



VIOLA

Healthy Playing

by Annette Caruthers

A student of mine began having right shoulder pain this past winter when she played in the pit for her high school musical, suddenly adding many hours of playing with cramped seating and poor position, on top of her usual schedule of practicing, school orchestra and GTCYS Symphony. Her mother has had some problems with neck and shoulder pain and she immediately took action to have the student evaluated by her usual doctor, by Jonathan Reynolds, a local physical therapist who is extremely knowledgeable and experienced in working with musicians, and by an orthopedic surgeon. These are the steps anyone should take in dealing with pain related to music performance. I accompanied the student and her mother to an appointment with Reynolds, and even though I have worked with him myself and have made a real effort over many years to learn biomechanically correct ways of playing, I learned some very interesting and valuable tips for teachers.

I had noticed in lessons that this student often had an extra hitch in bowing motions, especially when making bow changes at the tip, and these motions could be felt in her shoulder. Reynolds confirmed my intuitions and offered a way for us to check this so she can keep track of her movements on her own. He advised putting a small matchbox on her right wrist so that it would shuffle the matches, making a small sound, if the bow change was not made smoothly. I could find nothing like this immediately available so instead put a number of pennies in a small AA battery box and attached it to the student's wrist with a large rubber band that did not cut into her skin. To our amazement it really worked!! The sound of

the pennies on incorrect bow changes was a very clear reminder to this student to pay attention to how she used her arm and hand when playing at the tip.

Another idea from Reynolds at this appointment relates to holding the instrument with chin, shoulder (actually collar bone), shoulder rest, and left hand. This student had begun to slouch noticeably after growing several inches in height in one year. We had always been working on good setup for her, with changes in chin-rests and shoulder rests, etc. but playing in the crowded pit at school did not help her position. Reynolds gave us all a very clear picture of holding the instrument balanced on the collar bone (the bone runs from the top of the shoulder around the front of the neck on each side) with weight from the head and chin, using the left hand for "releases" of the neck and head and to add stability. An idea he described is to have photo copies made of music being learned, and mark points where there is no shifting so the left hand can take some of the weight of the instrument at those points, thereby "releasing" the tension in the head and neck. The muscles holding the head and neck are related to the shoulders, and this is an important "release" to have for healthy playing. It does take some focused practicing to learn to redistribute the weight of the instrument in this way, but this gives the player much-needed moments of rest for the head and neck.

These are ideas we can all use with students, and my hope is that we can teach our students a healthier way of playing and practicing than we may have learned ourselves. I hope to have Reynolds present

more ideas to a group of teachers in the near future; I'd love to have exercises for students in addition to tips for teaching! If you are interested, please contact me: Annettemusician@gmail.com, 952-924-0663.

More ideas and further information can be found in: *Playing (Less) Hurt* by Janet Horvath (cellist in the Minnesota Orchestra), self-published by Janet Horvath, ISBN 0-9713735-0-7. *The Teaching of Action in String Playing* by Paul Rolland and Marla Mutschler, published by ASTA, ISBN 1-883026-19-9. *Basics* by Simon Fischer, published by Peters Edition Limited, ISBN 1 901507-00-9. *The Athletic Musician: A Guide to Playing without Pain* by Barbara Paull and Christine Harrison, published by Scarecrow Press, Inc. ISBN 0-8108-3356-5. These books are available widely in bookstores, online and from music suppliers. *How to Hold a Violin* by Michael Shallock, found at Violinist.com also applies to viola.

Jonathan Reynolds is a physical therapist defending his Ph.D. Dissertation at the University of Minnesota on problems of the right shoulder in violinists. He can be found at <http://www.reynoldsrehabpt.com/> or call 612-331-5757. You can also search for his name on Google to find out more about his work.

Annette Caruthers, violist, teaches violin and viola in the Twin Cities. A former member of the Minnesota Orchestra and Utah Symphony, former Principal Violist of the Minnesota Opera Orchestra, she is now teaching full-time from studios in St. Louis Park and southwest Minneapolis. Her students have gone on to careers in music and often play on the first stands of the youth symphonies. ♪