



BOW ARM TUNE-UP

Developing structure and flexibility in your bow hold

By Scott Flavin

"Any fool can manipulate the fingers of the left hand, but the right hand is the artist."

—Eugène Ysaÿe

Many string players spend the majority of their time and effort working on left-hand issues (intonation, shifting, and vibrato), while devoting far less attention to their bow arm, bow hold, and tone. Yet awareness of the bow arm is a key to improving tone and technique—and it all begins with the bow hold. Apart from supporting the bow, the bow hold transmits energy and weight from the bow arm into the string, and allows a variety of bow strokes and colors to emerge in your playing.

When it comes to holding the bow, there are two major “truths” that are seemingly at odds with one another: one, you must

maintain a consistent structure to your bow hold; and two, it must also be flexible. Achieving this balance will help you achieve a better sound, with more variety of bow strokes, and greater physical ease.

STRUCTURE

A structured bow hold will improve the quality of your tone, as well as reduce tension in the right hand. In order to promote a consistent structure, you must remember that each finger of the right hand has a role to play in supporting the bow.

1 Thumb and second finger Structurally united, these fingers form the core of the bow hold. The point of contact of these digits also acts as a pivot point, or “hinge,” when you change the direction of the bow.

2 Index finger This finger creates the greatest connection between the arm and the bow, and can be used to add weight to the stick, equalizing tone from the frog to the tip.

3 Third (ring) finger In contact with the side of the frog, the third finger establishes lateral control as well as reinforces the connection between the arm and the bow.

4 Fourth (pinkie) finger Below the balance point, the pinkie helps support the weight

of the bow to prevent excessive weight on the string (and roughness of tone).

Structural Exercises

Be conscious of each of your right-hand fingers while playing throughout the entire length of the bow, through all varieties of bow strokes. Beware of lifting fingers or shifting their position on the bow.

1 Gingold's 5-minute bow Josef Gingold was a master of playing a five-minute-long bow stroke! Bear in mind, this doesn't sound so great, but it isn't about tone, it's about control. Work your way up patiently to five minutes—you may have to start with a bow of much shorter duration. This exercise reinforces a greater sensitivity to the role of each finger.

2 Long bows in the air Holding the bow in playing position above the string, but as close to the string as possible, do whole bows down and up, as slowly as you can. Practiced for a few minutes daily, over time you will notice greater strength and control in your bow hold.

FLEXIBILITY

Flexibility of right-hand fingers is so important; when the fingers act like “shock absorbers,” you are better able to create a thick,

consistent tone, and off-string bow strokes (spiccato, sautillé) improve. The classic analogy of viewing your fingers as bristles on a paintbrush is valid: If you attempt to paint with a stiff brush, you'll have very weak coverage compared to a flexible paintbrush.

An important concept to understand when dealing with bow-hold flexibility is that when you play, you are pulling the bow, not pushing it—the statement “you can’t push a rope” absolutely applies. This means that on the down bow, the weight of the bow arm is going to the pinkie, and on the up bow, toward the index finger.

A great way to experiment with this is to hold your bow firmly in the middle of the stick with your left hand and try to pull the bow out of your hand with your right-hand bow hold. Pull down bow and notice the weight going to the pinkie, while the index feels lighter; next, pull up bow and feel the weight going to the index, with the pinkie feeling light and passive. The shifting of weight from down bow to up bow pivots on the second finger and thumb.

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Flexibility Exercises

Cultivate a feeling of fluidity in your fingers and hand. Observe your right hand in a mirror, making sure it's flexible and loose.

1 Bow push-ups Hold a pencil with your bow hold and bring the pencil into the palm of your hand by curving your fingers, then release. Repeat, holding the bow.

2 Collé With the bow on the string, move the stick using only your fingers (no arm, no wrist). With practice, your control and range of motion will improve. n