
BASICS

Bow hold

How exactly should you hold the bow? There have been many different ‘schools’ and approaches, but in the end the precise way you hold it comes down to your unique hands. Think of all the different combinations you could have of the following: length of fingers, thickness of fingers, more pointed or more rounded ends of fingers, the width of the hand at the base knuckle joints, length of thumb and pinkie relative to the fingers, degree of general flexibility between the fingers and in the hand, and so on.

So in this case naturalness must always win over theory. I often remember the Final of an international violin competition that I saw when I was a student. The winner was a very good violinist, and a particularly fresh and interesting musician. But if you looked at her bow hand, you’d think she had never had a violin lesson in her life. She was doing something odd with her wrist all the time, pushing it down below the level of the bow, and her finger placement on the bow seemed haphazard and undisciplined. It was all entirely natural and unconscious. She really didn’t know she had a bow in her hand; she just played.

As a student hungry to develop technique this was a ‘wake up call’ as I realised the obvious point that you can have a perfect, ‘text-book’ bow hold and not be an interesting player or musician; and you can have a ‘home-made’ bow hold and go around winning competitions through the compelling qualities of your music-making.

Fig 1

Basic principles

However, there do seem to be basic principles that can be very helpful if they are used as a framework within which to find your own natural bow hold. A river flows best when the banks are strong. The different approaches to technique around the world, and from age to age, often stem from, or are based around, one particular player’s or teacher’s approach. However, all the different approaches are united by natural laws and principles. These natural laws of cause-and-effect, proportion, leverage and balance, must apply whatever the approach or philosophy of playing.

Fig 2

For example, how far away from the thumb should the first finger sit on the bow? The laws of leverage dictate that the further away the first finger is from the thumb, the more effect it has in adding to the weight of the bow into the string; the closer to the thumb you place the first finger, the more it needs to do to achieve the same result. Think of how a door handle is positioned opposite the hinges, and how hard you would have to pull if the handle were positioned on the other side, close to the hinges; or try pressing a piano key down right at the back end of the key, where the key feels stiff and heavy. There may be different ways of holding the bow, but this principle of leverage must apply, in exactly the same way, whether you are a violinist in New York, Moscow, London or Tokyo.

Fig 3

- Try playing strongly with the first finger close to the thumb (Fig. 1), and then play the same strokes with the first finger further from the thumb (Fig 2). The difference in lack of effort, to achieve the same result, is obvious.

Basic finger placement

The tip of the **thumb** contacts the bow on two points, one side leaning against the raised black thumb-piece and the other side on the bow (or the thumb leather). Therefore the placement of the thumb is diagonal. The contact-point changes depending on which part of the bow you are playing in.

Fig 4

- Place the bow on the A string at the heel. Note the contact-point of the tip of the thumb with the bow: is it more to the left of the tip, in the centre, or more to the right?
- Play to the point. Note how the contact-point of the thumb has moved to a slightly different place.

This movement is something that you would rarely do deliberately, rather than letting it happening naturally on its own. Equally, you must not prevent it from happening.

One of the most frequent problem-causers for the bow hand comes from placing the thumb on the bow too much on its pad. It is very easy to prove that the thumb should be curved: place the fourth finger of the left hand on the string on its tip and see how the finger naturally curves (Fig. 3). Place it on the string on the pad and see how the finger naturally straightens (Fig. 4).

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It is exactly the same on the bow, where if you place the pad of the fourth finger on the stick the finger wants to straighten completely. It is the same for the thumb on the bow: if it is placed too much on the pad, it automatically straightens and becomes stiff. When it is placed on the tip, the thumb naturally bends and retains its flexibility. There should be a tiny, imperceptible bending-and straightening movement of the thumb in just about every bow stroke that we ever play, and if this flexibility is lost the whole hand loses its give.

The Russian teacher Raphael Bronstein recommended that players with very short arms, but using a full-size bow, should position the thumb a little higher up the bow a centimetre or so away from the curve of the thumb-piece. The rest of that bow-hold is the same, relative to the thumb, as when holding the bow normally.

The **first finger** has two contact points, on top of the stick (sometimes on the middle joint of the finger, sometimes between the middle joint and the nail joint) and on the side of the stick. This is a 'modern' bow hold, as opposed to the old Leopold Auer bow hold – as seen in the playing of Heifetz, Milstein and many other great players of the past – where the first finger contacts the stick between the base knuckle joint and the middle joint.

The 'old' Auer bow hold has not entirely gone away. A rather less extreme version of it is still used by great modern players, for example the Greek violinist Leonidas Kavakos, one of the top players in the world.

The only contact-point of the **second finger** is at the crease near the nail joint. The circle made with the thumb is the centre and basis of the bow hold. The nail joint of the second finger is entirely redundant in playing the violin. Children often try to touch the tip of their thumb with the tip of the first finger, but this is an unnecessary action which leads to loss of freedom in the entire hand.

It is important that the second finger not lie directly opposite the thumb (Fig. 5) but more opposite the right outer edge of the thumb (Fig. 6). Otherwise you end up with a feeling of three fingers one side of the thumb, and one finger the other side, instead of two-and-two with the thumb in the middle. However, this placing of the second finger to the left of the thumb must be only very slight: too much immediately causes tension in the base of the thumb. Too little, and you lose power in the leverage of the bow into the string.

There should often be a strong contact between the pad of the **third finger** and the side of the frog, with the finger sitting between the round part of the thumb piece and the pearl eye in the centre of the frog. At the point, the contact between the third and the bow is not the pad, but the crease near the nail joint.

When I was twelve years old a new teacher changed my bow hold to one where the second and third fingers were very low, so that the tips of the fingers were almost off the lower edge of the frog. It felt cramped and I didn't like it at all. A couple of years later another new teacher got me doing the opposite: his approach was all about 'feeling the bow in the tips of the fingers'. Now my hand seemed too high above the bow, and if you exaggerate that approach only slightly it feels as though you are using the fingers like pincers. It now seems entirely obvious that a middle course has to be the right approach.

The tip of the **fourth finger** sits on top of the bow, or on the upper inside edge, depending on the tilt of the bow. For most hands a simple guide is to keep the line of the right edge of the frog continuing up the right side of the finger.

Contact with the bow

Think of the way babies grip your finger when you place it in their hand. They close their fingers around it in the firmest but gentlest grip. They neither squeeze too hard, nor are too flimsy, but instinctively form the closest, best-possible contact. This is a perfect image to illustrate the best contact of the fingers with the bow.

Shaking hands is another good example: you don't want either a too-weak or a painfully-strong handshake. Between the two extremes is the adult equivalent of the baby's grip.

But in finding the answer to the question of how firmly should you hold the bow, all you have to think of is how firmly should you hold a spade with which to dig? In fact, how should you hold it in the first place – how far apart should your hands be, how high or low should they be positioned, how far apart? Surely the answer is simply that it depends on what you are digging, and whether it is clay or sand. Similarly, in powerful playing, in chords or strong *martele* strokes, the fingers naturally hold the bow more firmly, and in soft, delicate strokes the fingers may barely contact the bow at all.