



VIOLIN

Developing Left Hand Flexibility: Opening Backward from Fourth Finger

by Ian Snyder

In 2009, I watched the livestream of the Queen Elisabeth Competition, and saw a breathtaking performance of Ysaÿe's *6th Sonata* by the violinist Mayu Kishima. She is a captivating musician on the whole, but what really caught my attention was how she navigated the fingered octaves and other left-hand contortions with total ease despite being noticeably petite. The violin looked almost viola-sized on her, and in a photo of the laureates she stands literally head and

shoulders beneath the violinist behind her. This affirmed for me the extent to which the flexibility of the left hand depends on flexible base joints of the fingers rather than the fingers' length.

When I began teaching, I was surprised by how often I encountered students who had problems with intonation or even the physical placement of a finger any time the shape of the hand deviated from the usual left-hand frame. It was most noticeable

with students who had issues with extensions. But I saw it even in musical passages that were in first position but required a slightly larger-than-usual spacing of the fingers, such as the minor third between G and B \flat in *Gavotte from Mignon*. It's tempting to address these issues on a case-by-case basis, helping the student tune the desired interval. (Or in the case of extensions, just figuring they'll grow!) But we would soon run into a similar left-hand problem, leaving us with a game of violinistic Whack-a-Mole. As I pulled at the thread, I always found myself back at the question of base joint flexibility.

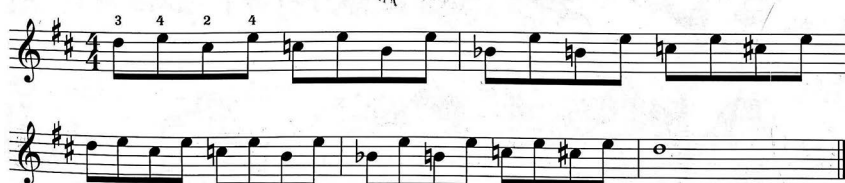
In order to loosen an area of our body, I've often found it more helpful to mobilize it rather than to simply ask the student to relax it. In the case of left-hand flexibility, I was reminded of a teacher who showed me how much further we can reach back from 4 than forward from 1. In first position I can reach a perfect fifth forward from 1, but I can reach that same 1st finger from a major sixth above, or even from a minor 9th above if I let the 1 open up. It struck me that opening the hand backward from 4th finger is an effective way to encourage the left hand to open up from the base joints. In my mind, this forms the basis for a worthwhile "course of treatment" for a student with left hand tension, or for a more petite student who is trying to maximize left hand mobility.

I always begin these exercises by checking for left thumb tension. If the thumb remains loose throughout, the student can access the kind of mobility I am looking to develop.

I begin with two exercises from *Fiddle Magic* by Sally O'Reilly, published by Kjos. *Fiddle Magic* has numerous effective exercises to develop left hand versatility, and I routinely teach the entire book, but *Backbends* and *Anteaters* have given me the biggest bang-for-buck when it comes to remedial cases. (See sidebar.)

I begin with *Backbends*, especially with younger students. I explain that the hand has to open like an accordion or a folding fan. This exercise tends to work on autopilot, although I do find it helpful to tell the student to keep their pinky curved the

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whole time.

I find *Anteaters* especially effective because of how explicitly they require lateral motion of the fingers. Some younger students or those with significant left-hand tension sometimes struggle to initiate the motion. I have them start by leaving down just one of the lower-string fingers at a time. Then we build up to two fingers on bottom, then all three.

I've also developed some exercises of my own that I believe target expansion of the hand at the base joints, while also developing intonation and fingerboard awareness because of the harmonies being played. I tell the student to watch that the higher finger remains curved and stable. If it seems like the upper finger is rocking backward along with the lower finger, I have the student finger both voices but bow only the upper finger: We listen that the pitch remains stable the entire time. I have students play these exercises on all strings.

The image shows five staves of musical notation for string exercises. Each staff contains two measures of music. The exercises involve moving between different string positions and fingerings, often with slurs and accents. The first staff has fingerings 4-3, 4-3, 3-2, 3-2. The second staff has fingerings 2-1, 2-1, 4, 3-3, 3-3. The third staff has fingerings 3, 2, 2-2, 2-2, 2, 1-1, 1-1. The fourth staff has fingerings 4-2, 4-2, 3-1, 3-1. The fifth staff has fingerings 2-2, 2-2, 1-1, 1-1.

There are many places in repertoire—for example, the openings

of the 4th and 5th Mozart concerti—where we have no choice but to extend upward, so I find it important to also train the hand to expand upward while still using base joint flexibility. Here is an exercise I received from Yair Kless that can encourage that kind of motion and flexibility:

The image shows a single staff of musical notation for an exercise by Yair Kless. It is in 4/4 time and features a sequence of notes with various fingerings and slurs. An asterisk is placed above the second measure, and the text "continue transposing" is written above the final measure.

During the asterisk, the player forms a “V” between their first and second fingers, resulting in a very small clockwise rotation of the base joints. At the same time, the player moves the left thumb slightly under the neck of the violin and between the first and second fingers. Kless called this “guitar position,” and I would add that it’s not unlike the left-hand position in cello playing. I think this is a helpful way to ensure that the “open” hand position (any time when the hand frame is wider than a perfect fourth) originates with a true opening of the base joints rather than by poking out the fourth finger.

I have found these exercises to be dependable in developing more flexible, rounded, balanced left hands. Of course, it’s only one step in a journey that eventually involves much more complicated demands on our left hand: Bach fugues, Ysaÿe Sonatas, etc. But I like to think that this approach “points the left hand in the right direction” and frees the student to require only simpler reminders of lightness and looseness down the road, rather than having to rework the left hand entirely because they have hit a brick wall at a Bach fugue!

Ian Snyder teaches privately in Southwest Minneapolis and has served on the faculty of the University of Minnesota Bravo! Institute for Keyboard and Strings. He has performed with the Minnesota Orchestra and Minnesota Opera, as well as a variety of freelance projects, including a recording for Prince. As a teacher, he is particularly interested in developing natural physical motions in playing, enhancing students’ awareness of tone, and in integrating musical style from the earliest levels. †