

# Journal of the American Viola Society

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## IN THE STUDIO

### LET'S BE KNUCKLEHEADS!

By Karen Ritscher

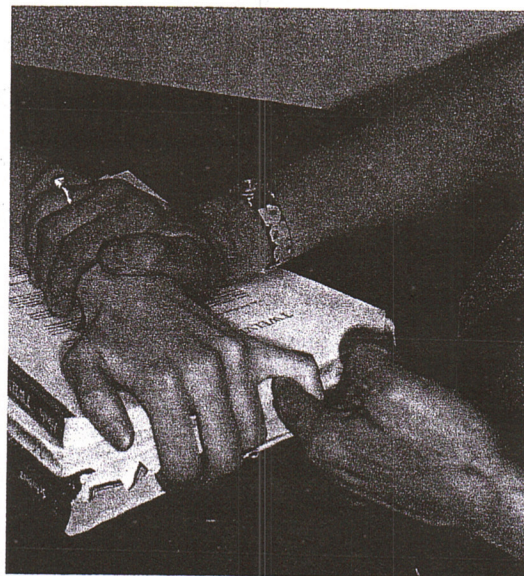
A number of years ago, while admiring some of the great performing violists, I noticed that all beautiful left hand techniques shared the characteristic of plump, well-formed knuckles. I wanted those knuckles as my own and started to obsess on how to achieve knuckle perfection. I have noticed in my students that often the proper use of base knuckles is the one missing link to successful left-hand ease. Following are a few suggestions and musings for improving left-hand function, gleaned from my own practice and observation of my students.

Most of us have been instructed that good finger action comes from a lever motion from the base joint. Among medical and anatomy people, the base joint is referred to as the metacarpal-phalangeal or m.p. joint. The m.p. joint is simply the joint that connects the bones of the palm to the base of the fingers. The interossei are small muscles originating from the metacarpals and inserting onto the phalanges (fingers). Their tendons are attached to those of the extensor muscles of the arm. The lumbricals are also small muscles at the base of the fingers. Collectively, the interossei and the lumbricals flex and extend the joints, enabling the minute finger action required to

play the viola. Of course, the flexors of the forearm also contribute to the finger action, but I would like to focus more on the function of the small muscles supporting the knuckle action. Without specific kinesthetic awareness, students are often stumped on how to acquire clear and efficient left-hand technique. We know that the action should be a "ping-release" from the base joint. Often students believe they are doing this correctly when in fact they are using too much of the back of hand and forearm muscles. I suggest doing an "opposition" exercise with the student away from the viola to help him/her gain awareness of the proper motivation of the movement:

1. Have the student rest his (or her) left arm on some phone books with his shoulder relaxed.
2. While the student presses a finger down, one at a time (like a piano finger action), the teacher uses his own finger and hooks it under the student's and provides upward resistance. The student should try to locate the tiny muscles around the joint and to recruit the arm muscles as little as possible.
3. Then the student presses his finger up while the teacher resists in a downward pressure. It is important for both student and teacher to concentrate and

use as little energy as possible to feel the opposition. This is NOT a muscle strengthener, but rather facilitates the awareness of the brain-knuckle connection.



*Teacher on right providing the resistance to help the student feel the strength of base knuckle*

While good hand shape or "frame" is vital for consistent intonation, one must also pay attention to the independence and balance of each finger. I believe that superb intonation can only exist with good knuckle alignment, which exists when the joints are free to serve as hinges. Each finger needs to: 1. drop and lift freely, 2. glide up and down the string and 3. cross easily between strings. While we talk about "lifting" motion, it is more accurately a springing motion from the base joint.



One of the most important elements in healthy setup is the counter-balance between the index finger joint and the function of the pinky. The space between the index finger base knuckle joint and the second finger base knuckle joint must be free of excess tension. The knuckles do NOT need to be parallel to the fingerboard, as this tends to lock the knuckles. Rather, the image of a “giving” hand shape helps an organized set-up. For smaller hands, indeed, the pinky knuckle will be higher than the first finger joint. Sometimes I fantasize, and even attempt to play, the viola with my first and second fingers on the C string side and the third and fourth fingers on the A string side because it feels so natural. My wrist releases, my knuckles open and my fingers line up beautifully.



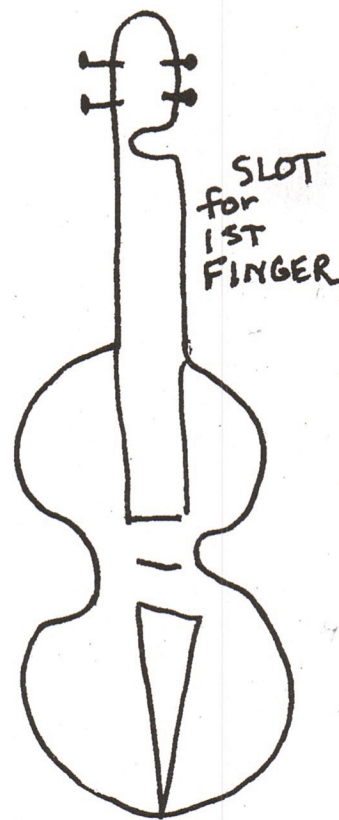
*Rachel White, student at University of Oklahoma, demonstrates comfortable hand setup*

When the student returns to normal hand setup, suggest that he or

she pretend that there is ample space for the first finger joint. I have a trick that facilitates this hand balance. Imagine that there is a slot in the peg-box running perpendicular to the strings where your first finger can rest and approach the fingerboard from the direction of the scroll. I keep a cardboard cutout of a viola that the student can experiment with to achieve this feeling.

Good shifting is also affected by the hinge of the knuckle release. The first step before the shift is to let go of the pressure of the stopping finger. Many students misunderstand and release the pressure of the tip of the finger, while keeping the back of the hand rigid. Instead, during the shift, if it is an “old finger” shift, the knuckle is open, the finger stays lightly on the string with a harmonic type pressure, and when the new pitch is reached the finger again springs down.

One last exercise that my viola studio has found helpful is the “intention” game. I suggest beginning with Schradieck Book One, page one. Place all four fingers on the string. Without the bow, pretend that you will play the exercise, but instead ONLY feel the firing or motivation of the finger motion. You can “play through” as much as you like, in rhythms or evenly at any speed, although slowly is always preferable until the brain connection is focused. You will then find that when you go back



to play the exercise or the passage from your piece that your movements will be much more precise and economic. ♪

*Karen Ritscher is Associate Professor of Viola at the Shepherd School of Rice University. She appears often as chamber musician and soloist and has given masterclasses throughout the US, Canada, Korea, and Taiwan. She was the string consultant for the book by Madeline Bruser, The Art of Practicing: A Guide to Making Music from the Heart, published by Bell Tower in 1997.*