



# Violin

## Developing a Strong Right Arm

by Sally O'Reilly

We begin our study of the violin on open strings, learning how to play them resonantly and cleanly. We focus on string level and the position of the right arm on each string. We practice string crossings in clockwise and counter-clockwise directions. We learn up-bows and down-bows and bow distribution in relation to quarter notes, half notes, whole notes and eighth notes. In most methods we are set up in a square with the bow perpendicular to the string, parallel to the bridge, the right forearm parallel to the string and ready to open and close from the elbow. So far, so good, especially if the violin is level.

Unfortunately, as far as the right arm is concerned, Doomsday is at hand. We get to put down the first finger of our left hand, and suddenly the right arm becomes a second-class citizen. All the focus moves to the left hand and the issues of intonation. (This is where responsible pedagogy steps in to level the playing field.)

If we are extremely lucky, we have strong hands that mold into an ideal bow hold. I've seen a few natural ones ... very few. The rest must be developed with care and patience and occasionally with help from a physical therapist. The thumb must form an oval in relation to the second finger's middle knuckle. The index finger does not hold. Rather, it lies on the bow in the center of its middle knuckle, ready to function as the contact point for the arm's weight. The little finger should be curved and sit on the top ridge of the bow. It is the counter-balance for the index finger. The third finger should be in contact with the body of the frog so that it can control the bow's direction. Sounds easy. It isn't.

So many things can go wrong, and, following Murphy's Law, *will* go wrong but for a teacher's constant vigilance over a long period of time. It's not only the shape of the right hand that is important. It's the flexibility. Rigidity is

not strength, although it masquerades as strength quite effectively. It is our job to monitor the right hands of our students, assuming that most bow holds will want to approximate "death grips."

Explain to your students that the bow weighs only about four ounces. If it is balanced on the index finger at the bow's balance point, it only takes one finger to hold it up. When we're playing, the violin is supporting the bow in one place while the thumb and second finger support it at another. If we succeed in keeping the bow hold flexible, the benefits will be reflected in the rest of the right arm, especially in the wrist.

In my book of studies, *Fiddlemagic*, there are multiple exercises that address the fundamentals of bow usage at the earliest stage. I follow that with Wohlfahrt *Etudes*, which do a wonderful job of exposing students in first position to the problems of bow distribution and a few different strokes. Later I use Sevcik *Bowing Studies, Opus 2, Numbers 1 and 2*, followed by *Opus 3*. It has been my experience that these books develop every type of stroke to a virtuoso level, and blessedly, they can't be done if the right arm isn't working properly. To frost the cake, I recommend Tartini's book on bowing.

All through the years of study it takes to cover this repertoire, we, as teachers, must constantly stress the importance of relaxation ... low right shoulders, elbows that don't levitate, flexible wrists and knuckles. We must monitor these things constantly because it is amazing how much can suddenly go wrong with even our best students from one lesson to the next. We can *never* take a student's good position and healthy technique for granted.

It is essential that we reiterate the fundamentals frequently. Students need to hear information over and over in

order for it to stick. It is our obligation to repeat ourselves to the brink of distraction. Just think of yourself as a human tape loop and do it. Your students will thank you for it.

*Sally O'Reilly is professor of violin at the University of Minnesota and a composer of technical studies for strings. She is founder and director of Bravo! Summer String Institute. †*

## Thoughts on Recent Events

by Sally O'Reilly

I want to speak to the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> and how they relate to what we do as musicians and as the teachers of the next generation of musicians. The following quotations, two of which are not attributed to anyone in particular, were sent to me by a colleague at USC.

"This will be our reply to violence: to make music more intensely, more beautifully, more devotedly than ever before."

— Leonard Bernstein

"The work we do promotes unity. It is the creation of beauty, the opposite of war."

"Do not take your good works and your love and your music for granted — be aware of them as a constant choice, and a blessing, and don't underestimate their power in the world."