



VIOLIN

Expression in Violin and Singing

Part 1: Body Awareness

by Katie Gustafson and Nicole Warner

A few years ago I was singing with a women's choir at church, and stumbled onto a wonderful new colleague. A vocal specialist named Nicole Warner had been hired to coach the ensemble, helping us with vocal technique and German diction. After getting to know her, I discovered that she also played violin, and I told her I would help her with violin if she would help me with my singing.

We had regular lessons together and enjoyed this partnership for about two years. During our time together we made some great discoveries about how complementary vocal technique can be to violin technique. Some of these areas include body awareness, breathing, ear training, musical phrasing, and others. I have since applied many of those discoveries to both my studio and orchestra teaching and found them very helpful to my students. I have invited Nicole to help me share some of these ideas with you, in hopes that you will find them as useful as I did.

The biggest and most practical issue I faced as a singer was that of body awareness. As I worked with Nicole, I began discovering muscle tension and posture issues that were crippling my technique. Correcting these issues led to a huge improvement in both natural tone production and physical comfort, and the same can be true with violin.

Let us begin with the subject of posture. As a tall woman, I have often thought about posture in the past. However, the conventional advice, "Don't slouch!" was never especially helpful. It embedded in my mind the idea that good posture meant throwing your shoulders back and keeping your chin up. If you have ever tried doing this, you know that it isn't very comfortable.

Instead of saying "Don't slouch!" or "stand up straight," try this alternative: "Stand evenly at your whole height." Any of these instructions might get someone to stand a little taller—but the latter encourages them to do so with a relaxed, flexible body. It invites your students to observe

this difference by asking them how it feels to stand at their whole height. If you are short on time, prompt them by saying, "As you stand, do you feel strong and flexible at the same time?" Add a deep breath or two (or four or five...) if they need help loosening up.

As you add the violin, things can start to go wrong. Students start leaning on one leg, the instrument droops toward the floor, or their head is tilted far to one side. I had one student who was folding his torso forward, causing his violin to droop; to correct this, he would lean to the right. The violin was then level with the floor, but his body was bent like a boomerang from his right foot up to his right shoulder.

Here is a possible solution: have your student(s) stand without their instruments "at their whole height," and have them show you how they would hold an imaginary violin. As they lift their arms into playing position, prompt them to observe the shape of their arms, and how it feels in their shoulders. Make corrections as needed. Have your students close their eyes and memorize what it feels like, and ask them to replicate the feeling while holding their real violin. Depending on the age of your students, repeat this process in further lessons until they have adopted it into their regular playing habits.

If you have a student who would benefit from some more in-depth discussion of body positioning, here is a possible exercise you could try:

1. Identify unhealthy posture.

"First let's create some really poor posture. Stand up with your feet in a random pose, cock your hips to one side, slouch, put a hand on your hip, and stick your neck out really far like a chicken pecking. Now exaggerate that pose (just don't hurt yourself). If it's uncomfortable, you're doing a great job."

2. Release and Rebuild

"Release that. Shake it out!"

"Now stand with your feet parallel, hip-

distance apart, and we're going to build great posture from the feet up. Starting with your feet, "place" your ankles over the heels of your feet. Straighten your legs and then release your knees just enough so your leg muscles engage. Stack your hips on top of that, and now imagine the vertebrae of your spine, flexible and strong, like building blocks stacked up on top of one another. Sway your shoulders from side to side to experiment with this strong flexibility. Finally, place your head on top of your shoulders such that your ears are in vertical alignment with your shoulders. You should be able to freely move from this tall, strong, and flexible position."

During my voice lessons with Nicole, this body awareness freed up my muscles to act in their most natural capacity. Rather than manipulating my posture due to overthinking, I felt free to act from a place of relaxation. My tone production markedly improved with this single epiphany.

Another aspect of body awareness that improved my singing was reducing muscle tension. Vocalists and string players might be targeting different body parts or muscle groups, but the eventual goal is the same: to let the body do its best work through freedom and flexibility. To increase this freedom and flexibility, here are a few ideas:

1. *Relaxation takes preparation.* Relaxing on command is not easy. In fact, you may be able to think of a time when being told to "just relax!" had the exact opposite effect. However, we can build an atmosphere of relaxation by encouraging students to warm up well before they play. Warming up slowly can give students a specific opportunity to pay attention to their bodies.

For example, after playing a few slow scales, stop to stretch. Some common stretches are: 1. Roll shoulders forward and backward; 2) Tilt head toward each shoulder, feeling a gentle stretch across the top of the opposite

shoulder; 3) Roll head in a few slow circles; 4) Stretch forearms by extending one arm out in front of you, and using the opposite hand to bend your wrist slowly both up and down. Sustain each stretch for around 10 seconds. After a few moments of this, take five slow breaths, standing at your whole height with a strong and flexible stance. When you feel calm and relaxed, pick up your instrument and continue to play with awareness of your body.

This kind of preparation can help to cultivate relaxation as an ongoing practice, rather than trying to make it an immediate correction.

2. *Ease tension with motion.* This worked beautifully with singing. If Nicole sensed that I was feeling inhibited, she would have me sway, or swing my arms. This freed up my breathing, and released any tight muscles. I have tried transferring this concept to violin and had similar success. If you have a student who locks their knees, have them play something simple while swaying slightly from side to side to loosen up the leg muscles.

I had a younger student recently who had a lot of left hand tension. His thumb and fingertips created a vice grip on the neck of the violin. I asked him to stop periodically to wiggle his fingers, and tap his thumb on the side of the neck. This helped him to be aware of how tightly his fingers were squeezing, and gave him a tool to use while practicing on his own.

A good place to start with your own students is to evaluate their current set up. Over time odd habits can creep into their playing while we are concentrated on another part of their playing. Try using a checklist like the one provided here to conduct a more complete evaluation of how your student is using their body. It covers almost the entire body, and you could easily adapt it to suit your needs.

Once you have identified problem areas in your students, use a mirror or perhaps a video recording device to help them observe the issue for themselves. Have them exaggerate the problem to increase their awareness of the physical problem, and help them practice some relaxation or movement strategies to relieve the problem. (If you work with older students, you can and should include them in identifying problems and brainstorming solutions.)

For example: I teach elementary-aged beginners, and a common problem for them is hunching up their shoulders. To address this, I might have them stand in front of a mirror while holding their instrument so that they can observe their own body stance. I might point out their shoulders, and then have them stand normally without their instrument to notice how their shoulders feel. We would then roll our shoulders, or stretch out a little to loosen up, and practice holding an “imaginary” violin with a more relaxed upper body. When they return the instrument to their shoulder, I would encourage them to continue watching themselves in the mirror

Posture Points The Body Awareness Checklist

Legs and Feet:

- Weight balanced on both feet
- Feet placed hip-width apart
- Knees just slightly bent. (Check for locked knees)

Torso and Head:

- Standing at full height
- Breathing evenly
- Chinrest and shoulder rest at a height proportional to neck length
- Head and chin in an upright placement
- Relaxed jaw and neck muscles (Watch for clenching muscles along the jawline.)

Left Arm:

- Instrument angle parallel to floor without distorting back or shoulders
- Left thumb relaxed (can be moved easily)
- Elbow can swing easily between G string position and E string position

Right Arm:

- Relaxed shoulder
- Elbow raises and lowers for string changes
- Wrist flexible when bowing from frog to tip
- Fingers on bow hold curved and relaxed (no locked joints)
- Tone derives from bow arm weight rather than pushing from shoulder or elbow.

to maintain a flexible and relaxed stance when they begin to play.

All of these ideas about body awareness have helped me in my own playing, and have informed my teaching. I hope that you find them useful. Please check back for parts 2 and 3, which will focus on breathing and musicality.

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Nicole Warner is a local mezzo-soprano who works actively as a studio teacher and a soloist. She specializes in German oratorio. Please visit www.nicolewarner.com ♪