

# FIFTEEN PRINCIPLES OF VIOLIN PLAYING

By Ronald Mutchnik

## Principles of Posture:

- 1. V-Shaped Feet** – No wider than length of shoulders and neither foot in front or behind the other.
- 2. Shoulders Level with Head Straight Ahead** – Head and neck aligned on top of spine; natural “C” curve in neck and gentle “S” curve in spine with no lifting/raising in the shoulders and no turning of the neck to the left as a default position.
- 3. Arms By Side Position** – Whether lifting up from your arms at rest by your side, or from above starting with right hand on left shoulder and left hand on right shoulder and separating them into playing position as left elbow falls and right arm opens forward and out. In this position the violin is placed *on the collarbone* so its neck will fall between the thumb and the first finger (also arrived at by doing Paul Rolland’s Statue of Liberty position and aiming the button to the center of the throat). Do not shift this arm-by-the-side position by pulling forward or inward with the left shoulder.
- 4. See-Saw Scroll and Tilt Toward E-string** – The scroll end is higher than the chin rest end (in a mirror when looking straight into it with the violin in front pointing the scroll up until the fingerboard disappears from sight in the mirror). Tilt the violin (chin rest and shoulder pad or rest or foam/sponge support can be used in addition to using one’s hand actively to adjust the tilt) so that it favors the E-string rather than be parallel with the floor since this will allow both the bow arm and the fingers in the left hand to reach the violin more easily with less strain).

## Principles of the Bow Arm:

- 1. Circle in Bow Hold** – Maintain a circle between middle finger and thumb with the finger hanging over a bit like an elephant’s trunk keeping the other fingers curved as well with the little finger resting curved on the side nearest the top closer to the player but not on the very top. Keep the inside of the circle (the tunnel) even when moving to the tip of the bow. Do not raise the wrist and extend the fingers when finishing an up-bow near the frog or the circle will be lost.
- 2. Figure 8 Bowing** (relatively straight bow) – First establish the proper relationship between violin and bow by letting the right arm form an L-shape by your right side. Then lift the bow into playing position on a given string and notice whether it is parallel with the bridge. If not, the violin should be adjusted to the left or right until it is in the position that allows the bow, supported by the raised L-shaped bow arm, to be parallel with the bridge. Next, form a small triangle at the frog with the bow remaining parallel to the bridge, or pulled slightly back and in. Initiate a circular movement in the arm from the shoulder blade muscles and begin to push out on the down-bow (crescent shaped bow) and pull in and back on the up-bow, drawing a sideways “figure 8” connecting loop at the tip and frog. Allow the arm to follow the slant of the bow up and down. When doing an up-bow, remember two things: feel the shoulder blade muscles initiate the pull of the ring finger and the pull of the elbow back as you start up-bow at the tip. Also, as you approach the frog allow the elbow to drop a little (causing the hand to be higher than the elbow), then let the fingers gradually curve while pulling the bow up like a magnet towards them. On the down-bow, let the wrist fall. These three movements happen in sequence and help create a strong but flexible smooth change of bow. In rapid, small bow strokes, the movements will remain in the same plane.
- 3. Pour the pitcher** – With your bow in hand, tilt your right arm toward the violin as if pouring water out of a pitcher. This will help naturally shift the weight of the arm onto the strings supported through the larger muscles around the shoulder blade in back. Maintain this position in both the up-bow and down-bow strokes. Though this is a prone position, supination will naturally happen as part of the up-

bow motion described in #2. In general, keep all the hairs of the bow on the string with the wood of the bow pushed away from you (towards the scroll). There are exceptions when a lighter sound is desired without full hair or when doing down-bow staccato in which the wood would be turned toward you.

**4. Resistance Between Violin and Bow** – Actively push the violin into the bow and the bow into the violin much the way two hands come together to clap with greater resonance than if one hand remained stationary while the other came toward it to produce a clap.

**5. Shift your weight based on bow direction** – For slow to moderate speed bows, if starting at the frog and heading toward the tip, move your weight from the left leg and foot to the right leg and foot, and do the reverse when heading from tip to frog. For rapid bow changes, remain more stationary. For a quick release of bow, move in contrary motion, body to the left and bow to the right. Do not bring the body and bow together into a cramped, folded position.

**Principles of the Left Hand:** (The first three principles are observed at rest; the remaining three principles occur when you start to move on the violin.)

**1. Fingers Curved with Spaces** – Keep the fingers curved naturally similar to the way they would be resting by your side. Keep a loose cushiony feeling in the palm of the hand.

**2. Wrist Straight** – Keep the wrist straight, both from side-to-side, as well as front-to-back in line with the forearm.

**3. Magic “X” Position and Thumb Opposite First Finger** – Allow the third crease down in your pointing finger to rest at the juncture where the neck and fingerboard meet at the seam. Keep your thumb across from the first finger on the opposite side slightly in front of the base of the first finger and behind the tip. These two positions are an average default position but depending on the breadth of the hand and the length of the fingers this may be adjusted based on the following principle: The longer the fingers, the deeper below the magic “X” the pointing finger can be placed and the higher the thumb can rest. For shorter than average fingers, one needs to lower the thumb and keep the magic “X” lower than the seam where the neck and fingerboard meet. The thumb position will change as a matter of course in shifting. In all cases, avoid grabbing or forming a vise-like grip to hold onto the violin. Instead, feel as if the neck of the violin is resting in the hand.

**4. Elbow Levels** – Feel the muscles in the shoulder blade initiate a turn in the hand and a swing in the elbow (forward and to the right going from a lower numbered finger to a higher one and backward and to the left going from a higher numbered finger to a lower one) to bring the fingers to a given place on a given string. Because the fourth finger is furthest out in the hand and is also the shortest finger, the turn in the hand and the elbow swing will cause the finger to be perpendicular to the string whereas the first finger being naturally closest to the fingerboard will appear almost parallel with the string.

**5. Base Joint Motion of Fingers** – Drop the naturally curved fingers from the base joint knuckles of the hand. Do not push the fingers forward stretched out and end up touching the strings only using the knuckles near the tip.

**6. Land on the Pad to the Left** – Land on the finger pad, rather than the very tip, to the left of center, the exception being with a very narrow fourth finger, which can land more towards the center.

These are the basic positions and movements. The skills of tone production (weight, speed, contact point) string crossing, double and triple stopping, shifting, and vibrato that follow are all the easier to master if these basic principles are in place.