

Practising in a dry acoustic

Whenever possible, practise in a room that has a dry acoustic: the challenge of playing cleanly and sweetly, and drawing the resonance out of the violin, is far greater than in an acoustic that muddles all the sounds together.

If you can play well in a dry acoustic, you will sound even better in a resonant one. But if you practise in too resonant an acoustic and then play in a dry one, you may find that what had before seemed good is now disappointing.

One way to deaden the sound is to pin some kind of fabric up on the wall. If it is not possible to play in a dry acoustic, sometimes stand in a corner of the room facing inwards to the wall. The sound bouncing straight back to you will be clearer and more truthful than the echoes in the room.

The legendary American violinist Michael Rabin liked to practise while standing facing into the bay windows of his music room: the curved windows threw the sound straight back out at him.

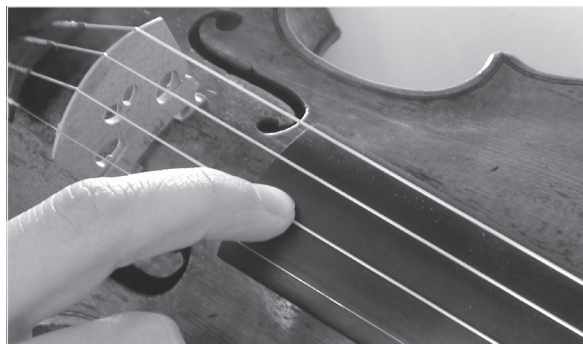
That would not have been to Yehudi Menuhin's taste, however. He recommended using a heavy practice mute during long sessions of practice to avoid deadening the sensitivity of the ears.

Understanding the properties of the string

The feel of the string



(a) The string feels hard near the bridge



(b) The string feels soft near the fingerboard

Fig. 7

The closer a part of the string is to the bridge, the more rigid it is. Using your finger, press at different distances from the bridge to feel the resistance of the string (Fig. 7).

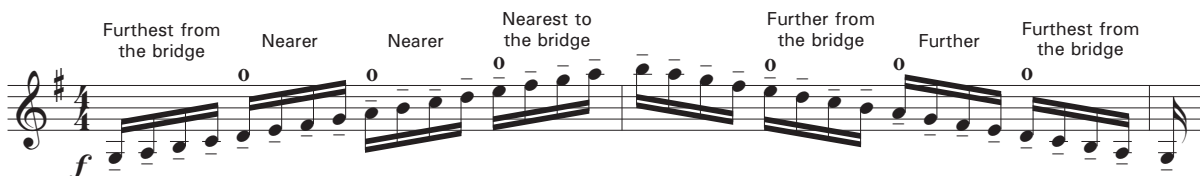
- Since the nearer you play to the bridge the less flexible the string is, you need more bow weight, to catch the string, than when bowing nearer to the fingerboard.
- The bow must also move more slowly when nearer the bridge, otherwise it whistles over the surface of the taut string without catching it – particularly on the thick G string.
- However, the higher the note, i.e. the shorter the string, the less pressure it can take, so you have to play high notes lightly near the bridge.¹

¹ See *Bow-pressure and pitch*, page 84

The thinner the string, the nearer the bridge

Each string prefers a different soundpoint from the string next to it. Near the bridge the open G string feels too stiff. You need to play faster, longer strokes around soundpoint 4 to make it vibrate the widest.

The open E string is the opposite. To make it vibrate the widest, you need to play around soundpoint 2. It feels too weak and fragile when bowed on soundpoint 4 or 5.



Experiment

- Point the scroll exaggeratedly too far out to the left (Fig. 23a). Notice how you have to straighten the arm at the elbow to reach the point, if you want to keep the bow parallel with the bridge.
- Point the scroll too much in front of you (Fig. 23b). Notice how you can now get to the point with the arm still only at the 'square' position, without having to extend the arm to reach the point.

This leads to restricted bowing in the upper half, since everything is then played with only the forearm; and cramped bowing in the lower half, since the angle at the elbow, of the forearm and the upper arm, has to close too much (Fig. 23c).

- Find the middle position between the two extremes (Fig. 23d).

3. How high or low on the shoulder?

Adjust the position of the violin on the shoulder. A small change at this end of the violin affects the path of the bow more than a small change at the scroll end:

- Short arms: violin higher on shoulder, so that the chin is nearer to, or directly above, the tail piece.
- Long arms: violin lower on shoulder, so that the chin is further to the left of the tail-piece.

Right arm

This adjustment of the position of the violin on the shoulder is often overlooked. It is common to see short-armed players with a chin rest too far to the left, and long-armed players using a centre chin rest.

The lower the violin is positioned on the shoulder, the further you have to reach to bow to the point:

- Short arms: shorten the distance to avoid ending up with an entirely straight arm at the point.
- Long arms: lengthen the distance to avoid ending up at the square position at the point.

Experiment

- Position the violin far too low on the shoulder (Fig. 24a). Notice that you have to straighten the arm at the elbow to reach the point, if you keep the bow parallel with the bridge.

Even if you point the scroll more in front of you, it is difficult to reach the point without straightening the arm. With the violin so low on the shoulder, there is too far to go to get to the point.

- Position the violin far too high on the shoulder (Fig. 24b). Notice that you can now get to the point without having to extend the arm.

Even if you hold the scroll out too far to the left, it is still possible to reach the point without straightening the arm – with the violin so high on the shoulder, there isn't so far to go.

- Find the middle position between the two extremes (Fig. 24c).

Fig. 24

(a) Violin too low on the shoulder



(b) Violin too high



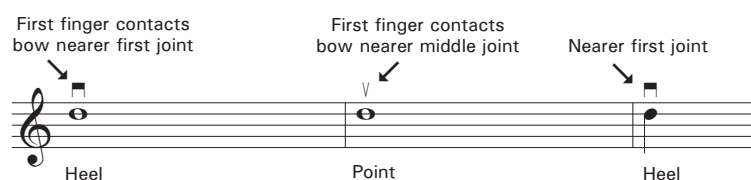
(c) Middle position

The changing contact-point of the first finger on the bow

¹ See also *The changing contact of the first finger with the bow*, page 123

At the heel the hand is more upright or 'supinated' (Fig. 28j, page 39); at the point the hand leans towards the first finger or is more 'pronated' (Fig. 28k).¹

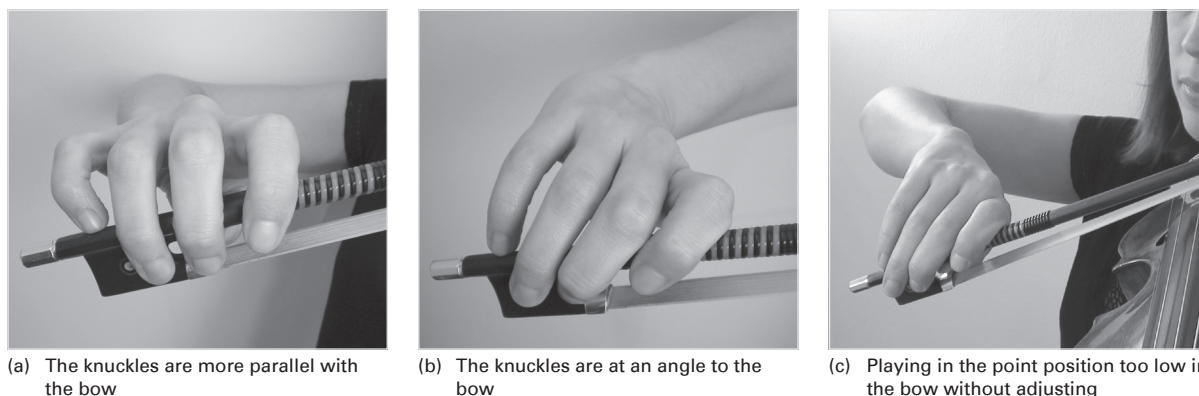
As the hand leans, the contact-point of the first finger with the bow changes from closer to the nail joint to closer to the middle joint:



The exact contact-point of the first finger, when playing at the heel, affects the rest of the hand:

- The nearer to the nail joint the finger contacts the bow, the more the knuckles are parallel with the bow and the lower the wrist (Fig. 32a).
- The nearer to the middle joint the finger contacts the bow, the higher the wrist and the more angled the knuckles as the forearm rotates slightly anticlockwise (Fig. 32b).

Fig. 32



A common fault is to play everywhere in the bow with the hand always in the point position (Fig. 32c). On the down-bow it is natural to change from the heel position to the point position; however, it can also seem natural to keep that position of the hand all the way back to the heel.

Then, having arrived back in the lower half with the first finger still contacting the bow near to (or beyond) the middle joint, it is natural to leave it there and carry on playing everything with the hand permanently in that position.

Instead, begin at the heel with the fourth actively balancing the bow and a first-finger contact-point near the nail joint – play to the point and allow the contact-point of the first finger to move closer to (or on top of) the middle joint – then, on the up-bow, let the entire hand move back on to the fourth finger while at the same time the first-finger contact-point gradually moves nearer to the nail joint.

Q If the contact-point of the first finger with the bow changes all the time, doesn't that make the bow hand feel unstable?

This changing point of contact of the first finger does not produce any feeling of instability in the right hand because the contact-point of the finger on the *side* of the bow remains constant.

To demonstrate the stable contact on the side of the bow, make a bowing movement in the air while holding your first finger against the bow with your left hand (Fig. 33a).

See how the nail joint of the first finger, on the side of the bow, remains in one place under your left finger during the journey from heel to point; yet the contact-point of the first finger on top of the bow changes from nearer the nail joint at the heel to nearer the middle joint at the point (Fig. 33b).