

Discerning Tension and Promoting Flexibility in String Playing

Tension:

Tightness of muscles. Some tension is useful, some unnecessary. Static tension can be especially harmful as can repetitious motions which are executed with more tension than necessary

Sources of tension:

fear-

of making a mistake or a displeasing sound
of dropping the bow or instrument

desire to please-

students sometimes try too hard

lack of bodily awareness-

role of teacher to raise consciousness (again and again when necessary)

New ways of using muscles must be programmed into the brain. Sometimes after a student is made aware of unnecessary tension it takes time, many reminders and a lot of repetitions before an action can be executed without unnecessary tension.

Problems caused by too much tension:

poor and inefficient tone production (same amount of sound can be gotten with less effort)

faulty intonation

abrupt and inaccurate shifting

lack of facility (speed in fingers)

discomfort and sometimes injury from playing

inability to use the whole bow (problems playing in the lower half in particular)

inability to execute advanced bow strokes and/or vibrato

Flexibility:

Ability to move, muscles able to respond. Students must have full range of movement in joints available to them at all times. Have students experiment with full range of motion of shoulder, elbow, wrist and finger joints.

Flexible playing begins with correct posture and position. The set up advocated by the famous pedagogues Ivan Galamian and Paul Rolland is one that has evolved to enable players to have maximum flexibility and facility.

Checklist for posture and position:

feet-

shoulder width apart, balance slightly on left foot
student should be able to sway back and forth, changing balance on feet
able to bend knees (locked knees strain lower back)

shoulders-

aligned with hips (no twisting)

violin placement-

keeps circle of activity in center of body (join hands left on top in front of body, lift and turn left hand as though playing instrument- this gives basic playing position)

violin on shoulder-

end button pointing at middle of neck
nose, strings, elbow, toes in same plane
head placement should be such that when we remove violin the head should be more or less as it is when not holding the violin
hold with jaw not chin, use cantilever principal (use natural weight of head not squeezing between head and shoulder)

Following are some exercises that can be done as soon as proper position and posture have been established, with beginners or remedial students, to promote flexibility and correct motions of the left arm:

Hold and Wiggle -with hand over high mark (approximately 4th position, pinky over middle of string harmonic hold violin and move head around

Tapping- with hand over high mark tap on wood of violin on G string side of instrument, check flexibility of wrist joint and preparatory exercise for vibrato) this can be done in rhythms

4 String Strum-strum all 4 strings with pinky (check for flexibility in shoulder as indicated by rocking motion of the elbow) this movement of the elbow is essential to a balanced hand position when changing strings and/or positions. Added benefit that it cannot be done easily with collapsed wrist or drooping violin.

The EEGG Song-pizz in 1st pos. with pinky EE then shift to end of fingerboard pizz GG (must be done to steady beat) promotes a shifting motion using the whole arm, good indicator of flexibility in the shoulder and forearm, demonstrates position of left hand in high positions.

Exercise for both arms:

Swing Set-start with violin and bow in position swing both arms out to full extension with bow in hand, left hand over high mark on violin. Then return to playing position, repeat over and over in a rhythmic fashion. Enables student to find playing position quickly and encourages freedom in large movements of the arms.

Exercises for the Right Hand and Arm:

Down Bow circles without the bow-pizz e string with right hand using large down bow circle motions, allow the body weight to shift to the left with a bilateral motion.

Wave the bow-left hand over high mark, hook bow tip on left pinky, wave bow up and down. Useful for shoulder flexibility and basic string crossing motion.

Finger Taps-Place bow in middle on A string with proper bow hold. Tap 1st finger, middle two fingers, little finger. Encourages awareness of fingers, independence of different units of bow hand, flexibility of fingers. My concept of function of the fingers-1st for steering and as a channel for weight at the tip, middle two for holding and for power, pinky for balancing and helping with string crossing in lower part of bow.

Silent Bow Placements-Place bow in middle, lift and place at tip, lift and place in middle, lift and place at frog. Have student examine and analyze the different positions of the wrist in different parts of the bow, call students attention to the feeling of where weight is distributed in hand for different parts of the bow (ie pinky actively balancing at frog, hand pronated toward 1st finger at tip) Demonstrate pronation and supination of the forearm without the bow (I call it the doorknob motion).

Bow Wanderings-start in the middle "wander, wander, wander" to the tip then to the frog. Stop at frog, release thumb (a really well balanced bow grip doesn't need the thumb at the frog). Check that fingers which have naturally extended slightly at the tip have returned to a loose curved position at the frog (fingers which stay extended indicate tension), also upper arm if relaxed will return to basic position by the middle of the bow with the elbow slightly below the hand.

Silent String Crossings-start in middle on A string, change levels with whole arm. At tip with whole arm and at the frog with the wrist and a little bit of forearm. The pinky feels more active than in other parts of the bow. (String crossings made in the middle and at the tip with only the forearm indicate that the upper arm is being "held", more freedom in the shoulder is needed.)

Silent bow bounces-start in middle, let bow bounce through all parts of the bow. Good for feeling the resiliency of the bow and freedom in the shoulder joint, springiness of bow fingers.

Basic bow strokes:

Martelé, détaché, and legato-all more specialized and advanced bow strokes are derived from these three. Martelé and détaché are especially useful in diagnosing tension in bow arm and hand. These bow strokes are an excellent place to start in either beginning or remedial teaching.

Martelé checklist-

Middle to tip

when resting in the mid. before executing this stroke

knuckles soft,

hand has 'hanging feeling',

stick of bow is brought down toward the hair of the bow with weight of hand and arm leaning on bow (demonstrate the difference between leaning and pushing), feeling slightly more weight on 1st finger, not by pressing with finger but by slight pronation of forearm-this will result in a strong, clear, consonant (as opposed to vowel) type articulation

elbow slightly below hand, when you poke at elbow in downward motion it has springy quality, it neither goes down and stays down nor does it fail to respond

When the stroke is executed it is 'released' (in other words this is an uncontrolled stroke), it imitates the action of an arrow in archery. Forearm initiates motion.

At tip-

forearm is pronated

nearly all weight is channeled through 1st finger

weight can be seen in closeness of stick to bow hair

elbow is slightly above hand

wrist curved down and out

shoulder slightly forward, degree depending on length of student's arm

When the stroke is released all parts of the arm and hand should return to the position as described in preparation at the middle

Martelé frog to middle-

feeling is one of balancing rather than leaning (natural weight of bow and hand are sufficient)

no thumb pressure

wrist curved inward not upward (taking advantage of horizontal motion of the wrist)

Stroke is again released but this time initiated from the back of the upper arm. Lower parts of the arm move passively.

Students need to be made aware of the difference between active and passive motions. Natural examples of passive motions- swinging of the arms when walking, balanced motion of the upper arm when shaking salt from a salt shaker. These motions feel funny when we do them on purpose because they don't normally require effort.

Detaché middle to tip-
forearm active

upper arm passive (slight up and down motion of the elbow) most common
errors-upper arm rigid, upper arm moving actively rather than passively

Characteristics of healthy stroke

click of bow when changing directions

uniformity of sound from middle to tip (doesn't get weak at tip)

Frog to middle

motion again initiated from the back of upper arm

same position for wrist as described in martelé stroke

same tone quality characteristics as for upper half detaché

Most common problem:

reluctance of student to go all the way to the frog

causes: tension in muscle at front of shoulder

unconscious discomfort at having hand and wrist too close to face
fear of hitting silver on frog

Without the violin, have student consciously tense muscle in front of
shoulder, try to reach for left shoulder

Relax muscle, reach over and touch left shoulder blade (this requires us
to extend much further than we need to when going to the frog)
student is now aware of the full range of this particular motion

Also practice long up bows that go past the frog

Inappropriate tension can get in a string players way at any stage of the game. Learning to
efficiently use our bodies to play these instrument is a life long endeavor.

I encourage string teachers to be on the look out for tension that restricts or detracts from a
student's playing. Do something daily for your students that helps them become aware of and
eliminate unnecessary tension.