Violin

Why Holding Your Violin is not like $950 Sushi

by Ian Snyder

Imagine you are out to dinner with a group of friends and the check has just arrived. How best to split it? Should you each pay for what you ordered? Divide it evenly? (This will always be suggested by the person who ordered the Chilean sea bass.) What about if there is a birthday girl in your group, or if there were a few appetizers for the table? Before we wring our hands and call Ann Landers, I would think that these questions become a lot more trivial if you're at McDonald's and a lot more dire if you are at a Michelin-star sushi restaurant.

I remember asking a teacher once if the left hand should help support the violin and she responded, "doesn't it have enough to do without having to hold the violin as well?" Nathan Cole, meanwhile, claims that the violin should be supported principally by the left hand. Augustin Hadelich feels that his support comes mainly from the neck. The level that all of these musicians perform at suggests to me that any of these possibilities can work, but what I feel is missing is the question of how MUCH we have to support the violin in the first place. Like the restaurant check, the total demand may make your methods for dividing responsibility more or less crucial. If your belief is that the violin needs to be pinned in, to a point of 100% stability, then the formula for doing so is a life or death matter—and I might bet that you're going to have a losing scenario with whatever recipe you choose. But if you can minimize the level of control placed on the violin, the exact formula becomes a lot more flexible, both from player to player, and moment to moment. And the liberation itself offers considerable benefits, both in terms of comfort as well as liberating left arm and hand actions such as shifting, rotating between strings, and vibrato.

I think it is worthwhile to spend some time deeply questioning how much we think we need to control the violin. Set a violin down on two chairs. See how just the physical presence of a surface underneath the violin supports it perfectly, without any need to pin it in, like we do with grasping or clutching motions. In order for the violin to naturally rest in this way, I do think a certain posture has to be cultivated. In my view, it depends upon the violin resting on the collarbone, with the end button slightly on the left side of the player's throat. Even with the stipulation that the end button make contact there, the violin can still swing like a clock hand in order to accommodate a variety of body types.

In order to drive this point home to children (and observing parents), I put the violin at the very edge of a table, with the scroll and most of the body hanging out into the air. I ask the student to put their hand on the chin rest and stop the violin from falling. Pretty universally, they notice this takes no effort at all. I then put their violin flat on a wall (and keep my hands very close) and then ask them to press on the chin rest to stop the violin from slipping down. This is nearly impossible. When the violin goes into playing position, we ask the question "have you put your violin on a table (the collarbone) or on a wall (the top of the chest)?"

The violin is a lot lighter than we might realize—about as heavy as a can of soda. If we are standing in playing position and continue to find ourselves clutching, it may be worth questioning if there is some fear of dropping the violin. Kato Havas addresses this fear in *Stage Fright*, and suggests a number of exercises to develop a sense of freedom. Any of these can be done over a couch or bed for security. First, she recommends having the student maintain the violin in playing position while raising their arms and placing their hands on their head. In another, while keeping the violin in playing position, the student then swings their arms at their sides as if going for a stroll. Havas notes that the left arm should swing as freely as the right. In the final exercise, the violin stays in playing position while the player bends over forward, letting the arms hang down. I noticed that this exercise produced a protective instinct on my part! But after I let everything hang for a few moments and then drew myself up to regular posture, I did feel significantly less guarded.

Maintaining minimal effort when returning to playing

On the one hand, I think these core attitudes and beliefs toward supporting the violin echo profoundly in so many other aspects of playing. It is worth spending time addressing this nucleus. On the other hand, the reality is that some of this idealism goes out the window when we begin wading into difficult repertoire. So in my mind, there is a second wave of considerations as to how we can incorporate this attitude of minimizing control into techniques requiring left hand freedom.

I think the elephant in the room is shift-

Hands on Head

Arms Swinging

Leaning Over

Kato Havas excercises to develop freedom holding the violin

ing. Whatever our exact shifting technique might be, it relies on the left hand being freer than if it was allowed to reside forever in first position. I find it helpful to begin by practicing the shifting motion silently between 1st and 4th positions (this is Mimi Zweig's "Slide the Magic X," rooted firmly in Paul Rolland's teaching). In this way we allow the left hand to contribute subtle (perhaps even psychological!) support while ensuring that it is free enough to shift. (I prefer this to some of the other exercises like placing the left hand on the right shoulder, because I think the cold turkey left hand removal can get us clenching between neck and shoulder, which is equally unhelpful down the road.)

For more advanced students, I apply a set of practice instructions to shifting exercises. I think it works particularly well in Sevcik *Op. 8,* but it could be adapted to anything, including shifts in repertoire.

1. Put a fermata on the starting pitch. During the fermata, move the left thumb back and forth like a windshield wiper. This ensures that the left thumb is not clutching or stuck in a previous position. (It also minimizes any guarding reflex in the left neck and shoulder as if we had removed the thumb entirely.)
2. Play the first shift, paying attention to the fingertip releasing its weight from the string. Listen for a "harmonic"-type whispering noise during the shift. After the shift is complete, immediately release any involvement that has arisen in the left neck and shoulder.
3. In exercises like Sevcik *Op. 8* where there are multiple shifts in one measure, I repeat step 2 after each shift. I don't go out of my way to especially involve or suppress engagement from the neck and shoulder. I simply let them respond instinctively, and keep my focus on releasing the left fingertip. Whatever engagement has arisen, I release after the shift is complete.
4. In Sevcik *Op. 8*, I return to step 1 at the beginning of each measure. I feel that it is important to check that the thumb did not begin to clutch during previous turbulence, and that it is living in the desired position. (So often we have deserted the left thumb halfway back along the path from our last position!)

My operating attitude in using this exercise is that it is completely acceptable to transition from a state of letting the violin simply perch upon our body to a state in which we give some active support in order to free the left hand. I do feel it is important to release that extra action after it is no longer needed. I don't necessarily think that students will be monitoring this process consciously in repertoire (I'm inclined to think you might be busy with other things in the Tchaikovsky Concerto Cadenza). However, I think we can develop an instinct to release unneeded clutching (or inversely, to rid ourselves of an addiction to controlling the stability of the violin). This remains as an undercurrent in difficult repertoire.

As a closing comment, I'll mention that writing this made me ponder how many things in violin playing we upset by a feeling that we need to control something. Pressed tone, stomping spiccato, tight vibrato. I think this often comes from a place of wanting to be proactive and engaged in order to produce a result. But it may stop us from taking advantage of some of the natural advantages we possess: the lightness of the violin, the responsiveness of the string, the springing quality of the bow.

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.