

## The “Holistic” Bow Arm

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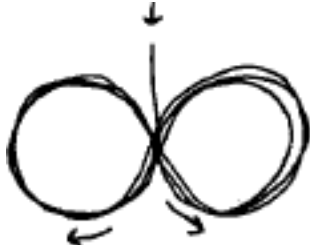
In 1921, Leopold Auer wrote, ‘To obtain a beautiful tone, the student must be willing to bear all his intelligence and all the mental and spiritual concentration of which he is capable.’ Seventy years ago, Auer stressed the importance of a “holistic” approach to the bow arm. Since then, there have been many exciting breakthroughs within the whole field of education, using whole-brain understanding and accelerated learning processes. But when we string teachers deal with the bow arm, too often we fall into patterns of mechanical explanations that often do not truly help the student. Perhaps we can learn from some of the integrated learning developments and apply them to an understanding of bowing. I would like to focus on some of the most common problems I have found in teaching the bow arm and to discuss some possible solutions and alternate viewpoints.

## The Optimal Bow Path

For artists to be able to express their musicality fully, they must have a beautiful, free bow arm through which their ideas can spontaneously flow. As teachers, we must help students learn the how-to's of bow technique and so be able to integrate the physical with their emotional source of expression. The most basic problem of the bow arm seems to be how to draw a straight bow. While keeping in mind that the straight bow is actually an arch relating to the sounding point, it is important to recognize the “hinges” that connect each part of the arm: the shoulder socket, the elbow, the wrist, and the bridge of the base joint knuckles of the fingers. Our muscles work to move our bodies, but they are not the structure. To help students develop their own bow arms, one has to look at the proportions of their physique and help them realize the way the joints move to draw a straight bow with a consistent sounding point. Often, students distort their bodies out of tension or possibly from imitating another player with a very different build. I have found that it helps to propose to students that together we will find an optimal “bow path” for them.



This suggestion helps the students let go of what they are “supposed” to do so that they can start to use their own kinesthetic intelligence and listening to find a truly beautiful, connected sound. If a student has, for example, a chronically high wrist, it helps to point out what function it serves. To relax it, the student has to experience it as part of the whole and feel the way it affects the rest of the bow function. One technique that can help the violist integrate the parts to the whole is through “Lazy 8's,” a technique borrowed from Paul Dennison's work, known as Educational Kinesiology.\* The student traces a lazy 8 in the air, always beginning up the midline of the body to the left, first hands together, then each hand separately. The teacher watches to see that students tracks the ∞ pattern with their eyes, with nice full loops while breathing comfortably.



Immediately afterwards, I ask the students to play some easy long bows without thinking about the technique. Often, this exercise helps them discover their own bow path, receiving information from their own bodies and listening to their own sound in a new way.

## Arm Weight

A major concept in teaching the bow arm is usually described as *arm weight*. By this term, I believe most people refer to keeping the muscles as relaxed as possible to transfer the natural weight of the arm through the bow. Common misunderstandings that may arise are that the student will push down through the arm and shoulder so that the shoulder is down (and the teacher is pleased) or that the student will feel a dead weight, thus producing a lifeless sound. I find that discussing relaxation to counter these resultant problems does not usually bring the desired effect because the student often releases the support of the bow-arm structure, mistaking *formless* for *relaxed*. I have had some success working with the idea of floating, suggesting that the student rest the upper arm on a huge fluffy cloud or feel a blown-up balloon under the armpit. At times, we've had success by visualizing all the cells in the arm and/or the whole body pulsating or dancing. I believe these kinds of images provide a more lively feeling of connection with the sound.

Several years ago, I stumbled on a trick that has facilitated the perception of the buoyant feeling—breathing sound. One day when I was teaching in Taiwan (with no interpreter), I demonstrated the idea of arm connection, using some exercise-resistance bands that I carried with me to use for workouts in my hotel. I hooked one under the student's elbow and one under his wrist, thus carrying the arm for the student: up bow, down-bow. The student was quickly able to trust the rubber bands, releasing his holding in the shoulder area, and then to perceive his own natural bow

path. As I “bowed” him (with much accompanying giggling on the part of the student and the observing class), his sound became focused and full. Since that initial experience, I have often used the bands to provide an opportunity for the student to realize how little pressure or effort is needed to transfer energy through the stick. Also, it gives me a chance to suggest through the kinesthetic sense a more efficient direction, if necessary. These resistance bands can be purchased in many sporting goods stores.

## Learning Styles

A number of researchers have established that students learn primarily through one of the dominant senses: visual, auditory, or kinesthetic. Students who learn primarily through the auditory normally like to hear explanations or talk about problems. Sometimes I find that these students have difficulties in their bow arms due to use of specific language. The almost universal definition of up and down-bow seems to affect us adversely. (While the French *push/pull* is better, I don't feel that it's ideal, either.) For the violist, certainly there is not much “up” about an up bow. On the C and G strings, it is an almost horizontal movement, and on the D and A, it is a slant angle. When students hear “up,” they tend to initiate the movement up, thus constricting the muscles and inhibiting the flow of the bow arm. The shoulder socket needs to stay free so the torso muscles can support and react to the arm direction. I make the suggestion of feeling the energy flow out the arm even as the bow moves toward the frog. Some students have had success pretending they're painting on the far wall with an imaginary brush extending out from their elbow.

I think it would be great to invent a new vocabulary for these bow directions: for *up*, perhaps “tranthru” for “transfer through.” The down-up is simpler in that one needs only to follow the movement of the frog, so maybe the term “fol-frog” could be used. So we could use *TT* and *FF* or “trant” and “folf!” I think this would free up the students' perceptions of working with gravity, while keeping their bodies looser.

Students who are visually oriented tend to learn by imitating what they see. This works well when the teacher demonstrates a lot, particularly if the student and teacher have similar builds. Sometimes I have students with much longer arms and

fingers than I have, who distort their own natural bow arms to look like me! When this happens, it's important to demonstrate why you need to do what you do and what you hope will work better for them, appealing to their reason and other senses of hearing and feeling. Obviously, great harm is caused by teachers who insist that all their students should look like them.

## Opinionisms

One last aspect of teaching the bow arm that interests me is in the area of what I term *opinionisms*. For some reason, most of us players and students tend to have a preconceived idea about how a sound quality or technique will feel in our arm. For example, we might assume that a very dynamic accent will feel very strong in our arm or a part of our arm. When working with students, it's important to emphasize that they might need to let go of their idea to perceive how to produce a new technique or sound quality. (Often, when expressing myself by playing the viola, the old adage "less is more" comes to mind.)

Also, as teachers, we must realize that there is usually some fear about letting go of one's opinions because it feels as if one's uniqueness is lost. Students have expressed to me, for example, "I would like to open my elbow earlier, but then it won't feel like my bow arm." As a teacher, I feel one needs to provide a safe environment in which students can learn with their whole self in a disciplined yet creative way. Ideally, students can discover the optimal use of body/mind to express their own true musicality.