



VIOLIN

The Violin Bow, Part 4 Essential Techniques for Beginning Students

by Lynnea Skeate

Proper bowing technique must have a solid foundation. The first step is to identify the essential techniques that a student needs to develop. Through research and discussions with my teacher, I have identified six basic techniques that are foundationally paramount. Each of these can only be learned through repetition of the correct concept, forming a good habit. For example, each time a student performs an action, a thread is formed in his brain. Every repetition adds another thread. Eventually, the threads create a rope that continues to grow stronger with each reiteration. This example has several implications. First, while repetition is a necessary part of learning the violin, it is imperative that the student repeats the correct action. If a bad habit such as a poor bow hold or crooked bowing is allowed to continue unchecked, it can be extremely difficult to undo later and could possibly cause a delay in the student's development. Second, being inconsistent in technique, such as using a slightly different bow hold every time the same section is practiced, can be confusing to the brain. Using the previous illustration, if a different thread is sent to the brain every time the student plays something, the brain cannot construct a strong rope of memory for the right action. In light of this illustration, it is important to master six basic techniques through careful and patient practice.

1) Correct Bow Hold

A key element of bowing is the bow hold. This primary skill affects everything related to bowing: tone, movements, dynamics, and style, among other things. One of the simplest ways to teach the bow hold is by using a pencil. A pencil is much lighter than a bow, allowing the student to position his fingers correctly without weight causing them to collapse. It is also a convenient size for the student to carry around and use to practice throughout the day. Various exercises can be done with both the pencil and the bow. "Windshield wipers," "teeter totter" and "rocket ship" are common ones. A student should pay close attention to his bow hold for the duration of the exercise, being especially mindful that his thumb stays bent and his fourth finger curved, as demonstrated below:



Spinosa, "Natural Hand Position," from *The Artist's Studio*, 8.

Although this is primarily a beginner's skill, it should not be ignored by the advancing student. Once mastered, the bow hold will feel natural to the student's hand, but he must be consciously aware of the connection between his hand and the bow and be prepared for minute adjustments to draw out the desired sound.

2) Parallel Bowing

Even while the bow hold is being established, the student should be introduced to parallel bowing. Parallel bowing refers to keeping the bow parallel to both the bridge and the edge of the fingerboard. Inherent in this technique is the need to understand how each part of the arm moves. Because the arm naturally moves in a circle, it is necessary to know how to utilize it to help rather than hurt technique. (Note: This section will be discussed in the context of using the whole bow.)

There are three main joints used in bowing: the ball-and-socket joint of the shoulder, the hinge joint of the elbow, and the pivot joint of the wrist. When drawing a down bow, a student begins by moving the upper arm. Then he unfolds the elbow joint as far as he can while keeping the bow straight. Finally, he pivots the wrist to the left while pushing the whole arm forward until the bow reaches its tip. To play an up bow, this three-step process is reversed, beginning with the wrist and pulling the arm backward. In the quest for a straight bow, a student must be mindful of where his bow is. At the beginning, the bow should run along the "path" midway between the bridge and the fingerboard. Every violin is slightly different, and the teacher can help the student find this middle ground.

Interestingly, a poor tone often results from a crooked bow stroke. When working with a beginning student who struggles, or forgets, to keep his bow straight, an excellent question to ask is, "When did your violin stop sounding beautiful?" This will immediately turn his attention and ear to the sound he is producing. As he plays his piece again, he should stop as soon as he is unsatisfied with the sound and observe the placement of his bow. From personal teaching experience, I have noticed that even my young students realize that the poor sound results from their bow sitting crooked or over the fingerboard. This recognition is an encouragement for a student to watch his bows more closely, and above all, learn to appreciate and strive for a pure tone. Of course, once a student is comfortable with parallel bowing along this path, he can expand his tonal possibilities by playing closer to the bridge or fingerboard.

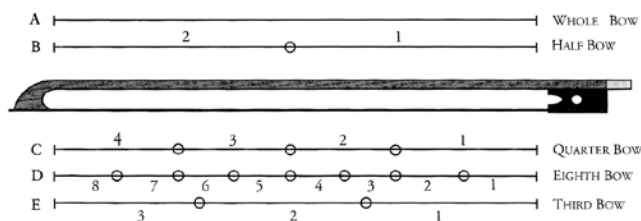
3) Bow Division

Bow division refers to the particular amount and the part of the bow with which a note is played, dependent on the context. A straightforward way to teach bow division is consists of playing quarter notes in the lower half (discussed later), the upper half, and the middle. Once a student is comfortable with these sections separately, he should be taught to combine them. This can often be accomplished through a sequence of half notes and quarter notes. For example, the half note is played with the whole bow traveling down and ending at the tip. Two quarter notes are played in the upper half followed by another half note using the whole bow. The next two quarter notes are played in the lower half. This process can then be repeated. At first, the teacher will need to spell out the

part of the bow for each note. Eventually, the student will be able to decide for himself what a proper bow division is.

Lucien Capet was a major proponent of bow division. In *Superior Bowing Technique*, his foundation is the division of the bow from a whole down to eighths.

Diagram Explaining the Divisions of the Bow



Capet's divisions of the bow, from *Superior Bowing Technique*, 10.

Each exercise is meticulously written in terms of how much bow is used and in which part it is played. Capet asserts, "fluctuations of sound [are] due to unequal division of the bow." Thus, a pure sound can be produced only when the bow is drawn perfectly evenly.

4) Bow Pressure

Bow pressure refers to the weight transferred by the violinist into the bow. This technique affects tone quality, dynamics, and style, among other things. The correct bow pressure is determined primarily by a combination of the desired dynamic level and the vertical placement of the bow on the strings (i.e. where is placed between the bridge and the fingerboard). If the bow is close to the fingerboard, the natural arm weight is often enough to produce a clear tone. On the other hand, if the bow is close to the bridge, a heavy, consistent pressure is required. From my experience, I have noticed that beginning students often play with one of two extremes. Either they press too hard and generate a crunchy, rough sound; or they fear playing an unpleasant sound and thereby play too softly, resulting in an inconsistent, unfocused tone. Those with a heavy bow stroke must be taught that the natural arm weight is heavy enough to produce a quality tone without added pressure. However, those students in need of a healthier tone often require encouragement to push the instrument's sound capacities and purposefully produce some crunchy sounds. It is better to have a solid sound with a few crunches than a wispy, incoherent sound.

The student can experiment with the playing area between the fingerboard and the bridge to discover how much pressure is needed along each "path." One excellent exercise is to play long, slow bows, beginning over the fingerboard then moving closer to the bridge with each stroke. The goal is a consistent sound from frog to tip, regardless of the bow placement.

5) Bow Speed

Bow speed simply describes how fast or slow the bow moves, under the control of the musician. Students usually discover the need for this technique when learning the $\frac{3}{4}$ time signature or dotted quarter notes. Both have a long note followed by a note that must be played in half or a third of the time as the original, but with the same amount of bow. Bow pressure actually plays an important factor in this skill. Often, the fast bows need to be played with a lighter pressure than the slower bows in order to prevent the fast bow from being noticeably louder.

One way to teach bow speed is to have the student count and play, beginning at eight and going down to one. In other words, the student must bow for eight seconds first (a very slow bow), then seven (a little quicker), then six (even quicker), etc. By the time he gets to one second for each bow, he must pull it very quickly. Beginning students especially find it difficult to move their bow slowly. A slow bow tends to crunch or grind, causing the student to automatically move it faster to keep the sound going. This skill can be turned into a game by having the student time himself to see how long he can make his bow stroke take. Each time he repeats this exercise, his goal is to make it longer than the last time. Like so many of the other techniques, bow speed is primarily a musical judgment transferred into a feeling. That is, the student must decide how quickly to move his bow on certain notes, and then he must be able to feel the correct speed.

The concept and practice of bow speed combined with bow pressure should continue to be developed by the advanced violinist. Capet explains that retaining a consistent sound in unequal bow divisions (e.g. dotted half note followed by quarter note) is accomplished through "the sensitivity of the fingers."

The ultimate sophistication of the slow bow is found in the "spun tone" or sons filés. The spun tone is created by a very soft, slow bow. The bow must be at the edge of the fingerboard and the hair tilted to the side. The only pressure on the bow should come from the natural arm weight. Finally, the little finger should remain curved and ready to accommodate weight when the bow reaches the lower half. A difficult but effective exercise is to strive for a "one-minute bow"—producing a soft yet clear tone on one bow for an entire minute. Playing a long string of broken thirds or any other combination that involves string crossings is also indispensable to developing this technique.

6) Playing at the Frog

I personally believe that playing at the frog is important enough of a skill to warrant its own section. Students tend to be very good at pronation. In fact, this is the very premise of the Russian bow hold: the weight of the hand completely leans into the index finger. However, students must become equally adept at supination with a smooth transferring of weight between the index finger and little finger with each bow stroke. Many students also gravitate toward playing in the upper half because it is much easier to get a clean sound. Because the frog is much heavier, it is more difficult to get a smooth, clear tone there. Therefore, a teacher must intentionally develop a student's agility in the lower half of the bow.

One way to practice this is to play quarter notes from the frog to the middle of the bow. This motion is mainly accomplished with the upper arm. Dr. Judish uses an exercise called "Click the Ferrule" with her students. A student should bow all the way to the ferrule of the bow striking it lightly when playing an up bow in the lower half. This is a concrete way to know that he actually went all the way to the frog. While playing these exercises, the student needs to be consciously aware of the weight of the bow in his little finger, which must always remain curved. Playing with the index finger lifted off the bow can further encourage this awareness. The student must also pay attention to keeping the base knuckles (those that connect the fingers to the hand) down and relaxed, keeping the wrist level with the arm rather than raising it into the air, and keeping the bow straight. In *Principles of Violin Playing and Teaching*, Galamian beautifully demonstrates the position of the hand at the frog:



Galamian, "Setting of the bow at the frog, 'triangle position,'" from *Principles of Violin Playing*, 51, Illustration 32.

Conclusion

The violin bow is a fascinating partner with an intriguing history and important musical role. It deserves great respect and diligent study from anyone who wishes to soar into the higher realms of musical expressivity. Its history, use, and techniques all point to the overarching goal of a beautiful tone from different perspectives.

The history of the violin bow is a story of searching for a beautiful tone by reach-

ing for perfection. From the hazy origins of the bow in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to the brilliant craftsmanship of François Tourte in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to the refining touches of makers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the bow has evolved through the influence of performers and makers all aspiring to one goal: perfection. Perfection is measured by the response and tone that the bow produces. The modern bow can produce sounds that are brilliant and bold, subtle and soft, employing a vast range of dynamics and tone color. Together with the violin, it has the ability to portray emotions in such a clear and intimate way that it speaks without words. The bow truly is the soul of the violin.

Regarding the bow hold, disagreements have abounded between pedagogues searching for the best way to produce a wide array of tones. This question was the impetus for many books and pedagogues aspiring to perfection in their art, from Joachim to Auer, as well as Capet to Galamian.

Finally, a beautiful tone is the beginning and the end goal of every violin student and teacher, whether they are just beginning or have been performing for years. We should seek to learn all we can from the masters of the past that we may leave a legacy for the musicians of the future. There will always be greater depths for which to reach in the realm of music. It is our privilege as violinists to search for and develop them. In the words of Ludwig van Beethoven, "Then let us all do what is right, strive with all our might toward the unattainable, develop as fully as we can the gifts God has given us, and never stop learning."

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! ♪