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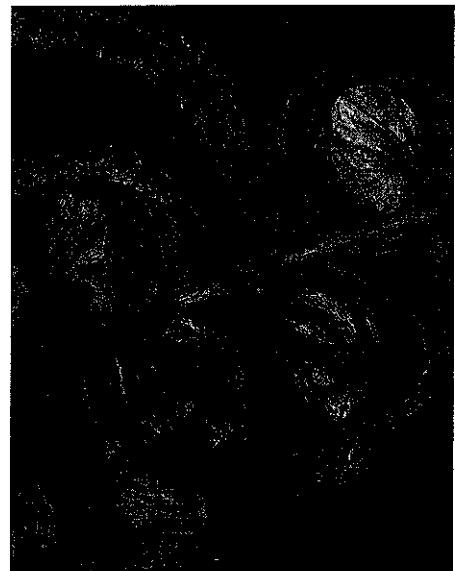
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On the Cover:

Emanuel Vardi *Debussy Trio II*

Collection of Sheridan and Dawn Whipp
For more artwork by Emanuel Vardi, visit: www.vardiart.com



HEALTHY BOW, HEALTHY SOUND

by Hillary Herndon

A beautiful sound is of the utmost importance to violists. We need to easily produce a sound with a "core" of pure pitch throughout a wide range of dynamics. Unfortunately, this is not a simple task for violists due to the fact that our instrument is not acoustically secure. To have the same ideal proportions as the violin, the lower register of the viola would require the body of the instrument to be at least twenty-one inches long.¹ Physical limitations force violists to play instruments many inches shorter than this ideal. Consequently, producing a sound with core requires a more precise bow technique than it would on instruments that are acoustically secure. Often, students do not have a clear understanding of the complexity of the issue and will try to achieve more volume of sound by simply pressing into the strings more.

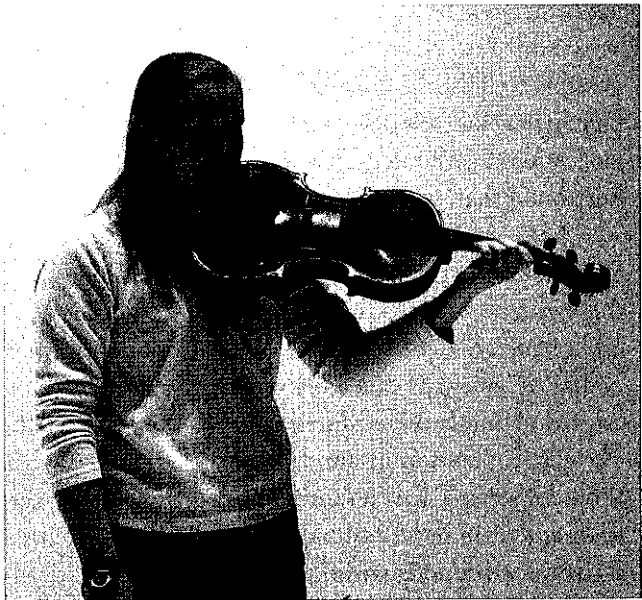
Unfortunately, this is not a healthy approach physically or acoustically. Pressing down into the strings is usually accompanied by over-pronation of the forearm into the index finger as well as excessive tension throughout the bow arm. (Clearly, muscles are needed to play the instrument. Tension, as described in this article, is defined as using two opposing muscles simultaneously.) Playing with tension not only leads to injury, but also prevents our natural arm weight from transferring into the string. A sound that is pressed will dampen the overtone series, leaving a "pinched" sound that is exactly the opposite of the desired effect. This article will examine the components of the bow arm used to produce a full sound in a healthy manner.

We will begin with a brief overview of instrument setup and then look at exercises that can be done without the bow or instrument to inform a healthy bow arm. After these individual components are examined, exercises are suggested for incorporating these arm movements with the instrument and bow in hand.

Posture and Instrument Setup

Good sound is produced from our arm weight passing through the bow into the string. There are mul-

Example 1. Bad and better postures.



Bad posture: notice how the shoulders are rounded, the chest is caved in, and the instrument "sags."



Better posture: here, the head and chest are upright, and the instrument is more parallel to the floor. This provides a foundation for the bow that allows gravity to work for us.

tiple ways to transfer weight from the arm into the bow, but a healthy bow arm will work with gravity, not against it. Working with gravity means holding the instrument in such a way that we create the maximum amount of support for the bow. Keep the head and chest upright with broad shoulders, and position the instrument as parallel to the floor as possible (ex. 1). It will not be possible to hold the viola completely flat, but the belly of the viola should certainly be more horizontal than vertical.

We are symmetrical beings, and this symmetry means that we will often “mirror” tension in our bodies. If we “grab” the viola with our left shoulder, we will most likely create tension in our right shoulder as well. It is important to note that in order to hold the instrument properly without tension, a good fit is needed with the chin and shoulder rest (if applicable). Although an in-depth discussion of options is outside the scope of this article, a few guidelines as to what to look for in a shoulder and chin rest are:

- The bottom lip of the viola should sit on the collarbone.
- Finding the right chin rest can take some trial and error but is well worth the effort. When standing in a front of a mirror, relax your neck, look forward, and allow your head to pivot around the top of your spine (located between your ears). Find a “neutral” position where your chin, eyes, and ears will be

more or less parallel with the floor. Keeping this position, bring the instrument up to your body, and rest the bottom lip of the viola on the collarbone. The space that is left between the top of your instrument and chin should almost be filled with a chin rest. You will want enough room to “drop” your head onto the chin rest by tilting the weight of the head forward off the back of the spine and onto the chin rest. This motion will be similar to a nod.

- If using a shoulder rest, it should help keep the viola in place by almost filling out the available space between the instrument and body. (Your shoulder needs to be left free for unrestricted movement.) Make sure that the end of the shoulder rest is not sitting on the shoulder ball-and-socket joint, as this will also hamper shoulder mobility.
- With both the chin and shoulder rests, make sure to not overfill the space created between your instrument and body. This will lead to tension in the opposite direction.
- With a proper setup, you should be able to easily hold the viola with a relaxed neck while swinging the arms open and closed in a wide motion. (See “Setup Exercise” video on the AVS website at: <http://americanviolasociety.org/resources/videorecordings/>.)

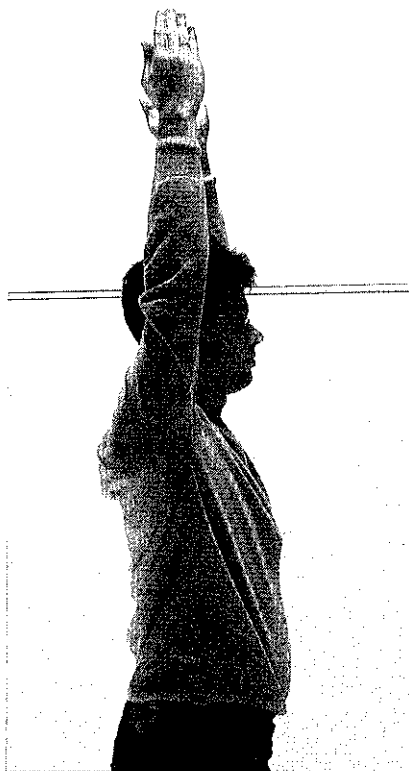
Shoulder Socket Rotation Awareness

To play without tension, the ball-and-socket joints of our shoulders need to be in a neutral position. This means that the joint hangs low and to the back of the socket (never pushed down and back). The following stretch helps find this position:

Step 1. Stand tall with your head facing straight ahead. Breathe. Throughout this exercise, keep breathing deep breaths, relax your neck, and aim to keep your shoulders from rising unnecessarily.

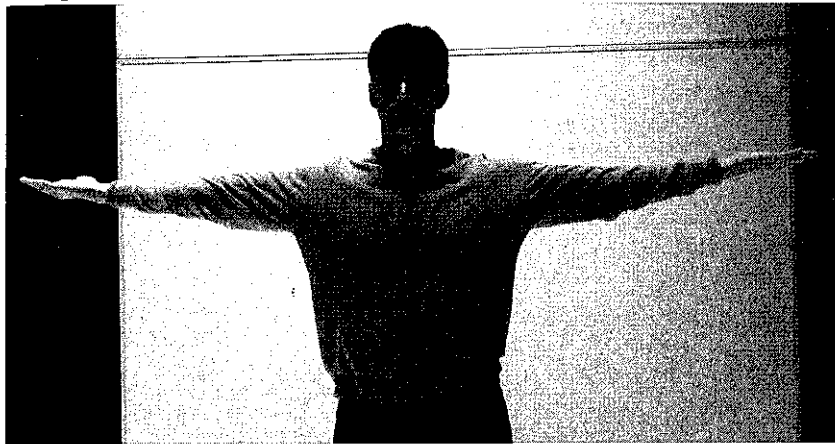
Step 2. With your palms facing each other, reach your arms up to

Example 2. The beginning of the T-pose stretch.



Reach for the ceiling with your arms directly by your ears.

Example 3. The middle of the T-pose stretch.



In the middle of the stretch, you should reach a "T" pose. The palms of your hands should face the ceiling. Keep stretching through the fingertips.

the ceiling (ex. 2). Stretch through your fingertips. Your arms should be parallel, reaching right past your ears. Your arms

should be reaching straight up vertically—not angled slightly in front of your body.

Example 4. The end of the T-pose stretch.



Keep reaching through your fingers all the way to the end of the stretch.

Step 3. From this position, continuously reach through your fingertips and slowly start to reach your fingers toward opposing walls rather than the ceiling. As your arms slowly lower, you should be heading toward a "T" pose, with your arms parallel to the floor, straight out to your sides and your palms facing the ceiling (ex. 3). Remember to keep breathing and relax your neck. Continue to have the fingertips stretch as your arms slowly reach to the floor (ex. 4).

Step 4. When your arms reach your sides, relax them and let them hang by your sides (ex. 5). Take note of your body. Your arms should be hanging directly by your legs, with the thumbs facing the wall in front of you. Notice how your chest is broad and "open" and that your shoulders are low and hanging in your back. This is very different than "pressing" them down. This is your neutral position. Aim to keep this neutral position as much as possible while playing. (See "T Stretch Video" on the AVS website at <http://americanviolasociety.org/resources/videorecordings/>.)

Typically, students can find their neutral shoulder position with the above stretch, but they don't immediately understand how to hold their bow arm in playing position without raising their shoulder out of neutral position. The following "Arm Chair" exercises help re-pattern the brain to allow for a neutral shoulder while the arm is in a playing position.

Example 5. Relaxing after the T-pose stretch.



When your arms reach your sides, allow the arms to hang. Your hands should hang directly by your legs with the thumbs pointing forward.

“Arm Chair” Exercise

You'll need a partner to help with this exercise. Have a friend stand by your right side with hands out in front of him or her. Rest your bow arm on your friend's hands (ex. 6). Think of releasing all of your energy from the arm—it should feel as if you are resting on the arm of a chair. You should be so relaxed that if your friend's hands are suddenly removed, your arm should fall, not stay suspended in the air! Try this until you can reliably release all of your weight into your friend's hands. (Note: released weight is NOT

Example 6. “Arm chair” exercise.



Rest your bow arm on a friend's hands. If you are truly relaxed, your arm will fall to your side when your friend's hands are removed!

the same as pressed weight. Try exaggerating the two extremes of this exercise—the feeling of very little weight into your friend's hands due to tension, followed by the feeling of excess “pressed” weight due to the opposite extreme of tension. Then return to released weight.) Switch with your partner so that you can feel how weighty a released arm is.

“Moving Arm Chair”

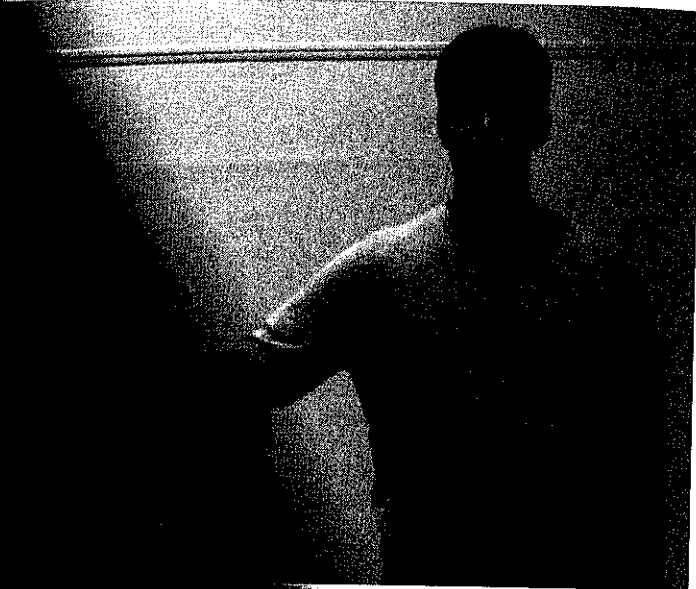
Once you can release your arm weight into your friend's hands, have your friend begin to SLOWLY move your arm in a playing motion. Your goal is not to try and “predict” where they are going, but rather to keep your arm weight totally relaxed as they move to the different string levels as well as up and down the length of an imaginary bow. This can be difficult

because your brain will try to kick in and “help” your friend. Be vigilant in your relaxation! Feel the release in your shoulder blade as well as in the muscles around your armpit.

Arm Recognition

Where does your arm attach to your body? Many people will point to their shoulder as the answer. Actually, the arm has one more important bone: the clavicle (ex. 7). The clavicle, sometimes referred to as the collarbone, is what connects the arm to the skeleton. You can feel this: Place your left hand at the end of your right clavicle, on the bump nearest your sternum. Reach your right arm out to your side, and then give an imaginary “bear hug” to yourself. Notice how much the end of your clavicle moves!

Example 6. "Arm chair" exercise.



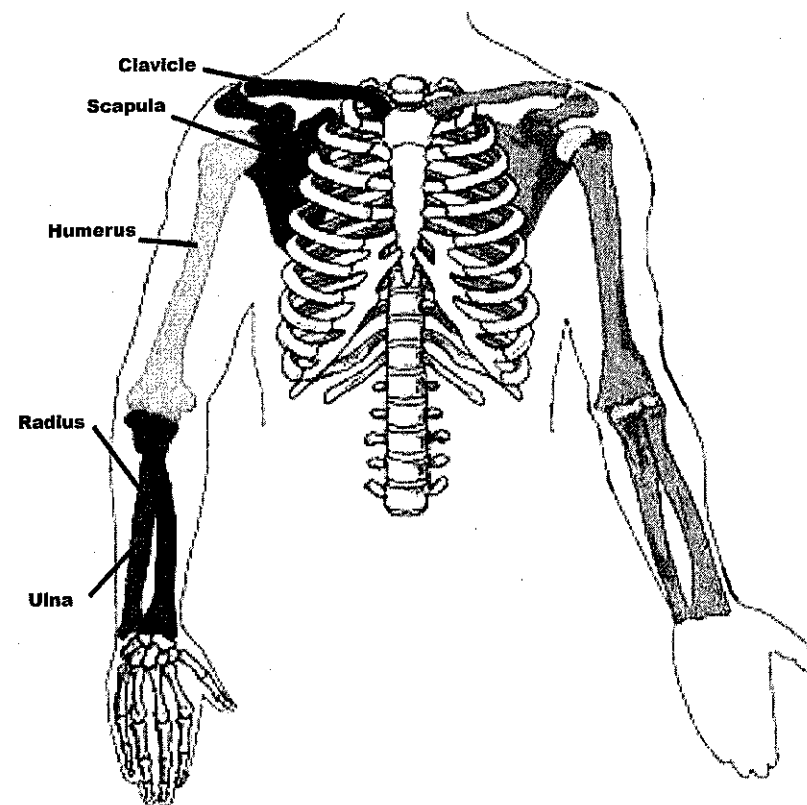
If you are truly relaxed, your arm
hands are removed!

Because your brain will try to
and "help" your friend.
plant in your relaxation!
release in your shoulder
well as in the muscles
your armpit.

Cognition

attach to
people will
as the
has one
the clavicle
bones

Example 7. Important arm bones. Image adapted by author from www.freeclipartnow.com/science/medicine/bones-skeletons/Human-arm-bones-diagram.jpg.html



Now, keeping your hand at the end of your clavicle, make some large "down bow" circles. Feel how this bone moves. Finally, play an imaginary full bow, from the frog to the tip. Notice that while the movement is slight, the clavicle does, in fact, move.

We must take care not to artificially cut off movement of this important arm bone by locking our shoulder. Remember this in the following exercises.

Shoulder Rotation

Stand in front of a mirror and hold your bow arm out in front of you, parallel to the floor. Now,

grasp an imaginary door handle and "close" the knob by rotating it to the left. Allow all of the parts of your arm to "close" as well: the forearm, the upper arm (humerus), and the shoulder joint as well. Look at your arm in the mirror. This shoulder location is what I will refer to as "closed." Try to play an imaginary full-length bow from this position, and notice how a closed shoulder will lock off the use of your clavicle.

Now, reverse the rotation. "Open" your imaginary doorknob by turning your forearm, humerus, and shoulder blade to the right. Your palm will be facing the ceil-

ing, and your shoulder is now in an "open" position.

While playing, our shoulder should be between these two extremes. Typically, students tend to err toward too much of a "closed" shoulder, although trying to play with a "forced" open shoulder is just as damaging as trying to play with a completely "closed" shoulder. Both extremes of rotation create excess tension, reduce flexibility, and ultimately remove the natural arm weight from the string. The shoulder socket needs to be allowed to rotate within the middle range of its motion in order to maintain the best possible sound throughout a wide variety of bow strokes.

Released Arm Weight with Bow

So far, we have examined components of the arm that are required to release tension from the bow arm. Now let's look at how to incorporate these elements with the instrument in hand.

Stand in front of a mirror, and hold the viola in playing position with the bow at the frog on the C and G strings. While looking at yourself in the mirror, look for the elements of the bow arm we have discussed so far: a "neutral" shoulder that will hang down and in the back of the socket, an "open" shoulder rotation, a clavicle that is free to move, and a relaxed "arm chair" feeling in the arm (here, let the instrument support the arm through the bow instead of your friend).

In order to find the ideal position of each of the above items, exaggerate the entire range of movement while watching in the mirror. Notice what looks awkward (usually noted by harsh angles created within the plane of the bow and arm) or what looks natural. Also note what feels most tense and what feels most relaxed or natural. Using both of these senses, find the position that allows for the most relaxed, supported arm.

From this position, hold the bow firmly, and raise your bow and arm as one unit about two inches above the strings. Breathe out, and “drop” the bow and arm into the strings. Feel that your bow is actually dropping below the string. You will hear a slight crunch as the bow grabs the strings. Repeat, this time raising your arm about four inches above the strings before dropping it into the strings, being sure to move the arm as one entire unit. Finally, raise the bow and arm just above your head, breathe out, and drop once more. Leave the bow in the string, and notice how much friction you have created between

the bow hair and strings without tension in the arm. Once more, scan your arm to locate excess tension, and note how this looks in the mirror.

Forearm Rotation

Now that we can release our arm weight into the string, we need to be able to transfer that relaxed weight throughout the length of the bow. This involves rotating the arm, with a flexible clavicle, from the ulna side of the arm at the frog, to the radius side at the tip (refer back to ex. 7 for a picture of these bones).

Set a metronome to one beat equals 60. On the G string, play a full bow with a *forte* sound that lasts five beats. Do not stop moving the bow between beats. Make sure that your thumb is rounded throughout this exercise (as described later in this article, keeping the thumb flexible is an important part of reducing tension). You will exaggerate the forearm rotation by doing the following:

Beat 1: Start with the bow at the frog. The arm should be rotated to the ulna side of your hand. The first finger will be least important in this position. Therefore, have this finger begin off of the bow. Play one beat.

Beat 2: As we move from the frog, our first finger becomes more important. Put it back on the bow. Play another beat.

Beat 3: At this point, our pinkie finger becomes less important. Raise it off the bow. Play a beat.

Beat 4: Raise the ring finger off the bow. You should now be holding the bow with your thumb and first two fingers only. Play a beat. Remember to keep a released clavicle. Do not “choke” its flexibility with a tight shoulder.

Beat 5: Raise the middle finger off the bow. You are now playing with just your first finger and the thumb. Your elbow will be raised slightly

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higher than it was at the beginning to rotate your arm weight into the radius of your arm.

On the up-bow, reverse the above directions:

Beat 1: Play one beat with just your thumb and first finger (radius side).

Beat 2: Add the middle finger. Play one beat.

Beat 3: Add the ring finger. Your arm should start rotating back to the ulna side. This will require a slight lowering of your elbow. Keep your clavicle free.

Beat 4: Place the pinkie finger back on the bow. You should be rotating your arm weight to the ulna side throughout this beat.

Beat 5: Raise the first finger off the bow.

Repeat on all strings.

(See "Five Beat Rotation Exercise" video on the AVS website at:
<http://americanviolasociety.org/resources/video-recordings>.)

After this initial exercise becomes easier, play with a whole bow, keeping the fingers on the stick, but keeping the same rate of rotation in your arm as you go from frog to tip and back. Be sure to try this exercise on all four strings, keeping an "open" shoulder that allows for movement in the clavicle. Play with as full of a sound as possible. Your elbow will move in its plane, drawing an imaginary oval in the air. Focus your attention at the moment of contact with the string.

Leg : Walking / Arm : Bowing

Take a short walk across the room. Notice how the component parts of your leg work in harmony. From a young age, we walk quite naturally without having to think about how we do it. We should aim for our bow arm to be just as natural.

When you take a step, what is the first part of your body that moves? When I ask this question of students, quite often they answer that their foot moves first. Try to walk that way—by consciously moving your foot first. The result is quite comic—"sliding" your way forward: toes first, with locked joints, the body left behind.

In reality, the first part of your leg that moves forward is your knee. Notice this. Now try to feel something else: before your knee moves, your weight shifts slightly forward into the balls of your feet, and simultaneously a "space" is created in your hip joint. If you have trouble feeling this—try the opposite extreme: lock your hip, and then try to move your knee. It is very difficult! This "space" that is created in your hip joint, and your slight shift of weight creates the "inevitability" moment that leads to the point when your knee naturally moves without your mind consciously telling it to do so.

Your knee leads the step. This starts a chain reaction: the upper and lower leg segments follow the knee as they are connected to it. In a normal, relaxed step, your ankle will be loose enough to "roll" behind your knee and lower leg. In turn, your foot rolls off the ground behind your ankle.

Now, let's think about the end of a step. What's the last thing that leaves the ground? Your toes are the last to leave the ground at the end of a step. As your knee bends to catch up to the body (which is now above the other leg), your lower leg follows the knee, the ankle and heel raise off the ground, and the toes bend to finally follow the foot.

These analogies are helpful in working on a "natural" bow movement. If your hip joint creates space that the knee moves to fill, the analogy is that a space is created in our shoulder joint, the weight shifts in our arm, and then the elbow moves to start a bow change. After the elbow leads, the other parts of our arm follow, leaving the fingers to change direction last.

Without holding your instrument or bow, play a slow-motion "air" bow, and try to create this fluid

wave-like motion through the components of your arm. Do this several times, noticing the correlation between your arm muscles and those used in walking.

Right-hand Balance

So far, we've examined aspects of the bow arm from the largest to the smallest body parts. This last component may be the smallest, but it is very important as it connects the bow to our arm, effectively making it an extension of our arm. In order for this to happen, the hand and wrist need to be flexible. The wrist needs to be loose enough to follow the elbow, but never floppy or limp.

The fingers also need to be flexible so that they can behave as shock absorbers as the bow travels over the string. Locked, tense fingers will not work this way. Keep the pinkie and thumb rounded. Allow for the rotation of the forearm described in the "five beat forearm rotation exercise" to create a rotation of balance in the base knuckles of the hand.

Sides of the String

To achieve maximum depth and core to our sound, we need to create friction with the string. (Note: friction is not the same as pressure or tension.) To use gravity to help with this, aim to play against the string. We do not play "down" on the string, rather from the sides.

Therefore, on a down-bow, pull the bow from the left side of the string, creating maximum friction. On an up-bow, push the bow from the right side of the string to keep this friction. (See "Sides of String" video on the AVS website at: <http://americanviolasociety.org/resources/videorecordings/>.) Again, notice that your elbow will change its location in order to achieve this slight rotation. By using gravity and friction to our advantage, we can achieve a sound with more "ring" and depth to it than we could with tension and pressure.

Circles

As mentioned briefly in the forearm rotation exercise, our elbow will not be relegated to one "level" during the course of a bow stroke. The elbow will be

constantly making slight adjustments that allow for the following:

- Preparation of bow changes
- Rotation of the forearm that allows the natural arm weight to be transferred into the string throughout the length of a bow stroke
- Change of angle required to play from the sides of the string (i.e. the elbow will have to be higher on a down-bow than on an up-bow in order to create friction from the left side of the string)

Straight Bow

Keeping a straight bow helps maintain maximum friction against the string by ensuring that no energy gets wasted. A bow that moves parallel to the bridge (and therefore perpendicular to the strings) will feel like an arc. To understand this, place the bow at the tip. Using a mirror, make sure that your bow is parallel to the bridge. Now, have a friend hold the bow secure in this location while you slide your hand in bow-hold position up and down the bow stick. This is what a straight bow feels like.

Combination

Play a whole bow with all of the elements listed so far in this article: good posture, a hanging and relaxed shoulder socket, natural arm weight, clavicle and forearm rotation, bow strokes led by the elbow, a loose wrist, curved and flexible fingers, a straight bow, and using circles or ellipses that are drawn with your elbow. These elements are all vital to playing with a healthy bow arm. Keep these elements as you do the following exercise.

Fast Bow Exercise

Start with a very fast bow on an open G string. Use a full bow, and play as fast as necessary to get the string vibrating as much as possible. Aim to have the string almost hit the C and D strings in the course of its vibrations.

Once you get this maximum movement, start to slow the speed of the bow without losing the amount of string vibration. Challenge yourself to get as slow as possible while maintaining maximum string vibration.

You should feel in the slowest speeds that you are “massaging” the string. Notice the open ring of your string. It should sound full and rich, with pure pitch and lots of overtones. Make sure that you are keeping a healthy bow arm as described above. This is your healthy sound! Notice that you are not “pressing.” Aim to make this your default sound.

Final Thoughts

Learning to produce a healthy sound in a natural way takes time. In order for students to reach the end goal (big sound with minimal physical effort), it is necessary to approach the physical aspects first, while making sure that the student understands what the desired sound outcome will be throughout the process. Without proper guidance, students will find their own methods to produce a big sound that are usually not

sustainable in the long term. These bad habits become more difficult to correct the longer they are left unaddressed. The elements described in this article will help ensure that the physical aspects of tone production are done in a healthy manner. With patience, attention to the way our bodies work, and an understanding of the desired sound, an acoustically and physically healthy bow arm is available to every violist.

Notes

¹David D. Boyden et al., *The New Grove Violin Family* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), 137–38.

Thanks to Alicia Keener and Louis Diez for serving as models in the photos and videos.

Hillary Herndon is the Assistant Professor of Viola at the University of Tennessee and is the founder of the annual UT Viola Celebration. She is also on the faculties of the Round Top Festival Institute and the Sewanee Summer Music Festival.