



# VIOLIN

## A Good Set-Up — Don't Take it for Granted

by Sally O'Reilly

The majority of well-schooled violin teachers do a wonderful job of setting up their beginner pupils with an exemplary position. Good posture is stressed at the outset. The instrument is held level with the floor and left hand independence is achieved by developing the student's ability to support the violin with chin and shoulder, freeing the left hand for shifting and vibrato.

Bow holds are carefully crafted so that the thumb is round and the knuckles of the fingers rest in a relaxed position on the stick, parallel to the wood. The "pinky" is round, supporting the weight of the tip of the bow.

Thus, the student begins his career in tip-top shape and we are rightfully proud of what we have achieved. End of story? Not by a long shot!

Alas, students grow, and as their physiology changes we must be ever-vigilant that last week's superb position hasn't morphed into this week's technique-threatening droop or subtly bizarre angle.

Perhaps my most dramatic experience with this issue took place with my student Stephen Rose, now principal second violinist of the Cleveland Orchestra. Stephen came to me at the age of twelve standing about 5' 6". We worked to relax his right hand, making it flexible and strong. Though his hands were large, his left hand adapted

to the finite spaces on the fingerboard with a remarkable level of accuracy. But he was growing, and it seemed that every week or two I had to readjust his bow arm (which was threatening to grow to orangutan length!), taking his elbow back so that his shoulder wouldn't go up.

It was a constant vigil over 7 years, but it was well worth the effort. Who would have guessed that Stephen would be 6' 6" tall at age 19!?! Obviously this is an extreme case, but I am happy to say that Stephen has always looked natural and comfortable with the violin in spite of his height.

There was a time when I suggested that he play the viola for fun with the idea that he might enjoy stretching out a bit. It was not a match and I let the subject drop.

With regard to instrument placement, it is terribly important to avoid outfitting a student with a violin that is too large. Arm length can be deceptive and misleading, especially with a slender student. I have found that it is best to fit the violin so that the edge of the curve nearest the shoulder doesn't extend *beyond* the shoulder. This is the best way to avoid a sagging position that can result from a violin that is too heavy. It is terribly tempting to go for a larger instrument with its bigger sound, but the toll it takes on posture may be too high a

price to pay.

As the right hand grows, it can change from a nicely compact "paw" to a spindly, rigid, pronated nightmare. Monitoring right hand shape and flexibility on a weekly basis is absolutely essential. If the little finger straightens out because it has grown long and weak, it will force the index finger over the stick and into the second joint, producing the highly undesirable "fish-hook" effect. Once the index finger begins to grasp the stick, all hope goes out the window for a successful spiccato or saltando because the fingers can no longer move.

Teaching at the preparatory level carries with it enormous responsibilities. Tadeusz Wronski, the former director of the Warsaw Conservatory and faculty member at Indiana University, once said to me, "I have never taught a beginning student, but if I did, I would ask myself, 'Could he play the Tchaikovsky Concerto in that position?' If the answer is 'yes', I'm doing things right. If the answer is 'no', I'd better fix it!" His is the question we *all* need to ask ourselves in every lesson.

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