
BASICS

Keeping yourself free

Fig. 1.

Many string players suffer from aching muscles or, over time, gradual loss of freedom of movement. When aches and pains are bad enough to force someone to seek medical advice, they are often advised to stop playing altogether for a period of days or weeks. While in certain cases this may be the right thing to do, it is more often quite unnecessary. The following simple procedures are extremely helpful and effective in eliminating pain or loss of freedom without having to stop playing. But use them even if you do not have any aches or pains. With these methods you can improve the physical freedom of your playing and make a sudden and surprisingly major improvement in your overall technique. And regular use of them will prevent any serious problems from developing later on.

Do be careful. If you have any existing problems and are unsure whether you should apply any of these methods, do discuss them with your medical advisor before trying them.

Fig. 2.

Manipulating the wrist

You can get an astonishing result by gently manipulating the eight bones in your left wrist, which is very easy to do. You can also find a new rubbery springiness in the right wrist by doing the same there.

You have to use your instinct and common sense as to how hard to do it, but the key thing is that even a slight push, even so slight as to be barely noticeable, has an effect. However, if you feel little resistance and can find a slight springiness in the bone as you push against it, you can probably be less cautious. It is this feeling of springiness, rather than rigidity, that is the ideal and the objective. But the key point is that force is not the issue and must never be used. It is more a matter of giving the bones the gentlest, most subtle encouragement to be free. (Of course, it is not the bones themselves that are not free, but everything attached to them.)

Fig. 3.

- With the left palm facing up, place the fingers of your right hand on the back of your wrist, and use your thumb to push against the large, protruding bone on the right side of the wrist (Fig. 1). As you do so keep the hand free, allowing it to move or rotate or do whatever it likes.
- Push against the large, protruding bone on the left side (Fig. 2).
- With the palm of the left hand facing towards you, place the index finger of the right hand flat against the top of your left wrist so that it sits on the two protruding bones (Fig. 3). Then use your thumb on the other side of the wrist – positioned not quite opposite the first finger but slightly to the right of it (Fig. 4). Gently push with the thumb while opposing with the first finger. As you do so allow the wrist to give slightly.
- With the palm facing down, reverse the fingers: place the thumb flat against the two protruding bones on the top of the wrist (Fig. 5). Gently push upwards with the index finger on the other side of the wrist.

Fig. 4.

Clearly, there are many other things you can do along the same lines, and once again instinct is your guide as you gently explore the wrist bones with the right thumb and fingers. I often witness the powerful, instant effects of doing this. For example, last week a student was having difficulty playing the extended fourth fingers near the opening of the third movement of the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto (marked +):

Fig. 5.



I showed her how to free the bones in her wrist, which she did for about a minute, and then she played the perfect fifth again, first finger B to fourth finger F# (while holding down the first finger). She was astonished as, with no effort at all, she overshot the F# and nearly placed her fourth finger on a G. But this can be repeated over and over again with the majority of violinists. Use it often as a key warming up or pre-warming up exercise.

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Massaging the upper forearm

Whenever you feel any tension in your hand or fingers – and certainly the moment you feel any pain or discomfort in the muscles or tendons in your wrist or hand – the place to work on is often the area of your forearm just below the elbow. In the most simplistic terms, the muscles that move the fingers are in the hand; those that move the hand are in the forearm; those that move the forearm are in the upper arm; and the upper-arm muscles are in the shoulders. So wherever you are feeling any muscular discomfort is probably not the problem area.

Try this amazing experiment: while the student holds their left arm in playing position without the violin, and with their left hand and fingers in position but entirely relaxed, squeeze the muscles in their inside upper forearm between your thumb and fingers (~~Fig. 6~~) (Fig. 6). The student will be astonished as their fingers move by themselves as you squeeze and release.

Regularly massage these muscles in your arm. To find exactly where they are, grip your upper forearm with your right hand and move the fingers of your left hand as though playing (~~Fig. 7~~) (Fig. 6). Feel the muscles and tendons in the forearm moving under your right hand.

Having found the relevant muscles, massage them with deep strokes, moving in the direction of the upper arm (not backwards and forwards). Always move along the muscle, not directly pressing down in to it.

If a muscle feels sore or tender, this may be a reason to go on rather than to stop. In fact, it is easy to discover places which are extremely sensitive to the touch, but these are the places to concentrate on, not to avoid. A little gentle work – though it has to be as deep as possible in the end – on those muscles instantly creates greater ease and elasticity in the entire left hand.

Isolate the muscles in the upper forearm that are associated with moving the fourth finger. See how good your fourth finger feels after a couple of minutes of work on these muscles!

Done on a regular basis, a little work like this completely cures a wide range of different aches or pains that typically appear in a violinist's left arm and hand. Many players have the frightening experience of suddenly acquiring sharp pains in their left or right wrist when they play with real energy, and even these can be eliminated almost instantly by massaging the upper forearm muscles.

Massaging the hand

There are no muscles in the fingers, but you can bring new freedom to the left fingers by gently massaging the muscles in the palm just below the beginning of each finger. Place your fingers on the back of the hand and use your thumb to massage along the muscles (~~Fig. 8~~) (Fig. 7), always moving in the direction of the wrist rather than backwards and forwards. Again, instinct must guide the amount of pressure, and of course it is always better to start very gently and err on the side of caution.

Proof of the effectiveness of massaging the muscles in the palm of the hand can be seen in the many cases of players, particularly busy professional ones, whose left index finger has lost the alacrity of movement that they have in the right index finger. Try making the extreme movement shown in (Fig 8) with the index finger of the left hand, and then of the right hand, and see if there is a difference in how far and how quickly you can bend the finger in. Although the extreme shown in Fig. 8 will probably never occur in ordinary playing, you have to go some way towards it just to play a minor third with the first and third fingers in 1st position.

Although any slight stiffness or discomfort will be located around the middle or base joint of the left index finger, that is not where the problem will be – again because you always look at the next place up in the chain, which in this case means in the palm of the hand. A short, deep massage of the muscle there (**Figure 7**) can immediately restore full quickness of movement to the left index finger to match that of the right.

Bending the hand outwards

In another effective pre-warming up exercise you can gain extra freedom in the left hand simply by moving the bones in the opposite direction to the shape they go into when playing:

- Bend the index finger of your right hand and place its middle knuckle on the back of the left hand in line with the left-hand middle finger (figure 9). Pull upwards on the side both sides of the left hand with the right hand's thumb and middle finger in opposition to the first finger (**figures 10 and 11**).
- Bend each side of the hand out using your right thumb one side and fingers the other (Fig. 10 and 11).



Fig. 6.



Fig. 7.



Fig. 8.



Fig. 9.

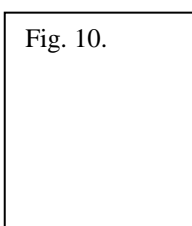


Fig. 10.

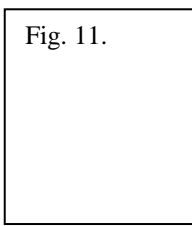


Fig. 11.