



VIOLA

Bowing tips...

by Annette Caruthers

If you've watched a youth symphony concert, or an amateur orchestra of any type, and then attended a concert by the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra or Minnesota Orchestra, what was the biggest difference you noticed? I bet it was in bowing. The younger players and amateurs usually have less-developed bow arms, and more difficulty with clean string crossings, playing at the frog, chords with whole bow — anything that demands real bowing skill, and most of that is related to playing at the frog.

Yet most of us seem to focus our energy in just getting students to play in tune, with correct rhythm... hoping to help them play something close to what is written. Don't give up that soon. Even on *Twinkle Theme* we can work for good tone, long bows that stay straight, and a slight ritard at the ending.

For playing at the frog the bow hold really has to be correct. The middle finger must align with the thumb, with the thumb being curved and not locked; the third finger must feel for a bit of the frog on the inside of the finger, with pinky just sitting curved on top of the stick (not on the screw) and first finger lying on top of the stick. If you try straightening your own thumb you will feel how your wrist locks up. If you try straightening your pinky you will feel what that does to the bow hold balance as well... try these things out yourself, but also have your students try them so they *feel* what is important in a good bow hold. We cannot look at our bow hold while we play, we must feel it.

Some tips for helping students learn to move their wrist as they play, to keep the bow straight and moving fluidly, are:

- Try having them play an up-bow and touch their nose with their wrist as they pass the strings. Have fun with this!
- Show them how to watch in a mirror as they play something that is memorized. They will get mixed up and move the wrong direction at first, but most do learn quickly.
- Help them draw several straight bows, going all the way to the frog, so they feel it while you help them do it. Then watch while they try to do this on their own.
- Begin the lesson with bowing work, (scales are ideal for this) then go to other material when the bowing has improved. Keep reminding while the lesson continues. (I recently spent an entire

lesson reminding a student to stop every time she played at the frog and check her bow hold; the following week that bow hold and frog motions were vastly improved!)

- Try having the student play past the strings — into the air on the left side of the bridge — still with a bow aligned for straight strokes. The wrist really has to move for this!

In *Basics*, Simon Fischer suggests having one player be the student and one the assistant; the assistant holds the bow by the screw, keeping it on the string at the point, exactly parallel to the bridge. The student then lightly runs his or her hand up and down the bow, which stays in one place. The player keeps the bow hand in playing position while doing this, and will naturally feel the changes necessary in the hand to keep a straight bow at all points. Try this on each string, as the arm will feel different levels for different strings. Start out slowly and then move faster. Then switch roles for student and assistant.

Mary West suggests having students hold the bow away from the frog, up on the end of the wrapping, then play right at the frog (try to picture this — it means playing with the hair of the bow sticking out to the right of the player's hand); work through an entire etude this way, then go back to a normal bow hold. Try this one yourself. It is an odd feeling, but really makes playing at the frog seem simple!

Mary West loves to use the Sevcik books for bowing, and I'm learning to put them to good use myself, but I also think our students benefit if we work on position and flexibility with everything they play. Public school teachers probably cannot assign Sevcik every week, but could choose sections from the repertoire the students are already learning and focus on bowing by treating those sections as though they were Sevcik exercises, using different bowing patterns and different parts of the bow for them. We do need to be creative, and some spontaneous fun can be the best teacher of all; have students make up their own bowing variations.

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