

# Clinic: Developing the Potential of the Bow Hand, Right From the Start!

by Nancy Lokken

If I had been told I would be working with and speaking to teachers years ago, I wouldn't have believed it! Teaching was the farthest thing from my mind! My plan was to perform and I was fortunate to do so for a while. What changed my direction was meeting Dr. Suzuki and listening to his tour group, a group of about 10-12 students who started touring around the world in the 70s. This marked the beginning of my teaching journey.

What struck me about the student's performance were 3 things: Age! Their age was much too young to be playing what I was hearing. Quality! The performance was astounding, for any age. Joy! The joy that was exemplified by the students is what really had an effect on me. I also learned that these students on tour were not "elite students" but simply those who were able to travel. I found myself desperately wanting to understand the energy, power, and concept of tone that I remembered seeing in my exposure to the Japanese students. What I share today is simply based on the study and background I have had, and what I have found to be most successful to me.

My passion is the bow hand and arm, and how responsible they are for the sound we hear. We need to know how the arm works and how it is structured. Our job as teachers is to make playing easy for our students.

## Physical Mapping

In their book, *How to Learn the Alexander Technique – A Manual for Students*, Barbara and William Conable refer to the number of people who do not map their body correctly. If a student doesn't have an accurate understanding of the map or structure of the arm, the potential of movement will be limited or eventually denied. This understanding enables the development of the bow arm and hand in playing the instrument.

A common misconception regarding the arm is that it includes three basic joints. However, the arm includes a collarbone, shoulder blade, upper arm bone, two lower arm bones, a wrist and a hand. The collarbone and shoulder blade are important here, because their inclusion means there are 4 arm joints, not 3.

1. Collarbone and breastbone: The only place that the arm structure joins the

torso is where the collarbone meets the breastbone. If that joint isn't mapped, it isn't used, but is held rigid. We can experience the movement in this joint when we reach for an object or move the right arm up to the G string.

2. Second Joint (Shoulder): The second joint is the joint of the upper arm with the shoulder blade. This second arm joint is designed to balance at the very center, laterally. When the hand is balanced and the second joints are naturally balanced, there is an ease of movement in this part of the body.
3. Third Joint (Elbow): The combination of two bones vs. one allows for rotation. When you bring a violin up you bend at the elbow and rotate at the elbow. The axis in the rotation is the bone on the pinky side of the lower arm (ulna).
4. Wrist/Hand: The hand is made up of 32 moving parts. Sometimes the wrist is thought of as a hinge, when it is really made up of several wrist bones (carpals). These parts may not be individually felt, but I like to think of them as several individual springs. Remember that the first joint of the thumb is at the wrist, not at the end of the metacarpal. If you free your wrist, you free your thumb.

## Tone

This development of the potential of the bow arm and hand is in service to sound. Sound is central to our music. If the player does not have a concept or awareness of this tone, it cannot come out. Beyond that, a person must have an awareness of the range of possibilities. Tone is a language, and the nuance, dialect, inflection, accent must be taught for the language to be effective. When working with students there are 3 areas that are important in developing tone:

1. Their Mind (Mental Awareness): Without the knowledge of what we are talking about, they can't pursue it effectively. We need to build their recognition and awareness. Listening

is a powerful tool in doing this.

2. Their Body (Physical): Under the map of the joints, the body has to memorize how the muscles work which leads to skill and ability.
3. Heart (Emotional Level): Music needs to be played from within. If it isn't, we just hear notes.



## Freedom of Movement

In the student's journey of preparation, the first necessary ingredient is "freedom" to move. First I look for the naturalness of their movement away from the instrument. If we are going to have a chance at being expressive, our body has to be free

to move.

Movement has to be understood not only by the teacher, but also by the student. For some students, it comes naturally, and for others we have to exaggerate it in the beginning. To be effective, movement must be generated by the music.

## Flexibility

Galamian referred to the joints of the fingers, thumb, wrist, elbow, and shoulder as being like springs. Dr. Suzuki talked about holding the bow "firmly, but softly." Flexibility in the fingers, hand and arm should be as natural as the flexibility we have come to take for granted in our toes, ankles, knees and hips as we walk.

To set the bow hand, start with the natural position of the hand. Let your arm and hand hang by your side. Bring it up and you see there is a natural curve in the hand by the fingers. Setting the bow hold should be as easy as just slipping the bow into this "soft" hand.

Fingers should not be extended or stretched up or down on the stick away from the two middle fingers we refer to as the huggers. If they are stretched the hand will get stiff and sound tight. The pinky rests on the inside octagon, not on the top where it will tend to slide off. There is equal-distance between the base knuckles and the stick. Let the bow rest on the shoulder in the beginning as all the fingers are studied.

The most natural bow hand with curved fingers happens when the bow is placed in

the middle. The small repetitive motions in the bow hand in the beginning help remove tension – assuming it is being guided carefully. I like to think that the fingers are riding the stick. We are developing the small motor control in the hand.

The bow should be held in such a way that the hand has the most freedom to use all the springs involved, and to use them in their interaction and coordination on required bow strokes. The magic of tone comes from how the bow is given to the strings. The sensitivity developed by the bow hand and arm makes it possible to produce the colors, textures, and nuances of the music.

The stick plays a role in this spring system, too. (Unfortunately, many small bows are best described by the word “club”! They are stodgy, too thick, stiff and unresponsive.) The bow hair also has spring-like qualities. It has resilience unless the bow has been tightened excessively. Rely on the elasticity and power of the horsehair. No matter where you place the bow between the tip and the frog, you should be able to get the same tone.

### Use of the Whole Bow

Now that the student has a set of tools and an awareness of balance in the bow hand, the journey can continue towards using the whole bow. We know that the more bow one uses, the more control it takes. Usually the first thing we lose in the early development of a whole bow is the tone.

To experience natural arm weight, try holding your right arm with your left hand. Feel the natural weight of the arm. When holding the bow, “give” this weight to the string. Use it with gravity. We *have* natural weight; we just have to learn how to use it.

The sequencing of steps in developing the whole bow becomes extremely important. Beginning with small repetitive movements, such as the variations in *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star*, helps establish control, weight, and tone. Then slightly longer bow strokes are introduced. Finally use the whole bow, maintaining the same sound modeled from the small repetitive strokes.

With the whole bow we note that the elbow leads the down-bow, and the hand leads the up-bow with the elbow following. Stop at the frog and check the hand; it should be balanced. How does it change when it is at the tip? It pronates and adjusts the division of weight in the hand. When the bow is traveling back to the frog, it should resume its balanced position when

it is about 2/3 of the way to the frog. Then it stays during the remainder of the bow stroke, and is ready for the next down-bow. When the hand and arm understand this movement we don't get a “flip” at the bow change.

The fingers “ride” the stick. It is similar to sitting in a car with a seat belt on. You can't change seats, but you can wiggle around. The fingers don't shift or change places on the stick, but they do pivot with the movement of the bow.

### Tone again

Suzuki told teachers and students that every lesson should include tone work. How to make a beautiful sound right from the beginning should be included in our highest priority at every lesson. Work on it apart from repertoire. Then apply it to the repertoire.

Try asking your students to describe their tone. Usually they can only think of tone as simply forte or piano. However, tone can be described through textures (sandpaper, cotton balls, etc.), colors (get samples from a paint store), materials (silk, velvet, denim, chiffon, leather), or even food! While I watched Perlman teach his students, he asked one to “play that passage as if you are eating low fat yogurt!” We can help students build a vocabulary to describe tone.

Tone is a concept, an awareness. You can't play with a chocolate fudge sound, full and rich, unless you have that concept in your mind! Not only must we learn the concepts which the words attempt to define, but we must learn about the relationship between bow speed, arm weight, placement on the string, contact point, distribution of the bow and vibrato, and then discover what effect all of these things have on the tone. The sensitivity developed by the bow hand and arm makes it possible to produce the colors, textures, and nuances of the music. We always need to remember the importance of how we give the bow to the string, no matter what bow stroke is required.

We need a sequence that allows one skill to lead to the next. We need to have a series of pieces that develop various stages of bow hand and arm development. Some examples are pieces that begin with a “vowel sound” vs. a “consonant” sound, a march that needs the staccato stroke, chords that need the spring from the hand, wrist and fingers that work like shock absorbers when the bow is set, bow lifts in a Hungarian dance.

The bow hand goes to “aerobics class” in some etudes, such as the *40 Variations*, Op. 3 by Sevcik.

A few other elements that directly affect the development of the bow hand and arm and tone include:

- Listening allows us to improve inflection and nuances. If a student is studying Mozart and has never heard Mozart's music, it is like someone trying to speak French without ever having heard what it sounds like.
- Choosing Repertoire: It is so important for teachers to choose repertoire for their students that has a purpose for development. It is also important to teach to the needs of the student and not to teach our own agenda.
- Involvement: We have to help a student learn how to be aware, what to listen for, and how to apply it. One thing I have found helpful is to be sure a student knows why he or she is doing something. Mindless practice is everyone's waste of time. Simple questions can be asked from the beginning and with young students: What did you hear? What has your lesson been about so far? What have you learned in your lesson today? Can you tell me what your lesson was about? When students learn how to be involved in the process, so they can eventually become their own teacher.
- Breathing: Music must sound like it is alive! When you breathe you move. Allow yourself the freedom to flow with the music. When a child is feeling something within the music, there will probably be some movement generated by the music itself. It indicates that the child is free to express the music as he feels it and is not limited to remembering how to play the notes. Breathing is a simple gesture that can easily be taught with very young children. One way to foster this is to encourage singing and speaking. I have found that if a student can sing or speak in the dynamic or style a piece needs, he can play it.
- Communication: I firmly believe that a teacher has to take the time and make the effort to understand the student being taught, apart from the instrument. If we don't know whom we are teaching, we cannot begin to

get to technique, and certainly not expressiveness. As teachers we need to be sensitive to the individual in front of us.

A teacher's role is to try to remove the students' limitations. Before a teacher can plunge in with a technical plan, he/she must first take time to understand the person that is being taught. If a teacher can begin the journey of teaching each unique student in a manner that builds self-esteem, then the teacher can easily develop the technical and

musical awareness that helps the student develop into a player of artistic ability.

Students must know that a teacher believes in their potential and won't give up on them. It is here that the challenge of teaching lies: to find a way to connect and carry out your vision for that student. Establish eye contact, use inflection that grabs their attention, and set your standard and expectation in the context of a caring environment.

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