

All-State: Removing Tension from String Playing (Paul Rolland Principles)

presented by Dr. Margaret Schmidt — reported by Sarah Duffy

Dr. Margaret Schmidt presented a session about removing tension from string playing, based specifically on Paul Rolland principles. It was a great companion to the earlier session on the Alexander Technique, and a good reminder for all of us about the importance of good posture and technique.

Dr. Schmidt first asked us to think about the tension we deal with in our own playing, or what we see in our students. Everyone had similar experiences—neck, thumb, back, teeth, jaw, arm, elbow, etc. Tension can come from static positions or repetitive movements.

When we play, the music comes through our bodies. According to Kato Havas, we don't play on the instrument—we play through the instrument. Understanding what we do and how we use our bodies are very important concepts. The key principle is that any change in one part of the body will create changes elsewhere. Awareness is key.

Dr. Schmidt then cleared up some common misconceptions. Instead of thinking that we play with our arms and fingers, we need to be thinking that we play with the whole body. Instead of moving our bows straight from side to side, we need to imagine moving in a circular motion. Instead of thinking that vibrato comes from the fingers, we need to picture it coming from the back and the arm. There isn't one fixed, "correct" way to hold the instrument. Instead, we are constantly moving and adjusting. Instead of thinking that arms move from the tops of the shoulders, we need to think about them moving from the sides of the shoulders.

Maintaining good body balance is crucial. Find a comfortable, balanced, and mobile posture. Think about having "marshmallow knees." Shift your weight from side to side, whether sitting or standing. Bring your instrument to you without disrupting your good posture and alignment.

For the shoulder instruments (violin and viola), remember that an appropriately sized instrument is essential. It is better for an instrument to be too small than too big. Be sure that chin rests and shoulder rests are appropriately sized and adjusted. Bring the instrument to the shoulder from above and fly it in—this is the Paul Rolland "Statue of Liberty." The head should be balanced

above the spine. Kato Havas asks—how gently can you hold it?

For the cello, endpin height is very important. When standing, the scroll should be close to the nose/mouth. When sitting, hug the cello and make sure it feels comfortable. The endpin should be slightly right of center. Rest the cello on the chest and tilt the cello slightly towards the C string side.

In order to free the left arm, support the left arm from the back muscles. The left wrist should balance on the forearm with the elbow, wrist, and pinky aligned. The fingers should fall at an angle on the violin or viola, and they should be perpendicular on the cello or bass.

In order to free the fingers, introduce all fingers early. It's important to teach all finger patterns and march them right away. Teach the concept of "umbrella fingers." Arm weight should sink into the string.

In order to free the thumb, move the left hand and arm along the length of the fingerboard from the beginning. Practice left hand pizzicato with a swinging elbow, and also in low, middle, and high positions. Place all fingers on the string and slide up and down the fingerboard without pressing—the Train Game. Make sure that everyone understands that the thumb bone extends fairly far into the hand. Thumb taps are crucial.

Dr. Schmidt also recommends practicing the Octave Shuttle, which can be found in *New Tunes for Strings*. The pattern is as follows:

- Open open - octave up a string
- Open open - third position
- Open open - harmonic harmonic (starting from open D, or other if you want)

Dr. Schmidt recommended the book *Teaching Body Mapping to Children* by Jennifer Johnson, available from Amazon.

When discussing holding the bow, don't say "grip." "Holding the bow" is better than "bow hold." Encourage flexibility.

To balance the right arm, move the bow using back muscles instead of arm muscles. Allow all parts of the arm to move. Practice flying pizzicato and then do bow circles of various sizes. Check head and neck alignment when bowing.

For bowing movements, teach students that each stroke includes a preparatory motion, a movement, and a follow-through. Large muscles change direction first and then the small muscles respond. Encourage slow strokes where the student pulls the sound out of the instrument—"Smile Bows" by G. Fischbach. When practicing fast, repetitive strokes, make use of rebound and circular strokes.

One of the methods Rolland suggested is as follows:

- Have the students sway to recorded music without holding an instrument
- Then, they sway to recorded music with an instrument—no bow
- Then, they add their bows and play, while continuing to sway

When teaching, it's important to remember that words and feelings can sometimes be misleading. We should refer often to flexibility, curves, and other images that convey responsiveness. We should say "release" instead of "relax." Practicing can make anything feel normal, until it starts to hurt.

The method book *Artistry in Strings* by Robert Frost and Gerald Fischbach incorporates many Rolland principles.

The Rolland video and book, *The Teaching of the Action in String Playing*, are both highly recommended. There is a wonderful Rolland workshop at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, in July 2018. <https://publish.illinois.edu/paul-rolland-workshop/>

This session was very useful and applicable to both school and studio teachers. By making a few easy adjustments, we can help our students create more ease in their playing and hopefully help them avoid a lifetime of performance-based pain.

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