



VIOLIN

Making Students Active in Developing a Healthy Set-Up

by Ian Snyder

When we teach beginners, we seek to give them a technique that makes their playing sustainable: First, we want our students to play without risk of injury. Second, whatever their level of investment might be along the way, we want them to have a technique that allows them to put their foot on the gas and play Tchaikovsky *Concerto* or the Paganini *Caprices* if they so choose. If that is not quite their level of motivation, this approach still puts them in a position to play a Brahms symphony in a civic orchestra or a Beethoven quartet with friends. In my mind, we are always cultivating this sustainability, either because we are rehabilitating a student who is new to our studio, or because a student who we taught from the beginning has grown and is learning to use their body in a new way.

The snag I hit is that this has everything to do with their *future* ability to find joy in music, but gives them fairly limited musical inspiration *now* (though students do often pick up on improvements in tone or new ease in playing!). It can be difficult to motivate young students to invest in these habits without a strong “WHY,” but it is equally difficult to capture their attention long enough to explain why!

I have had the most success when I give the student something to *do* that allows them to *feel* what I am trying to teach with little or no explanation on my part. I would like to share an assortment of exercises that have been the most effective for my students. I don't claim that any of this is original: I think of Simon Fisher's story of telling Dorothy DeLay that he was worried about “stealing” an exercise of hers for a *Strad* article, and she responded, “Don't worry. I learned it from Galamian, and he learned it from Capet. What is important is that these exercises become known!”

Violin position:

1. Start with the violin in playing position, and let it remain there. Lower both arms down to your sides and gently swing them, as if out for a stroll. Count down from 5 or 10. Bring the left hand back up to the violin and then shake your head “no” and “yes”

to make sure no tension built up in the neck. This ensures that the player can keep the violin in playing position without the left hand grasping the neck.

2. With the violin in playing position, gently slide the left hand up and down the violin neck, as though shifting from first to fourth position. I count down from 10 or more. This reintegrates the left hand with the violin while reducing grasping.
3. Play *Twinkle Theme* and during all the open strings, perform the sliding/shifting action from #2. I find this integrates non-grasping further into pieces of music.
4. Play left hand pizzicato in first position on the E string (with the left elbow a little under the body of the instrument) and on the G string (with the elbow a little in front of the student). Once this is familiar, the student can pluck in first position on the E string but then swing their elbow further in front of them and pluck at the top of the fingerboard on the G string. Not only is this elbow rotation essential for good left-hand technique, I find it ensures that the left shoulder doesn't freeze as we reduce left hand grasping. (For added benefit, plucking with the pinky can help develop a strong and rounded 4th finger.)
5. I have the student play a section of music while I hold a piece of paper in front of their left hand (almost as though I'm setting it down on a “fifth finger tape”). I find this breaks the habit of watching the left fingers, which allows me to move the violin further to the student's left (I often tell them that their belly button is 12:00 and their shoulder is 9:00 and that we are moving it from 11:00 to 10:00 or 9:45 depending on their physique).

Bow Arm and Right Hand:

1. (Paul Rolland's “Roll the Bow”) Place your bow at the tip and roll your whole arm from the ball-and-socket joint in the shoulder. This has the

effect of silently rolling the bow from G to E and back again. I often tell the student that it is like a large bird (slowly) flapping its wings. I appreciate the opportunity to reinforce the different (bow-arm) levels for each of the four strings, and more importantly, it takes a big step toward loosening the right shoulder.

2. Windshield wipers! These need no explanation, but the list would be woefully incomplete without them. I do often have to get the student to slow down a bit, making a little joke that, “it's only sprinkling outside the car.” I also ask the student to make them smooth, as I observe a tendency to “sling” or “flop” the bow back and forth, and which limits the “awakening” of the pinky when the bow is turned right-side-up.
3. Start with the bow at the frog on the A string. Bow to the middle of the bow and back to the frog again. Take your right thumb off the bow and put it back on again. This can eventually be done rhythmically in $\frac{4}{4}$ time: down – up – thumb off – thumb on. I find bow-thumb tension to be a chronic woe, and yet a difficult one to explain away. This exercise enables the student to feel how little they depend on the thumb's grasp. It also has an added benefit of prompting the bow fingers to find the proper balance (including a curved pinky) atop the bow, and is gentle enough that I don't see the bow fingers clench. This can be incorporated into scales or etudes.
4. Play four martelé bow strokes in a row down, and then four in a row up. The bow is divided into four equal parts down and up. Begin with all four fingers on the bow. After the first down bow, we remove our pinky; after the second, the ring finger; after the third, the middle finger; then we continue to the tip with only the pointer finger on the bow. After the first up bow, we return their middle finger to the bow; after the second, the ring finger, after the third, the pinky, and then we

return to the frog with all four fingers. I find this invaluable in teaching the way that the bow hand pivots when traveling from frog to tip, which would otherwise be a rather esoteric discussion, and might prompt some unnecessarily exaggerated motions on the student's part. When the student returns their fingers to the bow, it also gives the teacher an opportunity to remind the student about any desired placements: I, for example, often remind students to put their middle finger on the ferrule.

5. The student can perform a similar exercise but with whole bows legato down and up. Rather than involving all four fingers, the student simply removes the pointer finger of the bow whenever in the lowest quarter of the bow, and removes the pinky whenever playing in the highest quarter of the bow. This was apparently a favorite exercise of Oistrakh, according to a student of his I studied with one summer.

I admit freely that these exercises are only a piece in the puzzle of healthy technique. I still do my fair share of nagging over an array of desired habits! And there is still the question of applying our setup into broader violin technique. But I see two benefits of working in this way: First, even if I am left wishing I could reposition something slightly, a loose and mobile student is always easier to work with, and has the best odds of a resonant sound, whatever the visual/dimensional aspects of their technique are. Second, as I mentioned earlier, establishing a healthy foundation asks a lot of cooperation of the child, and a lot of vigilance from parents, so anything we can do to lead the child (often without them realizing it!) to feel conviction about these habits is wind in the sails.

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