



SCHOOL ORCHESTRA

The Elusive Gap of Despair

Or

One Man's Quest to Save the World From Easily Avoidable Suffering

by David Arnott

Proper instrument fit can have a great impact on violin and viola playing (sorry lower string players—this article is not for you). By fit, I refer not to the actual length of the instrument but to how it fits on the shoulder. Any reputable dealer or string instructor should be able to fit an instrument lengthwise to a student with little difficulty. (Of course, I believe it is best to avoid dealing with those who say things like “Yes, it is a little big, but he/she will grow into it before you know it.”) Once the issue of instrument size/length has been resolved, the need for additional support must be weighed and measured. It has been my experience that proper playing position can solve many of the difficulties and bad habits of string playing, especially the reluctant use of the fourth finger, development of vibrato, and the exchanging of positions (shifting is such a harsh word). The first step to proper playing position originates with a properly fitted instrument.

I begin with an anecdote. My viola teacher had no visible neck. His head seemed to be connected directly to his torso right between his shoulders. Consequently, he did not employ a shoulder pad in his playing — wherever would he put it? Just as we all have individual fingerprints that distinguish us from each other, we all have different needs in filling the space between our collarbones and jawbones. The length of our necks, the breadth of our shoulders, and the shape of our heads determine the amount of space to fill between the back of the instrument and a comfortable resting place on the shoulder.

Two options for filling this space (if, indeed, the space exists) include the height of the shoulder pad and the size of the jaw rest. (I refuse to call it a chin rest!) We are very lucky now to have a greater selection than ever of shoulder pads from which to choose. In the old days, a lumpy pad or a sponge with a rubber band was sufficient. The Resonans pad that came in three heights was a great improvement at the time, as well as an inexpensive option. While browsing

through my SHAR catalog recently, I saw no less than 13 companies that all make a variety of shoulder pads. Though the many innovatively designed contraptions do basically the same job, I prefer the ones that attach to the edges and the ribs rather than the ones that make direct contact with the back of the instrument, thus inhibiting vibration and producing a muted effect.

Try this experiment. Take the yardstick you have in your office or studio — you know, the two-sided one commercial instrument makers give out at festivals with suggested marks to measure young students to determine appropriate violin/viola length. Measure yourself for the distance between your collarbone and the spot on your jaw where you make contact with your instrument. Measure your students. How wide a range do you find? In my studio, I found anywhere from 1 ½" on myself (yes, I also have no neck) to over 4" of space. Obviously there is a great need for a variety of shapes and sizes.

The goals of the shoulder pad should include filling this gap, freeing the left arm from “holding” the instrument, and freeing the head and shoulder from having to grip the instrument to support it — thus reducing tension in one's left shoulder. It is this tension that produces discomfort and eventually pain — and we all know it should not hurt to play. This tension is also a source (though by all means, not the only source) of that annoying sore some string players develop on their jaws at the point of contact with the instrument.

A properly fit shoulder pad should allow a player to support the instrument with the left arm dangling at one's side. By this, I do not necessarily mean pointing the instrument horizontally at the wall — just up enough so that the left arm, when “holding” the instrument up, adds a modicum of security, allowing for the free and effortless ability for the left hand to move around the instrument.

It is also possible to fill the gap on the top side of the instrument. Jaw rests also

come in a multitude of shapes and sizes, though the selection of “taller” rests (an inch or more) is rather limited. Still, it is possible to accommodate a uniquely shaped individual through choice of jaw rest.

There are several options available for trying a variety of shoulder pads. Those fortunate enough to live close to the Twin Cities will find an excellent selection at House of Note, Claire Givens, or Schmitt Music (to name a few). Those not fortunate enough to live close to the Cities will find that a credit card will get you an excellent variety of shoulder pads mailed directly to you from companies such as Southwest Strings or SHAR. These two companies will charge you for all of those sent and then credit your account when you return those you do not wish to keep. Though less convenient, it is worth the effort in the long run.

As you survey your students, reflect on their positions (this is easier for orchestra directors who can survey their students all at once). Are their instruments all pointed roughly in the same direction? Are their fingers close to or over the fingerboard at all times? Are their left elbows under the instrument or pointing out left? Does their vibrato sound like a .50 caliber machine gun — shaking the whole instrument? Are their fourth fingers flat in first position (especially on the lower strings)? Are they exchanging positions smoothly or are they rough shifters? How many of these issues may be solved by tweaking the fit of their instruments? You will be surprised!

J. David Arnott is an Assistant Professor of Music at The College of St. Benedict/St. John's University where he teaches violin and viola and directs the symphony orchestra. He holds degrees in viola from The Philadelphia College of Performing Arts, The Curtis Institute of Music, and The University of Southern Mississippi. Dr. Arnott is currently a member of the viola section of The Duluth-Superior Symphony Orchestra and is the second violinist of the Tresca Quartet. †