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Transform Your Sound by Controlling Arm Weight

3 exercises to help you master the delicate balancing act that is proper bowing

By Leah Swann

WATCHING GOOD STRING PLAYERS PERFORM is like watching professional figure skaters—their movements are graceful, flowing, and seemingly gravity-free. In reality, their motions are a delicate balancing act with the force of gravity—it's just that they have learned to utilize and harness gravity's pull to enhance their movements. With a few basic skills, a string player can learn to master this balancing act—using the natural weight of your arm and bow can greatly improve your playing.

CONTROL ARM & SHOULDER WEIGHT

Don't confuse the natural weight of the arm with pressure that you force into the string. If you begin to think of the pressure that the arm exerts into the string—instead of the arm's natural weight sinking into the string—you'll almost certainly squash your sound. This kind of pressure will stop the instrument's natural resonance, since pressure exerted into the string will make the string ring less. Conversely, arm weight that helps to activate the motion of the string and continues along a vertical plane as you play will make the string ring more freely.

Imagine that all of the weight needed for sound production is stored in the muscles of your back, beneath the shoulder blade, and that you can release various amounts of weight for various sounds. The weight is there all the time, but you must decide when and how to use it. The following exercises—isolating the hand, arm, and shoulder—will help you develop an awareness of using that weight with only the necessary parts.



PLAY TENSION-FREE

Tension in the body is a fundamental problem for string players. My first yoga teacher used to repeat in every class: "Let go of all that is unnecessary; keep only what you need." This also holds true for string musicians. Strive to play with maximum ease and comfort while eliminating as much tension as possible.

—L.S.

1 **Isolate the Bow Hand.** Place the bow on the string and your left hand beneath the screw of the bow or simply hold the screw with the left hand so that the bow stays in place on the string without any effort from the right hand. Now, relax the right hand completely and release the thumb from the bow. Feel how much your fingers can melt into the bow, sinking easily into the bow like your head on a feather pillow. This is the kind of weight that your fingers should feel they are transmitting through the bow while playing—a deep weight that comes from a place of relaxation. Think of the way you might guide a child through a crowd using only a hand on her shoulder. You would exert just enough weight on her shoulder so that the child knows what direction to walk in, but you wouldn't push her through the crowd. Allowing your hand to relax and to act as a transmitter of the natural weight of the shoulder and arm will allow you to draw a resonant, ringing sound from your instrument.

ARCHIVE

For more about using arm weight to produce sound, read "Up a Wall" online at AllThingsStrings.com.



2. Isolate the Arm. In order to experience how the weight of the arm and shoulder should be used, find a shelf that is just a few inches below shoulder height (or about elbow height when you are playing on the D string). Rest your right elbow on the shelf and relax your right shoulder completely. If you have trouble with this step, shrug your right shoulder up to your ear and try to tense all of your muscles as much as you can. Then release them all back down with a sigh. You should feel like your arm would fall completely to your side if the shelf were not there to support your arm.

Now try drawing the bow—you won't be able to play long bows on every string, but notice the kind of sound you get while using minimal effort. When your elbow is supported by the shelf, it should feel easy to produce a big sound! The weight from your upper arm, shoulder, and back can flow easily through the forearm and fingers to the bow and string, without blockage from any unnecessary tension.



3. Isolate the Shoulder. As a final exercise, find a space such as a doorway to stand in—a place where you can feel the back of your right shoulder against a wall, but where your elbow can move freely. It's as if you are leaning casually (but with good, upright posture!) against a wall or friend. If you try pulling a few bows in this position, while trying to recreate the feeling of relaxation in the hand from the first exercise, and then trying to recreate the feeling of release in the elbow from the second exercise, you should now be able to easily draw a bow with a deep, healthy sound.

In this exercise, try to maintain the contact between the wall and your right shoulder, checking to make sure that your shoulder does not swing around to the front of your body and does not travel up in the direction of your ear while playing.

Maintain a constant, but easy, amount of contact between your back and the wall.

Ann Marie Calhoun For Real.



Ann Marie has appeared with Steve Vai, Jethro Tull, Ringo Starr, Jon Bon Jovi, Widespread Panic, Damien Marley, and Dave Stewart to name a few.

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