



VIOLIN

Building Blocks for a Flexible Bow Arm

by Katie Gustafson

The flexibility of the bow arm is a skill that is easy to neglect. I, myself, did not give it as much attention as it deserved with students until recent years. I began to discover its importance when trying to teach a younger player to keep their bow going straight, only to find that a rigid wrist and tense bow fingers prevented it. The same problem came up when working on legato bowing, where the tension in the joints made bow changes abrupt and clunky. And again with very fast bowing, like long running sixteenth note passages, tremolo or sautillé, all of which require light, flexible motions in the wrist and fingers.

After working on this issue with several intermediate students, I have begun watching for opportunities to teach bow arm flexibility techniques with my younger students. The sooner these skills are in place, the more likely they are to be successful with some of the important skills mentioned above. Here are some important elements of a flexible bow arm, and some ideas for how to address them with your students.

Bow Hold

The importance of a good bow hold may seem obvious, but a couple of particular details are worth pointing out. First, make sure that the middle fingers drape far enough over the bow stick. This keeps them more curved and gives them better control over the movements of the bow. It also pulls the pinkie closer to the bow stick, making it easier to reach the stick and remain curved. Second, check that the fingers are comfortably spaced. Over-spaced fingers can create stress on the finger joints, and build tension in the palm muscles. Third, build strength in the bow fingers by giving students exercises like “Windshield Wiper” and “Spider Crawling” up and down the stick. The bow hold should be regularly checked even in older students to ensure that bad habits aren’t creeping in.

Bow Hand Flexibility

In my personal experience, this has been one of the more challenging aspects for students to master. However, there are several

exercises that can help students practice flexible movements in the bow hand. Much like vibrato exercises, they usually require time and patience. Encourage students not to worry if progress comes slowly.

1) *Teeter Totter*

Starting on a pencil, have the pinkie and pointer fingers of the bow hand play “teeter totter” using the thumb and middle fingers as the fulcrum. Help your student observe the flexibility in the finger muscles, and the slight change in curvature as the outer fingers move. This exercise can be made more challenging by doing it on the bow, first holding in the center of the bow, then at the balance point, and finally at the frog.

2) *Cat Claw/Release*

Imagine the shape your hand makes when acting like a cat baring its claws. If your palm is facing down, the middle knuckles of the fingers pull upward, like they are being tugged by marionette strings. This position is very much like the position of the bow fingers when playing close to the frog. Next, allow your fingers to release, dropping down into a relaxed, hanging position. This is very similar to the gentle extension the fingers make while playing at the tip of the bow. Have your student first try this exercise without holding anything. Once they feel comfortable with the motions, try it while holding the bow as it rests on the student’s left shoulder. When fluid motions are achieved while holding the bow, try placing the bow on the shoulder near the frog, making the cat claw shape, and pull the bow to the middle, helping the student observe the slight changes in finger curvature, and finally to the tip, feeling the fingers extend slightly. Do the same in the up bow direction, helping the student pause at different parts of the bow to coax their fingers into returning to the cat claw position by the time they get to the frog. Eventually, students should be able to make these slight changes fluidly as they move between the frog and the tip. Apply this skill to open string playing, then to slow scales, and finally to a legato passage from

a piece of music.

Hinge Elbow

This is another skill that seems obvious, but still deserves mentioning. It is usually addressed with beginners to help them bow straight. “Open and close your elbow like a door hinge!” However, there are some subtler situations to watch for. When young players develop enough control to use long bows, the upper arm naturally comes into play a little bit, especially when playing all the way up to the frog. This is a good time to reinforce the elbow hinge, just to make sure that the shoulder doesn’t start taking over. Secondly, when students play faster notes with smaller bow strokes, it is easy for tension to creep into the arm, as though the muscles are “over-trying.” This is another important time to encourage students to loosen up their shoulder and upper arm, letting the elbow open and close freely. A mirror can sometimes be helpful in this case, to help students see what their arm is doing.

Flexible Wrist

Flexibility in the wrist first comes into play when students start using long bow strokes. Help the student observe how the wrist bends slightly toward the face when near the frog, and slightly away when near the tip. Emphasize gentle, relaxed movements. Sometimes I tell students to “allow” their wrist to bend, rather than “force” it to bend. This helps prevent them from over doing it.

In more advanced students, fast bowing like running sixteenth notes or tremolo often call for light wrist movements rather than elbow. Help the student learn this by bowing on their shoulder, and using their left hand to gently hold the forearm, preventing movement. Ask them to try to move the bow with only their wrist. The bow fingers will need to remain light and flexible for this to work. Transition to bowing on the string, and help them achieve a clean, consistent tone using only wrist and fingers. Next, try to increase the speed, and apply to an easy scale with four or eight sixteenth notes on each step of the scale. Finally, apply to a passage from a

piece of music.

Over time, these elements can be gradually combined to create a bow arm that is flexible enough to allow for many different advanced techniques. It is best to work them into regular practice rather than waiting until a great need arises. For

example, if a student has a stiff bow arm, but needs help getting a very fast orchestra excerpt up to speed, you may not have time to help them develop the necessary skills before they need to perform. But with early, regular practice, they will be prepared in advance for anything that comes their way.

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