

Setting the Left-Hand Position on Upper String Instruments

A Brief Survey of Related Literature and Rote Exercises with Teaching Tips

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“A discussion on the doctrines on the position of [left] arm, hand and fingers is attended by various difficulties, of which one springs from the fact that what could be called the basic attitude is a static concept, whereas in actuality one has to deal with constant motion.”

- Neumann, 1969, p. 39

The purpose of this article is to provide readers with insights into what constitutes a left-hand setting (position) that is conducive to good intonation through the perspectives of several respected string teachers and pedagogues. In addition to these perspectives, I will provide sequentially organized rote exercises and teaching tips. While most of the discussion that follows pertains to the set-up of the left-hand on upper string instruments (violin and viola), the proposed exercises can be adapted for all four bowed string instruments.

Flesch (2000) proposed that the principle goal of left-hand techniques is the development of *pure intonation* - which he described as “producing musical tones in a prescribed speed and with a number of vibrations inherent in the laws of acoustics” (p. 7). Galamian (1985) explained that good intonation “rests mainly on the sense of touch in combination with the guidance of the ear” (p. 19). In this article, components of the left-hand settings will be organized in three subcategories: (a) position of left-hand, fingers, and thumb, (b) left-hand natural frame, and (c) position and movements of the left elbow.

Position of Left-Hand, Fingers, and Thumb

Brief Survey of Related Literature

Among string pedagogues there is an ongoing discussion on “proper” left-hand, fingers, and thumb placement on instrument’s neck. By far the most common recommendation is that the instrument’s neck should be placed equally between the thumb and base knuckle of the first finger (index finger), and that the instrument’s neck should touch both the thumb and the base knuckle of the first finger (on violin and viola). Galamian (1985) called this concept *double contact*, and he considers it to be a “very important intonation factor” (p. 21). The shape and the angle of left-hand fingers is yet another consideration that needs careful attendance. All authors agree that left hand-fingers need to be curved when in neutral

position but, when needed, as Galamian suggested, they can assume “elongated position, depending upon the note being played” (p. 17).

Fingers need to hover over the string on which the player plays. Most pedagogues suggest perpendicular placement of the first finger (violin and viola) with the fingernail facing the player. The fingernails of second, third, and fourth finger should be inclined to the left of the player’s face. While Applebaum (1986) suggested that the thumb “more or less should be facing the ceiling” (p. 4) there are some variations in views where exactly the thumb should be in relationship to the first finger. For example, Applebaum viewed the position of the thumb as a variable that depends on the shape and size of the hand and therefore can be placed “opposite the first finger, midway between the first and second finger, or slightly behind the first finger (toward the scroll)” (p. 5). On the other hand, Joachim had a more decisive view on thumb’s position and he believed that “[the thumb’s] best position is somewhat forward of the base of the forefinger” (as cited in Courvoisier, 2006, p. 12).

Rote exercises and tips

To help students orient the position of the left-hand on the instrument’s neck, Rolland (1960) suggested placing two markings on the students’ left-hands: a “Magic X” is placed on the skin that covers the indent in the bone that can be touched at the base knuckle of the index finger and a “Magic Dot” that is placed in the middle part of the upper knuckle of the left-hand thumb. Applebaum (1986) suggested this exercise as a good way to check the correct setting of the fingers of the left hand: a student places all four fingers on the lower string but is still able to sound the next higher string while fingers remain down. To prevent the habit of clutching the instrument’s neck with the left thumb, Applebaum recommended to place all four fingers on D string and slide the left thumb up and down the instrument’s neck. He also suggested playing one octave scale with the thumb removed from the neck.

Left-Hand Natural Frame

Brief Survey of Related Literature

Several pedagogues highlighted the importance of developing left-hand frame as an indispensable promoting factor of reliable intonation. Galamian (1985) described left hand frame as “the basic placement of the fingers, first and fourth, *on the octave interval* within any one position” (p. 20). Once the student

acquires the left-hand frame, the second and third fingers (on violin and viola) need to function within the frame, sometimes assuming square position (for lower pitches) and sometimes assuming extended position (for higher pitches), without first and fourth finger abandoning the shape and feel of the frame. Jacobson (2016) argued that the entire left-hand needs to be balanced on the fourth finger because “[that] opens the hand, [and] the fingers of the left hand form an imaginary line with the line of the right arm when bowing” (p. 209).

There are two considerations that need a teacher’s attention when developing left-hand frame. The first consideration is the natural weakness of the fourth finger, which, as Havas (1961) explained, may make players “find more difficult to sense the feeling of weight in its base” (p. 32). This common problem with the fourth finger prompts the need for strengthening fourth finger exercises. The second consideration stems from the natural tendency of the hand to contract, which prompts the need for exercises that support the widening of the fingers’ base joints.

Rote exercises and tips

Sound pedagogues provided us with numerous exercises for strengthening the fourth finger. At the beginning level of instruction, Rolland’s left-hand pizzicato Plucking Exercises are useful. In addition to widely adopted plucking open string

exercise called *Each and Every Ant*, playing the bass line of *Hot Cross Buns* transposed into four keys (teacher or more advanced students play the melody and beginning students pluck open strings with fourth finger starting from lowest string) is also an efficient exercise to develop the fourth finger’s strength while simultaneously developing an understanding of *rest* and coordination between the upper and lower part of the body while stomping on quarter rests.

At the intermediate level, a useful rote exercise to strengthen the fourth finger is playing the *Twinkle Theme* with the fourth finger placed on the adjacent string - either lower or higher. Caution needs to be in place to not overdo this exercise as the fourth finger is “fragile.”

Advanced exercises to strengthen the fourth finger are synonymous with exercises for the development of the left-hand frame, chief of which is the *Geminiani Chord*. This exercise has been used for setting the left-hand frame since the 18th century when Italian violinist and composer Francesco Geminiani proposed a four-note chord to be “played” without the bow as a means of acquiring the “perfect position of left-hand.” This is accomplished by placing the fourth finger on the lowest string, the third finger on the next string, the second on the string next to the highest, and the first finger on the highest



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string. Since that time, several pedagogues used the Geminiani Chord as a strategy for setting up the left-hand including Applebaum (1986) who proposed practicing the Geminiani Chord in two positions as illustrated in Exercise 2.

Both Fischer (2013) and Applebaum (1986) suggested exercises for widening the space between the fingers' base joints. A simple exercise that is practiced away from the instrument for this purpose is:

- Make the first and second finger of your left-hand in the shape of letter "V".
- Curl the fingers down while keeping the shape of letter "V".
- Place such shaped fingers ("V" shape) on the back of your right-hand.

(Adapted from Fischer, p. 134.)

A useful and fun exercise for widening space between base joints is playing the "Arabian" version of "Go Tell Aunt Rhode" song played on D and A strings as it requires playing a low first finger (E flat) while keeping the second finger high (F sharp) as illustrated in Exercise 1.

Position and the Movements of the Left Elbow

Brief Survey of Related Literature

The left elbow's position in relationship to the instrument has been a pervasive issue through the centuries. For example, Baillot (1835/1991) and Ševčík (as cited in Neumann, 1969) both taught that the elbow should be placed under the

middle of the violin while Rivarde (as cited in Neumann, 1969) suggested that the elbow should be turned inward and much to the right. On the other hand, positioning the elbow more to the left, as compared to Baillot, was instructed by Flesch (2000) and his teacher Marsick (as cited in Neumann, 1969). More contemporary pedagogues seem to view the position of the left elbow as a variable that changes depending on the string to be played as well as the height of the position in which the player plays, the character of the music, as well as the size of the player's fingers and hand. Fischer (2012) noticed that when going from a higher string to a lower string (e.g., from E string to G string on the violin) the player will still be able to reach the desired pitches with accuracy even if the elbow remains in E string position because the hand will retain its natural shape and the fingers will be able to reach the G string. However, when going from a lower to a higher string (e.g., G string to E string on the violin) the player will not be able to reach the desired pitches on the E string without distorting the shape of left hand if the player retains the G string elbow position.

Rote exercises and tips

To find the correct position for the left elbow, Applebaum (1986) proposed that the left elbow should always be under the tip of the fourth finger. In order to find the correct and balanced position of the left elbow, Fischer (2013) proposed the "hanging the arm" exercise:

- The scroll of the instrument is either resting on some kind of support or the student holds the scroll with their right hand.
- Student makes, let's say third finger, into a "hook" and hangs their arm from the fingerboard.

- Students will notice that when the finger hangs on the G string, the elbow is pronated more to the right and when it hangs on E string the elbow moves to the left.
- This hanging exercise can be practiced on each string and with all four fingers. Students will notice that with every new string and every new finger that the position of the left elbow changes slightly.

(Adapted from Fischer, p. 143)

A useful rote exercise for helping students at the intermediate level of technical development to understand several important concepts of left-hand techniques, including left elbow movements, is to introduce students to *Harmonic Twinkles* as illustrated in Exercise 5.

Kievman (1963) supplied two pages of effective left elbow movement exercises that can be easily transformed in rote exercises and that can be adapted for all four bowed string instruments. Two examples from Kievman's method book are presented in Exercises 3 and 4.

Summary

Through this article, I have provided readers with an overview of the components of the left-hand set-up through the perspectives of several highly regarded string teachers and pedagogues. I have also supplied rote exercises and teaching tips for setting up a well-balanced left hand and arm that is supportive of the development of good intonation. Teachers and students may find these multiple points of view helpful as students build and grow healthy left-hand positions.

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Exercise 1 Arabian Go Tell Aunt Rhody for opening the space between first and second finger



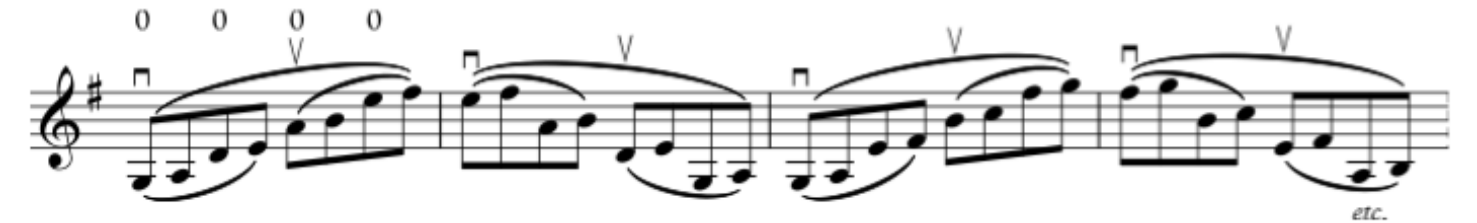
Exercise 2 Shaping Left Hand with Geminiani Chord (modified by Applebaum S.)



Exercise 3 Beginning Exercise for Balancing Left Elbow (from Kievman, L.)



Exercise 4 Advanced Exercise for Balancing Left Elbow (from Kievman, L.)



Exercise 5 Twinkle Theme with Harmonics for Active Movement of Left Elbow and Shifting Preparation

