Violin

The Violin Bow, Part 2

Three Schools of the Violin Bow Hold

by Lynnea Skeate

As the violin bow developed, the way a player held it naturally developed as well. Three basic schools of holding the bow have emerged, each determined by the style of music and desired tone in that time period. Of course, even as violinists and pedagogues continued to study their instrument within a particular school of thought, their bow holds continued to evolve and mature. Undoubtedly, even the foremost bow hold of today will continue to be refined as violinists strive for perfection in their art.

The German School

The German bow hold is from the oldest school and was used up until the late 1800s to early 1900s. One of its principle proponents was Joseph Joachim (1831-1907), an influential teacher, performer, conductor, and composer. One of Joachim's most notable students was Hans Letz (1887-1969), who was concertmaster of the Chicago Symphony, chamber music performer, and teacher at Julliard. Letz preferred a light sound in chamber music, and the German bow hold enabled him to achieve both dexterity and a delicate sound. The index finger laid on the bow between its first and second joints with the thumb opposite the middle finger. All of the fingers were held close together with a high wrist at an angle with the forearm. This position inevitably prevented the use of flat bow hair.

Carl Flesch, *The Art of Violin Playing*

Figure 1. German bow hold

Drawing on common scientific knowledge that fingertips are much more sensitive than any other part of the hand, violinists reasoned that the fingertips should be on the bow since they would be the most receptive to its movement. Although this made sense theoretically, in practice it caused severe problems. Most prominent was tendonitis, caused by awkward angles of the wrist. The stiff fingers inhibited smooth bow changes and the sensitivity of the fingertips was marred when the knuckles were bent to place the fingers on the bow. Overall, it simply required too much force to produce a good volume. As violinists experimented with new ways to hold the bow in order to achieve the fuller sound necessary for the demands of Romantic music, the German hold faded into obscurity.

The Russian School

The Russian bow hold is almost a complete opposite of the German. Originally established by the Polish Henryk Wieniawski (1835-1880), it was then championed by Leopold Auer (1845-1930), a Hungarian violinist and teacher. In the first book of his *Graded Course of Violin Playing*, Auer explains that the index finger should be placed on the bow between the second and third knuckles with a small space between the index and middle fingers. The thumb should be firmly placed and bent at the first knuckle with the ring finger directly across from it. The pinkie, playing a minor role, only touches the bow when it is in the lower half. This creates a hold with a heavily pronated hand, as seen in Figure 2, causing all of the weight to fall into the index finger. The angle of the wrist remains mostly unchanged from frog to tip, requiring players to labor for straight bows.

Auer, *Graded Course of Violin Playing: Bk. 1*

Figure 2. Demonstration of the Russian bow hold by Leopold Auer

The greatest advantage of the Russian

bow hold is that it allows for an extremely powerful sound. Despite its advocates, however, the Russian hold causes several problems. First, there is little flexibility in the bow hand, forcing the player to accommodate various bow strokes and dynamic levels in the same position. As Jascha Heifetz (1901-1987), one of Auer's famous pupils, demonstrated, it is possible to use the same tool and still achieve stunning virtuosity. However, it is much more difficult to do so, analogous to using a hammer both to pound a nail into the wall and to push a piece of delicate china back into place. Second, if the hand is repeatedly held in the required position, tendonitis can result and force the player to end his career. To counteract potential strain on his wrist, Heifetz always rested from practicing for six months of the year. When he did play, it was only for three hours a day with a rest on Sunday.

http://jaschaheifetz.com/gallery/in-concert/

Figure 3. Jascha Heifetz with Russian bow hold

The Franco-Belgian School

The Franco-Belgian bow hold had a major impact on the violin community. Gaining momentum in the early 1900s, its main advocates were Eugène Ysaÿe (1858-1931), Ivan Galamian (1903-1981), and Lucien Capet (1873-1928). It seems that this bow hold was adapted over time. In 1923, Capet published *Superior Bowing Technique*, which is still considered an invaluable treatise on the art of bowing. Capet explains that the index finger and pinkie exert opposite forces on each other around the pivot of the middle finger and thumb, yet they provide the flexibility and finger independence. Flexibility is indeed the greatest result of this bow hold. In 1962, Ivan Galamian wrote his famous *Principles of Violin Playing and Teaching*. He advocated flexibility and a "natural," curved hand position. Of course, this did not mean a flimsy bow hold. Firmness is required, but unlike the Russian hold, the Franco-Belgian hold "should not resemble the stiffness that would occur if one were to try to walk without bending the proper joints." Galamian explains that the fingers should lie on the bow with natural spacing between them. The index finger lies on the stick close to the second knuckle while the pinkie rests on top of the stick with a noticeable curve in it. The thumb remains opposite the middle finger with a slight bend in it to keep the hand flexible. Although this is the normal hand position on the bow, Galamian acknowledges that the hand can adapt its stance slightly, depending on the style, bow stroke, and tone required.

Galamian, *Principles of Violin Playing*

Figure 4. Franco-Belgian bow hold as advocated by Galamian

The advantages of this bow hold are tremendous. One important feature that sets it apart is the balance of the hand between the index finger and the pinkie. Both are actively engaged in the bowing process through the use of pronation and supination. Pronation refers to the position of the hand when leaning toward the index finger, as it does from about the middle of the bow to the tip. Supination occurs when the hand leans toward the pinkie, as it does from about the middle of the bow to the frog. This results in a gradual transferring of weight from one side of the hand to the other as the bow is drawn up and down—a motion similar to turning a doorknob. Another key result is flexibility of every joint involved in bowing. The arm moves, and the wrist and fingers respond to that motion. Because the hand is flexible and can quickly make minor adjustments, violinists have more options available when attempting certain articulations, tone color, or dynamic shades than they would have with a stiff Russian hold.

The pedagogues and masters of Franco-Belgian hold are numerous: Rodolphe Kreutzer (1766-1831), Pierre Rode (1774-1830), Jacques Féréol Mazas (1782-1849), Charles Auguste de Bériot (1802-1870), Joseph Joachim (1831-1907), Henry Schradieck (1846-1918), Eugène Ysaÿe (1858-1931), Lucian Capet (1873-1928), Fritz Kreisler (1875-1962), Shinichi Suzuki (1898-1998), Ivan Galamian (1903-1981), Josef Gingold (1909-1995), and Dorothy Delay (1917-2002), among many others. Virtuosos who embrace this bow hold include Jacques Thibaud, Arthur Grumiaux, Itzhak Perlman, Pinchas Zukerman, David Oistrakh, Isaac Stern, Joshua Bell, Midori, Hilary Hahn, and Anna-Sophie Mutter. All of them attest to its adaptability and flexibility in meeting the demands of the greatest violinists.

Bow Holds of Today

Although the German school has faded away, the Russian and Franco-Belgian schools still have prominent followers. Many violinists advocate for an adaptable bow hold. They change their bow hold to suit the style of music they are playing: a lighter touch (similar to the German) for Baroque music; a Russian hold for intense, deeply Romantic, passionate music; and a flexible Franco-Belgian hold in general practice. There are a surprising number of performers who still adhere to a strictly Russian hold in favor of the tone they can produce. However, the majority of teachers, students, and performers use a version of the Franco-Belgian hold. Indeed, the widespread and longstanding use of this hold by masters, both past and present, testifies to its excellence. It has guided many performers to a higher level of musicianship and deeper development of sound color.

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