



VIOLIN

The Violin Bow, Part 3

A Case for Starting the Student with the Bow

by Lynnea Skeate

Learning to play the violin is a feat of coordination between two independent hands. The left hand requires agility, finesse, sensitivity, and command of the fingerboard. These qualities are developed continually through exercises and repertoire. However, even a perfectly executed left hand can be marred by a deficient right hand because it is the bow, guided by the right hand, that draws the sound out of the violin. Thus the bow is the foundation for technique in players at every level.

**** Author's note: Some teachers may agree and some may disagree with the reasoning and conclusions I draw in this article. My desire is to present points for consideration and my hope is that teachers will be able to glean what is useful, whether in whole or in part, to their method of instruction. We all learn from each other, whether we agree on everything or not. ☺*

There are many approaches to teaching a student how to play the violin. Out of these multiple approaches, two main ways emerge. The first method is to start the student with pizzicato. The student learns to read a full octave of notes while doing only pizzicato. Many teachers simultaneously introduce the bow hold through use of a pencil, requiring the student to practice the proper hand position and do exercises on it. Once the student has learned the octave of notes and mastered the pencil bow hold, he or she is allowed to begin bowing open strings. This method essentially constitutes starting with left hand technique, since the student learns to play fingered notes fairly quickly. Several popular method books utilize this approach including *Essential Elements 2000 for Strings* by Michael Allen, Robert Gillespie, and Pamela Tellejohn Hayes and the newer *String Basics* by Terry Shade and Jeremy Woolstenhulme. The reasoning behind this is that practicing the bow hold until it is perfect on a pencil or on the bow will make it easier for the student to play correctly once he/she places the bow on the string. In the meantime, the student

will advance his/her left hand technique. When the two hands are finally combined, it seems logical that the process will be smoother than if the hands were combined at the beginning.

This method has been used very effectively by many teachers and there are certainly strong arguments for it. However, although I agree with separating left and right hand techniques, I believe that there are several inherent issues with this first method. First, it generally takes longer for bow technique to develop than left hand technique. In contrast to the left hand, which employs the wrist and fingers in the same general position, bowing engages more moving parts, coordinating every arm joint plus the wrist and fingers. Since bowing is more complicated and takes longer to develop, it seems reasonable to begin the process right away. Second, practicing the bow hold on a pencil can be helpful to a certain extent. I have started most of my students practicing their bow holds with a pencil. But this is ultimately a poor substitute for the reality of playing with the bow. A correct bow hold can only be truly learned in context of how the right hand adapts to the bow in motion. In other words, the bow hold is not a frozen shape but a flexible link in the whole bowing apparatus—from the right shoulder muscle down to the fingertips. The bow itself must be viewed as an extension of the arm with the bow hold as a pivotal component. Third, a correct bow hold is necessary for the creation of a quality tone, able to portray nuances of expression in the music. For beginners, this includes learning bow arm movements, bow weight adjustment, and bow speed, while coordinating when to execute each of these elements. Again, this can only be accomplished in context of actually bowing on the strings. The sooner this discovery process is begun, the more time a student will have to develop and experiment with his/her tone.

The second method of teaching violin begins with bowing on open strings. Many other method books begin this way includ-

ing *All for Strings* by Gerald E. Anderson and Robert S. Frost, *String Builder* by Samuel Applebaum, and briefly, the Suzuki method books. Leopold Auer, the great teacher of the Russian school, published a set of nine method books entitled the *Graded Course of Violin Playing*, and he dedicated the entire first book to open string exercises. In “A Word to Teachers” at the beginning of Book 1 in his series, Auer explains his reasons for this.

...the pupil must become impressed with the importance of *tone-production from the very start*. Even on open strings alone he must learn to produce a clear, round tone, capable of dynamic shading.... *Until this has been accomplished, the student's attention should not be diverted through the additional difficulty of learning how to set the fingers.* [Italic in the original]

All of these method books begin developing bow technique right away. Exercises include whole notes for practicing straight bows, and combinations of quarter notes, half notes, and whole notes for learning bow division and bow speed. String crossings teach proper arm levels and arm/wrist coordination. Rhythm combinations develop right hand agility. Each book varies in the emphasis it puts on certain techniques and the time spent on open strings before adding the fingers. The common element between them, however, is the recognition of the priority of the bow and right hand technique.

My violin teacher, Dr. Marion Judish, also advocates beginning with the bow. Much of her knowledge concerning the importance of the bow—and the careful practice needed in order to develop it—was from her teacher, bow expert Young-Nam Kim. In the section “Exercises” from his treatise *The Incidence of Bow Technique on the Quality of the Sound*, Dr. Kim explains his view on tone production and the bow:

There are many exercises one could

devise to relax and utilize bow hold, finger joints, wrist, forearm, shoulder etc. However, these are often unsuccessful because they are practiced irrelevant to the goal that is to produce the best possible tone at the given point of contact at a minimal physical cost. This goal should dictate the necessary adjustment of mechanics. So it is important that our mind always concentrates on sonority as the target before fussing over the details.

This idea can be further applied to suggest that a beautiful tone ought to be pursued

even above intonation! Of course, since intonation is absolutely critical to playing the violin, a quality tone is even more so. And since a quality tone is a foundational element of violin, I submit that it is important to begin developing the bow hold and the right hand from the beginning.

How do you approach teaching violin to your students? Whether you agree with my conclusions or not, my encouragement is to have conviction and reasons for the way you choose to teach. In the end, we all bring a unique approach to teaching influenced by our individual education, research, and experiences, and each student

is unique in the way they learn. Therefore, every teacher is important and contributes valuable information and perspective to the wonderful world of violin!

Lynnea Skeate lives in St. Cloud and graduated from St. Cloud State University with a B.A. in Music in 2016. She has been teaching privately since 2011, and currently teaches violin, viola and beginning cello. Her website is www.tmstringstudio.com. She has assisted with several youth orchestras and loves playing violin and teaching! ♪