

CLINIC: DEVELOPING FLEXIBILITY IN BOWING

by Elizabeth Ericksen

“The importance of considering the whole body in the performance of musical or physical skills cannot be overemphasized.”

— Paul Rolland, *The Teaching of Action in String Playing*, p. 32

Developing flexibility in bowing is a process that starts from the very first lesson. Paul Rolland compiled a number of Actions that can be incorporated into lessons over a period of years to help students develop arm, hand and finger flexibility. In the presentation, I and the folks attending the Fall Clinic practiced these various Actions. I did not address instrument placement or learning to hold the bow in this presentation. Next to each Action title, I have placed the page number on which that Action occurs in Paul Rolland’s book, *The Teaching of Action in String Playing*. I divided the presentation into three sections related to playing ability: Beginning Actions, Extending the Bow Stroke, and Developing Flexibility.

Beginning Actions

Stance pp. 68–69

In a balanced *Stance*, violinists’ and violists’ feet form a V with the left foot placed slightly forward. Bassists stand with their feet apart, transferring weight from one foot to the other making sure knees are unlocked. Cellists sit evenly on their sitz bones with feet flat on the ground—cellists transfer weight from side to side from their sitz bones. (Make sure they do not only move from their waist).

Flying Pizzicato p. 115–117

In *Flying Pizzicato*, the right-hand fingers pluck the string, flinging out away from the body in an oval motion. At the same time, the weight transfers from both feet (when the string is plucked) to the left foot (as the arm flings out) and then back to both feet (when the hand returns to the string). Cellists and bassists can practice this same motion. It is important to help the student to follow the arc that the arm will take when using a whole bow rather than pulling the hand to the side or behind the body. A common mistake is for the body to lean in the same direction as the bow is moving. For this Action, we want the weight transfer to be opposite to the bow motion. Paul Rolland called this “Bilateral Motion.”

Flying Pizzicato is beneficial because it mimics the use of the whole bow; and students can practice this Action even

before they have established their bow hold. Students can more easily incorporate the weight transfer (bilateral motion) when they don’t have to worry about holding the bow or putting fingers down on the instrument. Upper string students learn the feeling of the right-hand crossing over the center line of their body when playing at the frog and all students learn the feeling of opening their arms to play at the tip.

Roll the Arm and *Rock the Bow* pp. 86–87

These Actions can be introduced without the instrument. In the upper strings, the student holds their left arm in playing position with left palm facing the student. They then “hook” the bow on the extended pinky and Roll the Arm up and down from the shoulder like a stadium wave and then “shake” (*Rock*) the bow like a salt shaker.

Cellists and bassists hook the tip of the bow between the left thumb and 1st finger; and do these Actions with the bow in approximate playing position.

These same Actions can be done with the instruments in place; and finally, by placing the bow at its balance point (the balance point of the bow is the place where you can balance the bow on a single finger—it is about half-way between the frog and the middle of the bow) on the instrument and silently rolling the bow from higher to lower string and then back. For the *Rock the Bow* Action, let the weight of the arm fall into the string and then *Rock the Bow*, like shaking salt.

Place and Lift p. 87

For this Action, which was also advocated by Suzuki and Galamian, it is very important that the bow hold be secure, with fingers rounded and pinky curved. Place the bow at the balance point. Raise the bow about 5" above the string; making sure that the pinky is curved and the thumb bent. Replace the bow on the string; *Roll the Arm*, *Rock the Bow*, and tap each finger to make sure the bow hold is relaxed.



Refining Tone Beginnings—The “Rebound”

P. 94

When first teaching the *Rebound*, have the

student place the bow at the balance point, and after a short bow stroke, create a small oval (over the string) with the bow, and then gently replace the bow at the balance point. The arm and bow will move as one unit.

Refining Tone Releases p. 95

Even beginners can be taught to taper their bow releases at the ends of phrases. Emphasize that there is a slight curve at the end of the bow stroke. In the early months of playing, the student can play in the middle of the bow or the balance point, where it is easiest to play. After a short , have them raise their frog; after an , they can raise their tip. At first, they can practice with a rest after the bow stroke, where the bow leaves the string in a curved motion. Later, they can practice without a rest—the bow stroke still has a slight curve (for violin and viola: as if moving to the next higher string in an up bow and the next lowest string in a down bow) but the bow stays on the string.

Extending the Bow Stroke

Wandering p. 117

Wandering is just like it sounds. Have the student explore playing in different parts of the bow. Start in the middle of the bow and using short, continuous strokes, move the bow to the tip, back to the middle, to the frog, and then back to the middle. A common problem is that as the student moves away from the middle, the bow hold can “fall apart”. This can be helped by having the student check their bow hold in different parts of the bow and *Roll the Arm*, *Rock the Bow*, and tap the pinky.

Silent Bow Transfer p. 118

This Action is an extension of *Place and Lift*. Place the bow at the balance point. Lift the bow off the string and with an arched motion, move it to the tip. (Be sure to reach out in front of the body.) (At the tip, the wrist will be lower, and the fingers slightly extended.) *Roll the Arm*. With an arched motion, go back to the balance point. (The fingers will be more curved.) Then with an arched motion, move to the frog. (At the frog, the wrist will be slightly rounded and

the fingers curved.) *Rock the Bow*.

Short Strokes with Lifted Bow Transfer p. 119

This Action adds bow strokes to *Silent Bow Transfer*. Place the bow at the balance point. Choose a rhythm. Using the same arched motion as in *Silent Bow Transfer*, play your rhythm in each part of the bow. Check the bow hold at each place (Middle, Tip, and Frog) and perform the *Roll the Arm* and *Rock the Bow* Actions and tap the fingers.

Rebound with Long Strokes p. 120

As soon as the *Flying Pizzicato Action* with weight transfer can be performed easily, and the student has a secure bow hold, the student can start working on the *Rebound with Long Strokes*. Start by placing the bow at the frog. Play continuous down bows, starting with small bows and returning to the string in a non-stop motion. The motion will be elliptical just like the motion in *Flying Pizzicato*. Gradually increase the length of the bow stroke until the student is using the whole bow. (This increase in the length of the bow might not happen in one lesson; it often takes a number of weeks or months for students to be able to use the whole bow.) The same weight transfer (“bilateral motion”) that was seen in *Flying Pizzicato* also happens, with the weight on both feet when at the frog, transferring to left foot while approaching the tip, and returning weight to both feet when the bow is back at the frog. In upper strings, the instrument will be tilted more toward the higher string when the bow is at the frog and flatter when at the tip.

Long Strokes Followed by Release p. 121

This Action is an extension of *Refining Tone Releases*; the student starts by reviewing this Action with small bows. Next, they can continue the Action with whole bows. They will play $\blacksquare \vee$, letting the motion continue in the air, beyond the string. The tip will raise as the student leaves the string, and the weight transfer that the student used in *Flying Pizzicato* and *Rebound* will also continue. Next, they can play \blacksquare rest $\vee \blacksquare$. At the end of the \blacksquare , they will lift the frog to curve the release. It is important that during this down-bow release, the arm pronates while approaching the tip, so the tone does not die.

Developing Flexibility

Sequential Action and the Follow-Through

p.145

In *Sequential Action*, motion starts in the body, moves to the large limbs (arms) and

then flows into the small limbs (fingers). (Like a stadium wave or jelly fish.)

With this Action, the bow is held vertically. The student moves the bow straight up to the ceiling. (You need a tall ceiling for this Action.) As the arm reaches its limit, let the fingers bend to allow the hand and bow to go up a little further.

Motion Continuity—The Bow Change

p. 146

First review *Long Strokes Followed by Release*. Now we are going to add finger motion. After $\blacksquare \vee$ rest, let the bow continue in the air beyond the string. Raise the tip as you leave the string, let the fingers curve, and drop the elbow. For \blacksquare rest $\vee \blacksquare$, at the end of the down-bow, lift the frog to curve the release. For smooth bow changes at the frog, let the elbow drop while the hand, fingers, and bow finish the up-bow.

Pulling and Pushing the Bow Against

Resistance p. 149-150

This Action is done without the instrument. Hold the bow horizontally—keep right hand fingers curved in a relaxed bow hold and hold the bow lightly with the left hand, about 4" from the tip. Pretend to play a \blacksquare (Pull). Allow the wrist and fingers to bend; the wrist will be slightly lower. Next pretend to play an \vee (Push). Allow the fingers to extend; the wrist will be slightly arched. This Action can be helpful in teaching students the feeling of finger action that you “allow” to happen rather than “make” happen.

String Crossings pp. 150-151

In *String Crossings*, the arm anticipates the bow, hand, and finger movement. For violin and viola, the elbow rises for the lower string and drops for the upper string. Cello and bass are the opposite; the elbow drops for the lower string and rises for the upper string.

Start by having the students play $\blacksquare \vee \blacksquare \vee$, lower string to upper string for violin and viola and upper string to lower string for cello and bass. This motion is in a clockwise circle. Next, they will play $\vee \blacksquare \vee \blacksquare$, lower string to upper string for violin and viola and upper string to lower string for cello and bass. This motion will be a counter-clockwise circle. Students should allow their fingers to bend during \blacksquare and extend during \vee .

Conclusion

Learning flexibility in bowing is a process that can take months or years to develop.

But we can start this process very early in students’ study. Early Rolland Actions can be learned without the instrument; even using a pencil and later just the bow. These are particularly helpful for beginners and remedial students who exhibit tension.

When adding the bow to the instrument, it is beneficial to start in the middle of the bow or at the balance point. This is the easiest part of the bow to control. By gradually extending the bow strokes over time, you help the student develop the muscles that are needed to play in different parts of the bow. The early Actions use the large muscles. As students develop proficiency, they can learn to add the finger motions that are necessary for smooth bow changes.

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Recently retired from both Carleton College and MacPhail Center for Music, Elizabeth Ericksen is now devoting her time to her private home studio and to mentoring string teachers for the Paul Rolland Pedagogy Society. In 2021, Liz presented at the Level 1 On-Line Paul Rolland Pedagogy Workshop, sponsored by the University of Illinois and also mentored two groups of teachers in a Level 2 Endorsement. In 2022, she was invited back to present at the On-Line Workshop and continues to work with teachers in upper levels of Endorsement. Liz served on the board of MNSOTA as Secretary and President. In 2019, MNSOTA presented her with the Master Teacher: Studio Award. Her mentors include Paul Rolland, Mary West and Joseph Gingold. †