many orchestral and chamber music players, unless they are tall with a long back, is how to bow at the point on the E string without bumping their right hand into their right leg.

An easy solution which many players adopt is simply to bow to the right of the right leg. But this means the spine is twisted, with the shoulders at a 45-degree angle to the hips. Some put their right foot more under the chair to lower the height of the knee when they play at the point on the E string, but for many players this does not feel comfortable.

There are two things to do that avoid the drawbacks of twisting or of moving your right foot. First, when playing on the E string make sure the scroll of the violin is high enough. Second, make sure it is flat enough.

Use exaggeration to see the result of raising the scroll and flattening the violin: raise the scroll absurdly high, and hold the violin so that it is quite flat. Notice the plane of the bow on the E string: instead of bowing towards your leg, your right hand should now be moving out somewhere in front of your face.

Not pulling down

One of the number one things not to do when playing the violin or viola is to lose the length of your back, to go with gravity and pull down in the upper chest.

Apart from the physical constriction that this involves, it is difficult to play with a flat violin if you pull down; and the resulting excessive tilt causes many problems of tone and of bowing in general. You have a completely different bow arm that uses different sets of muscles if you lengthen your back, raise your chest, and allow the shoulders to sit back in their sockets.

Make a connection between lengthening your back and keeping the instrument not too tilted:

Lengthen the back by flattening the violin

Flatten the violin by lengthening the back

- An excellent thing to do from time to time is to practise with your spine against an edge such as the corner of a cupboard, a jutting-out corner of a room, or an open door.

Position your feet slightly behind the edge that you are standing against so that you can stand perfectly upright while contacting the edge near the bottom and top of the spine – with a space between the two contact points large enough to slide a hand into.

Try to become taller by tucking your chin in and lengthening the back of your neck as though trying to contact the edge with a lower and lower point on the back of the head.

- Rotate your hip joint backwards as if trying to contact the edge at a higher and higher point up the spine.
- Similarly, raise your chest as if trying to move the upper point of contact higher up the spine.

Do not raise the chest by trying to squeeze the shoulder blades closer together. Raise the chest by lengthening the back. At the same time *widen* across the back at the shoulder blades.

Regularly practise in this position for a few minutes at a time.

Rocking from foot to foot

If you have any sense of being at all stuck or ‘locked’ while playing, this is a nice and simple way to activate all kinds of natural, self-balancing instincts: playing standing up, and playing the same long bows as before, lean all of your weight on to the right foot during the down-bow and on to the left foot during the up-bow. Allow the other foot to leave the floor entirely. Notice how good your bow arm and shoulders feel after a minute or so of doing this.

You can go on from there to playing scales or even passages from etudes or pieces while rocking from foot to foot.