

Position of the Bow Arm

A violinist who is teaching in Texas writes: "Some teachers insist on the elbow remaining close to the side,—even tying it down. What about this? I am teaching pupils that there are four planes for the elbow, corresponding to the four strings on the violin, that on the G string the elbow is high and on the E Low."

Our correspondent is entirely correct in her view of the matter, and she might add that there are three additional planes, which are employed when playing double stops, the position of the elbow being lowest when using double stops on the E-A, somewhat higher for the A-D, and highest for the D-G.

Of all mischievous half-truths it is doubtful if there is any one which has done more harm to the development of the correct method of violin playing than this mistaken theory, which is so prevalent among ignorant violin teachers and amateurs, that the arm should be held close to the side at all times in bowing, no matter what string is used. These teachers have their pupils continually practicing with a book under their arm, or tie the upper arm to the body with a piece of clothes line. I even heard of one bright genius who had his pupil bring an old coat when he came for his lesson, and gravely stitched the sleeve to the body of the coat and directed his pupil to always practice in that coat.

It is quite true that the elbow should be held close to the side when bowing on the E string, not hugged tight to the side, but in a comfortable, free position. If the pupil in the earlier stages of violin bowing occasionally holds a book under his arm only while playing on the E string and when using the upper part of the bow, he may get a good idea of the proper position of the bow arm when being used in that plane, but to try and keep the arm close to the side while bowing on each string of the violin, spells disaster if persisted in. The science of the matter is this; the wrist must work at all times in the same position (at the angle of greatest freedom of movement) no matter what string is being played upon, and the only way to accomplish this, is to raise the elbow, as the A, D and G strings are used. Let anyone hold a book under his right arm and try to use the full length of the bow on the A, D and G strings without letting the book fall, and the ridiculous contortions he will make, in the effort, will at once convince him of the absurdity of holding the arm close to the side, at all times.

The position of the bow arm, the wrist, and the various curves and movements necessary for correct bowing, must be the same, no matter what string is being played upon. consequently the elbow and arm must be raised the proper distance as the back strings are attacked, to bring this about. Thus it results that there are seven planes (*i. e.* positions for the arm and elbow) one for each string of the violin, and one each for the three double stop combinations, E-A, A-D, and D-G.

The victims of this false theory of keeping the arm constantly pressed tightly to the side are legion, and thousands of violin players have been ruined for any good playing by being started in this manner. I have seen any number of pupils who have acquired a faulty cat's-paw method of bowing in this manner which it was almost impossible to eradicate.