

A Violin Player's Guide to the Bow



Improving Your Violin or Viola Bow Hold

Use this simple exercise to enhance your technical command of the bow

By Leah Swann

Bowing Basics

Working down the arm gives players insight into bowing movement and mechanics

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Shall We Dance

Learn to bow by Laban's motion factors

By James Reel



Improve Your Violin or Viola Bow Hold in 3 Easy Steps

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The proper bow hold is a key part of developing your own sound—it's a fundamental that needs to be learned and then reinforced, not only at the beginning, but throughout your entire career. This sound is your musical voice, created, in large part, by how you use the bow.



1. While holding the bow vertically in your left hand—bow hair toward you—**form a loose ring with the thumb and the middle and ring fingers of the right hand.**

The other fingers should curve naturally around as well, completely relaxed. Maintain this shape, and bring your right hand to the bow. Open the loose ring just enough to allow the stick of the bow to rest on the thumb, which should be in the place where the frog meets the leather bow grip.

2. **Now bring the index and middle fingers loosely down over the frog** so that the pads of those fingers (opposite the first knuckle) are resting on the frog. Place your index finger gently around the stick, at least a finger's space away from the middle finger. Curve your pinky on top of the stick.





3. A healthy bow hand should feel comfortable while holding, but not gripping, the bow, with all of the fingers curved in a relaxed manner, and no stiff joints. **The palm of the right hand should remain soft.** A teacher used to tell me to imagine a soft, warm light hovering in this space beneath my knuckles, in the palm of my hand.



Bowing Basics

Working down the arm gives players insight into bowing movement and mechanics

By Mimi Rabson

The bow is the string player's breath. Whether you want to shout with joy, whisper sweet nothings, declare your intentions, or gently croon, your bowing skill will deliver the message. There are many muscles, joints, bones, tendons, and ligaments that need training in order to master your bowing. The three most important things to remember are:

- 1) Sound is produced on your instrument at the point where the bow touches the string. Focus on maximizing what you want from that point and the rest will follow.

- 2) Keep your bow parallel to the bridge.

- 3) Relax. Relax. Relax. Everything about your playing will be better if all those muscles, joints, bones, and tendons are loose and flexible.

Keep your eye on yourself in a mirror as you work your way down your bow arm to examine in detail the movement and mechanics involved in basic bowing techniques. Here are the points to consider:

THE SHOULDER

Relax. There is nothing you can do with your shoulder to improve your bowing besides relaxing. Make sure that it is uninvolved, particularly on up bows. If you find yourself lifting your shoulder on up bows, work to stop it. Keep it relaxed at all times, as if you were just standing up with good posture.

THE UPPER ARM

Relax. Again this part of your anatomy should be pretty much quiet. It is a passive support for your elbow. If you notice that the tip of your bow is moving toward the fingerboard on down bows and over your left shoulder on up bows, then you are probably using your upper arm to move the bow.

Try standing with your upper arm against a wall or door and move the lower arm without using it at all. It's a bit awkward, but this exercise will give you the feel of keeping your upper arm passive.

THE ELBOW

Your elbow is there to support the rest of your arm. It should be held at a level that keeps your lower arm, wrist, and hand relatively flat. So when violinists play on the G string, your elbow should be lifted high enough to maintain that plane in the rest of your arm. Note that you can lift your elbow without lifting your shoulder!

As you move down through the D, A, and E strings, lower your elbow accordingly to keep the plane flat in your forearm, wrist, and hand. One way to practice this is by putting a coin on the outside edge of your hand and playing on all four strings without dropping it.

THE LOWER ARM

This is where the action is. The muscles in your lower arm are primarily what propel your bow across the string. There is a little upper-arm involvement as you get to the frog, but otherwise your forearm is the engine.

THE WRIST

Think of your wrist as a well-oiled hinge. Passive and relaxed, it opens and closes as the bow goes up and down. Imagine a string going through your wrist from top to bottom. When your lower arm begins an up bow, the string pulls up and pulls your hand, wrist first, closer to your nose. The hinge will close up a bit on the underside as this happens.

When you take a down bow, the string will pull your hand, wrist first, away from your nose. Now the hinge will open on the underside and close a bit on the top side. Relax, relax, relax. This is mostly a passive motion. It is a way to connect the power of your lower arm with the refinement that your fingers will provide.

THE HAND

Your hand should be turned slightly toward you so that you can clearly see the back of it. To do this you'll have to turn your wrist and lower arm as well. It should always be in this position whether going up or down. This allows your index finger more flexibility in directing the bow (more on this to come as we talk about fingers).

All those knuckles in your hand and fingers also should be relaxed and act as shock absorbers to smooth out and support the movement of the bow across the strings. Keep an eye out for white knuckles—this means unnecessary tension. Remember, your violin will hold up your bow; our hand is just there to direct it. No need to tense up about that. You should be able to gently squeeze any of those knuckles and have them give a little.

THE FINGERS

Your middle and ring fingers should be draped around the bow so they can just enjoy the ride. Your pinky should sit atop the bow and also just enjoy the ride. Occasionally you will need your pinky for some added weight (like when you are right at the frog), but for the most part it is another passive part of this equation. In fact,

if you are just playing long tones you should be able to wave at someone else with those last three fingers while you are playing.

Your index finger is in many ways the boss of the bow. Contact with the bow should be between the outer and middle knuckle, a bit closer to the middle knuckle. When you want a stronger sound or to make an accent, then your index finger can lean in a bit.

If you want a softer sound, then back off the pressure from the index finger.

This is when all those other passive parts of your arm can be a huge help. You can use the natural weight of your arm to help your index finger lean into a passage that needs more emphasis. There is a lot of weight there that can be harnessed to make a stronger, fuller sound.

You can also use your index finger to keep the stick of the bow over the hair. This will give you a rich, full sound. If you are looking for a softer, less intense sound, you can lean the stick toward the scroll a little so that less hair is touching the string.

THE THUMB

The thumb, like the other fingers, must be relaxed. Only when it is relaxed and mobile can the fullest tone quality come out. When your bow is at the frog, your thumb should be curled up, both knuckles bent.

In fact, all your knuckles should be bent at the frog. As you take a down bow, the thumb (and the other fingers) should slowly uncurl until about two thirds of the way down the bow, where it should be straight but not locked. Then on the way up the process reverses.

This may be the single most important part of the whole process. Keeping that thumb loose will help keep your bow straight, i.e., parallel to the bridge, as it moves up and down the string, and allow you the greatest flexibility of sound.

SPEED, WEIGHT, POSITION

How fast are you moving the bow? How much weight are you putting on it through your index finger? How close are you to the bridge?

Once you've got your bow arm working well, these are the three parameters that will help you maximize the sound colors available to you.

Mixing and matching different combinations of these three elements can offer an infinite variety of tone. A heavy, fast bow in between the bridge and the fingerboard will help you shout for joy. A light, fast bow over the fingerboard can give you an ethereal, whispering tone. A heavy, slow bow closer to the bridge will give you a declarative sound. A heavy, slow bow closer to the fingerboard will make you sound more alluring. And, a heavy, slow bow very close to the bridge will give you acoustic feedback.

Experiment for yourself and see what kind of sound colors you can create!



Shall We Dance?

Learn to bow by Laban's motion factors

By James Reel

The ancient Greeks knew of four elements: earth, air, fire, water. The periodic table of elements is a lot more crowded these days, but many dancers still reduce everything to four elements of their own: weight, space, time, flow. That's what 20th-century dance theorist Rudolf Laban emphasized in his study of movement.

These elements could apply to string playing, too. What is bowing but a dance on a wire by wood and horsehair partnered by your arm? Janine Riveire, an associate professor of music at Cal Poly Pomona, has adapted Laban's theories to help you bow like a dancer.

As you know from chemistry, elements combine in many different ways to form various substances. Similarly, Laban's elements—he called them factors—combine to produce many different kinds of motion. There are more than you might guess, because each of the motion factors comes in two varieties.

Weight can be either heavy or light (also called strong or weak). Space may accommodate a movement that is either direct

(with a single focus) or indirect (multi-focused, like crossing from one string to another). Time, in terms of movement, means that something is either fast or slow (or sudden versus sustained). Flow can either be bound or free (a bound movement can be stopped suddenly).

As Riveire points out, "The combination of the first three factors can result in the eight basic efforts: dab, punch, flick, slash, glide, float, wring, and press. Flow then moderates these efforts, giving an overall character to a movement."

Getting confused? It's not that complicated. "Dab," for example, is a movement that is direct, light, and fast. "Punch" is a movement that's direct, *heavy*, and fast. Change just one of the factors in the combination, and you get a different effort.

GO WITH THE FLOW

Let's start with something simpler, the factor that gives each movement its final character: flow.

“Probably the most important thing anybody at the beginning or intermediate level can be concerned with is recognizing the difference between bound and free flow,” Riveire says. “I’d say that 80 to 90 percent of the time, we want free flow in the bow arm. You have to recognize when you have tension in the shoulder, neck, or arm muscles, that will inhibit the free movement of your bow. Tension is blockage that interferes with the sound. Most beginners are very familiar with the choked sound that tells you your arm is way too tight or you’re using way too much pressure.”

The Suzuki method, Riveire notes, acknowledges that small children naturally start out with short, jerky movements—bound flow—so Book 1 gives them lots of 16th- and 8th-note rhythms, saving free flowing legato bowings for later.

According to Riveire, “Laban believed that any skill is developed through a type of consciousness-raising, ‘a gradual refinement of the feel’ of a movement.” That ties in neatly with her own training under the method of Paul Rolland, which has you practice movement using your instrument in only a primitive way, or not using your instrument at all.

“You just practice the movement to develop the muscles and angle and flow, whether you do it with the instrument or not,” she says. Learning vibrato, for instance, can begin by pretending to shake salt on your salad with your left hand, or fanning your face, or waving goodbye to yourself.

When it comes to bowing, Riveire suggests imagining that you’re pushing open a saloon door to get your elbow to open up.

OPEN THE DOOR

And that brings us back to Laban’s eight “effort” words—dab, punch, flick, and so on. Like a direction to open a saloon door, they take descriptions of movements we’ve all done in normal life and apply them to bowing.

Here’s how to start. “Place your bow on your favorite open string,” Riveire says, “and try to move your bow in a nice straight line, real heavy, real slow. That would be a ‘press.’ That doesn’t get you a lot of lovely sound unless you’re close to the bridge. So now take that same direct, heavy movement and make it fast, and it turns into a ‘punch’—and that can be your martelé stroke. Take that direct bow and make it *light* and fast, and that’s the ‘dab,’ a small staccato note.

“Direct, light, and slow is a ‘glide,’ your beautiful whole bow. Take that and turn it into a string crossing, so it’s now *indirect*, light, and slow—it’s a ‘float,’ and you need that any time you change strings, especially for slurred string crossings.

“The ‘wring’ motion is indirect, heavy, and slow, but any movement that involves a twist has an element of wringing to it. In a full bow, especially on violin and viola, and on cello on the A string, as you do pronation



toward the tip of the bow there’s a natural wring to that. Practice that movement off the instrument with the bow, and you’ll get the feeling of it.

“Indirect, heavy, and fast gives you the ‘slash,’ which I think of as the beginning of the slow bow. When you’ve got those Baroque concertos, the figures with the first downbow and the three-note slur up, that’s your slash. We get to slash the other direction, too.

“Finally there’s the ‘flick,’ indirect, light, and fast. It’s more a pizzicato movement than anything. By the way, we don’t spend enough time working on pizzicato and what we can do with it in terms of tone production. You can probably apply all those Laban ‘efforts’ to pizzicato for a whole new tone vocabulary.”

PLAY IN A COMBO

Now, to make it a little more complicated, your average bow stroke is usually a combination of those “efforts.” Break a stroke down into its individual efforts, and you’ll have a better idea of how the movement is supposed to work, and maybe why you’re having trouble with it.

“Let’s go through a basic full bow,” Riveire says. “It starts at the frog with a glide, which is direct, light, and slow. It may turn into a press as it gains some weight as you’re moving toward the tip, and then it changes to a wring. Your transition to the upstroke might have a passing use of arm weight or that indirect pivot we use, and the upstroke is almost entirely a glide, suddenly decreasing in weight.

“With experience, that becomes a rather more unified motion; we don’t think about it a lot after we’ve been playing 10 or 15 years.

“From that, when you need to have those accented attacks or a more martelé stroke, you add a little speed or weight at the beginning, make it more of a punch or a little splash as you begin the stroke, and it smoothes out into a wring.

Son Filé Exercise

On any open string

♩ = 60

Viola

"All these things we've been talking about are mostly free-flowing movements. Sometimes, though, it needs to have that bound quality. A grand martelé that's very staccato is a bound movement, one you can stop suddenly, and it involves a lot of tension in the muscles.

"I think the movement we do that would be the most bound is tremolo. You've got that nice little quiver going on in the hand, and for an extended tremolo we have to be sure we don't seize up any muscles in the shoulder or upper arm.

"Rapid 16th notes may appear bound to the eye, but using movements analogous to bouncing a ball or rapping on a door can keep them more relaxed. These are called ballistic movements, because they naturally propel themselves.

"There are other things that can look as if they're bound, but we can control how bound they are so we don't get too many blockages. In all the work I've done with intermediate players, we're always looking for the most efficient, least direct force that you have to use, so you don't wear yourself out.

"One thing people can do to work on that free flow is the *son filé* exercise (see above), where you start with whatever metronome mark feels good, maybe 60, and you play four full bows, a quarter note to each bow. Then you play a pair of two beats per bow, then a pair of three beats per bow, always using a full bow, each pair adding one beat.

"Beginning to intermediate students can work their way to getting 10 beats in a bow, then work their way back to one. More advanced students should work their way to 30 or 60 beats in a bow. To get to 30 beats will take about 10 minutes if the metronome is set to 60. After 30 beats, a full tone is not easy, but the goal is a smooth, free-flowing sound, without any hiccups in the movement. Playing so slowly drives teenagers crazy, but it's analogous to the martial arts, where so many exercises are done in slow motion before they're done quickly. And in yoga they say if you can't do it slowly, you really can't do it." □

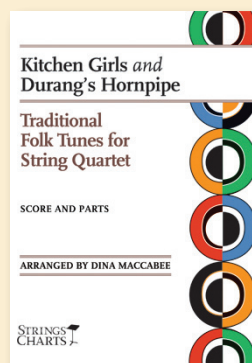
GET A MOVE ON

- PRESS:** Direct, heavy, slow
PUNCH: Direct, heavy, fast
DAB: Direct, light, fast
GLIDE: Direct, light, slow
FLOAT: Indirect, light, slow
WRING: Indirect, heavy, slow
SLASH: Indirect, heavy, fast
FLICK: Indirect, light, fast

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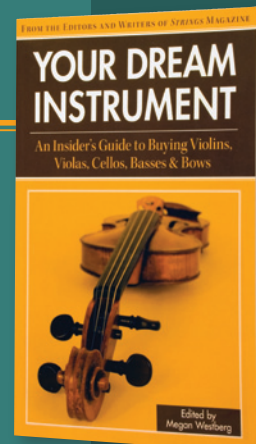
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