



VIOLA

Hold it! Just a Second...

by Annette Caruthers

I've recently had a few students, new to my studio, who used a weak bowing style. Their tone was "airy," the bow would often turn in their hands while they were playing, and they all had rather straight fourth fingers, even while playing at the frog. These are bright children, who love to play, and did not realize that their tone could have been better...and their way of bowing was a solid habit, very difficult to change, especially without destroying joy in playing.

By experimenting, listening to feedback from students and families, and discussions with other teachers, I have made a lot of progress with this problem that I hope can help others.

The first thing I look at is how they place the thumb on the bow. Some try to put their thumb in the frog, which almost always means they turn the bow hand substantially to the left and raise their right elbow, maybe even raise their shoulder. Putting a dot of ink on the inside corner of their thumb by the nail and showing them how to place it next to the frog often makes a huge improvement almost instantly. I also use this approach if their thumb is not in the frog, but is still not tilted a bit. The tilt is an important key to good bowing...as is having the joints curved and flexible.

To encourage a more centered tone, I

will ask students to bow in the air while I hold their bow between my fingers while I grip it slightly. This gives them a sense of how the bow should feel as it pulls the string. Discussion of how it feels to move your arms through the air versus how it feels when swimming also gives a good idea to many students, or instructions to "bow like you're pulling through honey" may help. Most players with an "airy" tone will need to develop some endurance with the new effort needed, and some will not like the more powerful tone. Playing in a larger room can help with the latter issue; and I sometimes play with both types of tone myself so they can hear the difference.

A poor habit usually feels "right" to the student and new habits mean developing muscles that were not used before. To encourage the fourth finger to be strong enough while curved to balance the bow properly, "pinkie pushups" can help (push with the pinkie to lift the bow off the string, keeping the finger curved, then let up.)

Some players are used to using their index finger to activate almost every motion in bowing, which encourages the other fingers to be weak or to straighten. (For great viola tone, the second and third fingers need to control more of the bow action than the index finger.) This is especially

difficult to change. Try having them lift the index finger when they are at the very frog. This can show them a more flexible way of moving and almost always results in a more curved fourth finger. Another tip is to place the index finger on the bow just in front of the second knuckle, so it doesn't wrap around the bow quite so far.

Most students hate being corrected too many times, and they are trying to do better, but often can't tell when their position has slipped. I am working especially hard right now to get them to check for themselves. It really helps if they play slower than usual and check their bow hold at each bar line, or the beginning of each line of music, or each rest. They learn to "Hold it! Just a second..." and then play. Beginning each lesson or practice session with bow work during a scale or tonalization helps the student to focus on the issue. With patient help and consistent, positive feedback, most students will show significant improvement.

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