

All-State: Teaching Action in String Playing: the Pedagogy of Paul Rolland

presented by Elizabeth Ericksen

In the 1960s and 1970s Paul Rolland directed a 10-year project in public schools in Illinois to develop “actions” that could be used to develop string playing. He made pioneering films of his students that have been recently released on DVD. Elizabeth Ericksen studied with Rolland at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and showed some of the DVDs and used her personal knowledge from studying with Rolland to demonstrate and answer questions.

Balance — tension and release

Balance was fundamental to Rolland’s approach. The violin is balanced between the shoulder and the left hand. The left hand is balanced between fingers 1 and 4 so that thumb works for all fingers. On a string crossing, the left hand is balanced in motion as the elbow swings to accomplish the crossing. The bow is always balanced between the right hand and the string. To be balanced is to have muscles ready for motion.

The film on balance began by showing children on a teeter-totter, then riding a bicycle—movements that are balanced. When showing children playing violin, viola and cello, Rolland advised: keep joints and limbs flexible and balanced; avoid stiffness even in the legs. When holding the violin or viola, the player’s neck must not be stiff; the head balances most of the weight of the instrument and the left hand helps a bit. The weight of the bow is balanced by the instrument and the arm.

Leverage and balance allow the freedom of movement required to produce a big tone. Do not press the bow with the fingers, but allow the weight to come through resilient fingers.

Repetitious movements such as fast *detaché* or *sautillé* need a well-balanced arm. Do not impel every movement in fast playing, but use the rebound to get two sounds with one action. Do not immobilize the right upper arm, but allow it to rotate slightly. The film showed a player with an elastic cuff around his upper bow arm, with a long stick attached horizontally; the stick quivered with the rotation as the student played rapid sixteenth notes.

For vibrato, the left arm must be balanced. There will be a rotary movement in the upper arm.

For big bows, maintain overall balance by shifting the weight of the body and instrument in the opposite direction to the

bow—lean left on a down bow, and return to center on the up bow. This movement will be natural if the body is relaxed and balanced.

Preparatory motions should match the gentleness or vigor of the character of the music that follows. Avoid sudden starts. Ease into shifts. Anticipate movements to overcome inertia, for instance when performing a long shift.

Finish a movement with follow through, like a golf swing, or the final stroke of a piece. Do not stop abruptly, but have a follow-through motion during rests, for instance in the thirty-second rests in the opening theme of Dvorak’s *Humoresque*.

Use effortless quick action in the same direction for *martelé*; the arm, hand and bow move in the same direction. Hold the bow more firmly for a slow bow stroke; a weak hold will cause an indistinct sound.

Movements requiring change of direction (e.g. *legato* bow change) require one part of the body to lead in the new direction while the rest of the body completes the old direction of motion. Jerky changes of direction are caused by lack of balance.

Use a lightly balanced arm to play fast motions with ease (e.g. rapid string crossings).

Don’t fidget before playing! The film showed a violin student giving a wonderfully bad example: setting the violin, wiggling her shoulder and head, craning her neck, adjusting her chin, moving the fiddle trying to find that “perfect spot,” never actually ready to play. Then a group of violin students were shown doing an amazing good example. At a tempo of about 50: beat 1—full down bow with a natural left lean; beat 2—full up bow returning to center; beat 3—a flying Statue of Liberty with a natural left lean, violin and bow both held above the head with outstretched arms; beat 4—return to playing position; repeat beat 1—full down bow, etc. Each time, for each student, the violin set was perfectly balanced and ready to play on that single beat.

The film concluded with Rolland’s students with 1-2 years of experience playing pieces from Fletcher’s *New Tunes for Strings*. One required long up bows with a reset for the next up bow. One piece was a fiddle tune performed at three tempos: normal allegro with knee bends on the rest; faster with foot stomps on the rest; and very fast with a shout on the rests.

Teaching balance

Liz demonstrated some of the beginner actions Rolland advocated to develop balance.

- Left hand pinky pizz on the violin G string (cello C) will promote a good left-hand shape and develop the elbow movement required for string crossings.
- The shuttle game gets beginners moving from low (1st position) to medium (3rd or 4th position) to high (over the body) registers using left hand open string pizz. (Upper strings use left hand finger 4 pizz; cellists use left hand finger 3 pizz.) For example (low) D D D ♯ | (middle) D D D ♯ | (high) D D D ♯ | (middle) D D D ♯ | (low) A A A ♯ | (middle) A A A ♯ | etc.
- For violin pre-vibrato, tap the top of the instrument on the G string side with a nicely shaped left-hand motion. Use a rhythm such as ♯ ♯ ♯ ♯ or ♯ ♯ ♯ ♯ ♯ ♯. Rotate your arm and hand to the E string side during the rest, then rotate back to the G string side for the next measure of your rhythm.
- Use flying pizzicato to promote playing at the frog, playing full bows and teaching the circular motion required for down-down bow lifts. The natural fling the student needs for a flying pizz is exactly the arm stroke for a full down bow.
- When the student is in playing position, the teacher can find out if the child is relaxed and balanced by moving the instrument—the child should move when the teacher moves the scroll.
- If the child is tight, get the muscles in motion! You must release a clench in order to make a motion. For example, if the left thumb is tight on the neck, tap the thumb on the neck to loosen it.

Liz shared compositions by Mary Alice Rich, a native of Mankato and student of Rolland. Mary Alice was commissioned to write student pieces, many using open strings, that could be used to teach action as Rolland advocated. Each piece has parts for student violin, viola, cello and bass, and optional teacher and/or piano accompaniments. Mary Alice has given permission for the pieces to be distributed; contact Liz at adericksen@comcast.net if you are interested. *After the Storm* uses left hand plucking to

help shape the left hand position; students can use violin position or banjo position. *Lost Kitty* and *Kitty Found* use low, middle and high positions; student parts have open strings, while the teacher part has the melody. *Opening Doors* uses left hand tapping on the body of the instrument, then right hand pizz of open and the octave finger. *Break Open the Piñata* can be performed with flying pizzicato, or down-down with small, medium or large bow circles. If using full bows, make sure students are rocking their body weight to the opposite side.

The bow hold

Holding the bow is difficult; developing tone is a long-term project. Violin students usually find it hard to play at the frog; cello students usually find it hard to play at the tip. Everyone needs to learn to use their bow hand to keep the bow straight.

The film on holding the bow showed grade-school children doing actions and playing. The bow is held in round hand and fingers, like bouncing or holding a ball. Thumb and finger 2 are opposite. Start with a pencil hold—move it, wave it, twist it. With the bow, begin by holding it at the balance point for a more easy start. When holding the bow at the frog, develop a relaxed bow hand by waving your right hand with left pinky hooked through the tip of the bow. Then set the bow on the string and flex your fingers, then return to the left hand pinky through the tip. Liz Ericksen demonstrates in the photos below.



Wave the RH with LH pinky through the tip



Flex fingers with the bow on the string

Establish a bow hold that is not too loose and not too tight by placing the bow on the

string, lifting and placing again. Develop a straight bow motion by shadow bowing on your left shoulder, or bowing through a tube held on your shoulder. To keep the bow straight, “direct the bow forward.”

In a good bow hold, finger 2 and thumb “encircle” the stick; they form a circle, not a bird’s beak. Finger 3 “embraces” the stick. The film showed students playing open strings in various rhythms accompanying a folk song (*Swanee River*) played on the piano.

Playing in the middle of the bow for violin is where the upper and lower arm form a square. The film showed students playing ♩ ♪ ♪ in accompaniment to the *Blue Danube Waltz*.

The right elbow must drop to move to a higher string. Practice pivots holding the bow tip with left pinky. Then practice string crossing slurs with big (almost full) bows to develop a loose right shoulder and natural adjustment of elbow height.

Practice ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ all down bow to develop sensitivity for correct weight and a ringing release. The film showed students playing *Skip to My Lou* in various bowing patterns.

Teaching bow hold

In the discussion after the film, Liz pointed out the suggestion of drawing lines on the fingers where the bow touches. Especially for thumb, students are sometimes confused about what part of their finger and thumb comes in contact with the stick. Liz demonstrated how to make a “pinky nest” (invented by Mimi Zweig) out of heavy tape to stick on the top of the bow to help finger 4 find its spot. We learned how to attach a tube to the strings with a rubber band to give students the feel for a straight bow on the string. (The tube goes on top of the strings in the playing zone; the rubber band goes around the end of the tube, under the strings, and around the other end of the tube.) Teachers suggested developing the bow hold through “the bunny rabbit with dental issues” and “zombie hands” (stretch your arms out in front, and flop your wrists).

Tunes by Mary Alice Rich included *Open Sesame* for detaché and practice in string crossings; the upper arm must not get immobilized and tight. *Open Sky* uses ♩ ♩ ♩ | ♩ ♩ ♩ | rhythm for bow distribution: lower half for ♩, full bow for ♩, upper half for ♩ then full bow for ♩.

Vibrato

The film on vibrato showed developing

finger vibrato by having the teacher wiggle the finger joint for the student. From finger vibrato, if you release finger 1 from the side of the neck, you get wrist/hand vibrato.

Students tapped rhythms on the body of the instrument while the teacher played the melody, e.g. *Old MacDonald*, *Jingle Bells*, *Jack and Jill*. Then students tapped ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ on a string in first position, then on the body of the instrument, then back to first position. If you throw your hand as if to tap, but your finger stays in place, you get vibrato.

The arm must be balanced and swing evenly for a good vibrato. Violinists can learn vibrato in banjo position. Do lots of silent vibrato exercises in 1st then 3rd positions.

To coordinate vibrato with the bow, play an open string and do the vibrato motion without any fingers down. The base of finger 1 will brush the side of the neck. The thumb balances the fingers. The upper arm rolls to balance the fingers. The movement is free, effortless, even and continuous. When placing the fingers on the string for vibrato, angle the fingers back and towards the scroll.

Violinist Elizabeth Ericksen is a Senior Lecturer in Music at Carleton College and also teaches violin and viola at MacPhail Center for Music. She coaches string quartets in the Augsburg College Suzuki Talent Education program and the Sartory String Quartet Institute. A founding member of the Sartory String Quartet, she now performs with Ensemble L'Autumno. Liz has B.S. and M.M. degrees from the University of Illinois, where she studied with Paul Rolland. ♩