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# BASICS

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## Keeping still

One of the key elements of gaining any skill is in learning what *not* to do, just as much as what *to* do. The great artist Michelangelo said 'Every block of stone has a statue inside it, and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it'. You have to chip away all the bits that should not be there to release the angel from its prison. In chipping away to get to the ideal violinist-musician trapped within every player, the main thing is to eliminate the wide assortment of extra physical actions and mannerisms that become associated with simple technical actions. Some of the obvious ones to avoid are:

- Moving the head to the right during any up-bow, and to the left on any down bow
- Moving the scroll from left to right with, or instead of, the phrasing, particularly if it disturbs the relationship of the bow with the violin
- Lowering the scroll by slightly bending the upper back forward, particularly on any descending notes.

Extra movements like these are often indications of good musical ideas, but ones which have ended up as bodily movement instead of being channelled into the instrument. Without reaching the instrument, so that they affect the bow and the fingers, these artistic intentions go unrealized.

While many extraneous actions masquerade as nice musical movements of the head and body that are all part and parcel of the performance, they are often actually pure tension that has become associated with an otherwise simple movement and action. In fact they usually go against the music, for example, pulling down as you climb up to the top of a scale, or moving the violin in an area of stillness in the music.

Most importantly, they often involve an aspect of technique which has become 'cluttered' – tangled up with local associated tensions and extra movements so that it no longer works alone as a fine, focused, localised action.

Every physical movement involves a contraction of a set of muscles. Tension is also muscular contraction. If, when you use one finger, other fingers react by straightening, muscles and tendons must be shortening when they could be remaining neutral. Similarly, raising the right shoulder at the end of up-bows, tightening the left upper arm against the side of the body when placing a finger or shifting, squeezing with the thumb, pushing the left wrist out with the finger action instead of keeping a straight line or a 'giving' wrist, and so on, are all tension-related extra movements that need to be weeded out of the playing.

### **Feeling as though there is nothing left**

It usually happens that when you ask someone to play an expressive phrase without moving their head, or dipping the scroll, or shifting their weight onto another foot – in short, absolutely without moving the instrument – it turns out that neither the bow or the vibrato is making the music after all. This is like playing a phrase without vibrato and discovering that you are not being expressive enough with the bow.

The first reaction of nearly everybody, when they do achieve the playing of a note or phrase without any extras – and at first it can take many attempts before they manage it – is to complain that now it sounds or seems 'boring'. But the horrible truth is that actually the phrasing, or the tone, or the vibrato wasn't really doing them justice before either! If you liken extraneous physical motions to 'noise', you could say that because of all the noise of their excess 'expressive' movements the students can't hear their actual playing.

### **Keep the violin up and still**

There is a way of 'not moving around' which is far from standing like a statue or playing like a robot. When the posture and the entire physicality is always working from starting points of balance, and every action is localised and therefore involving minimal effort, natural waves of movement flow through the body, plus all the desirable sympathetic movements that are really part of the original movement – but all that freedom and mobility is an entirely different order of things to the movements we are talking about eliminating here.

The first step, which sometimes can help sort everything else out in one go, is simply to decide to keep the instrument still. Keep it up so that the strings are basically level with the floor most of the time; make sure

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it is not too tilted; and aim the scroll at some marker on the wall, such as the corner of a picture, and find how to play without the scroll moving away from it. Just keep it like that! At least until you can play perfectly easily without the instrument ever moving. Then, perhaps, you will find that you want to allow yourself more freedom, but again that is not the same thing as the original 'tangled up' approach.

When all the extras are stripped away, so that every action is performed on its own without any knock-on effects, the playing becomes truly skilful, and an extraordinary aura of mastery and authority immediately enters the playing.

Try doing the legato string crossing in the Schubert G minor Sonatina in two ways. Each time begin with the violin up so that the strings are parallel with the floor:



- First, at the precise moment of crossing to the 4th finger on the D string, dip the scroll slightly by pulling down a little in the upper back. Make the opposite motion as you cross back to the A string.
- Then repeat, again starting with the strings flat but this time keeping the instrument absolutely motionless. Notice the striking increase of precision in the bow, and the musical and technical authority that the playing instantly gains.

Slight, apparently expressive movements of the body and instrument often turn out to be there for a reason. For example, in a recent lesson it turned out that the real reason why the player tilted his head to the right on each descending string crossing, and at the same time slightly tilted his violin clockwise – both movements very slight – was that by doing so he was bringing the string towards the bow, shown here by the arrows:



Dorothy DeLay used to say that rather than thinking in terms of 'good' and 'bad', 'right' and 'wrong' in violin technique, it is better to think of 'more efficient' or 'less efficient' ways of doing things. So it is not 'wrong' to make the string crossings smoother by bringing the string to the hair rather than the other way round. But it is certainly a very much less efficient way of doing it, and is therefore a deficient technical component. But the main point is the way this technical deficiency was disguised as a musical gesture.

## Keeping still to the end of the phrase

I often recall Sandor Vegh teaching the first movement of the Schubert A major Sonata in a masterclass at Prussia Cove. After the student had played, Vegh told her to start again. The pianist played the introductory four bars. When the violinist came in Vegh stopped her after the second note. 'Why do you move your head down when you shift? Again!' The piano played the first four bars, she started again, this time keeping her head still. Vegh stopped her in the second bar. 'Why do you close your eyes when you shift down? Again!' This time the violinist got as far as the third bar. Vegh stopped her. 'Why do you move the scroll down?' And so it went on for the rest of the lesson. That opening four bars on the piano must have been played thirty times, and the violinist never got past the opening statement.

While it was often certainly very tough going for the hapless students, Vegh was a most wonderful music teacher. The point about this opening statement is that it is one, long, seamless phrase that goes on all the way to the end of the entire opening section. Not counting the opening four bars, the phrase is twenty-four bars long. If the player makes constant changes it becomes literally impossible to make the long line of the music and one is left with 'good-sounding, in-tune notes'.