

“Head Weight ‘Etude’ ” By Gary Frisch

The purpose of this exercise is to learn how to keep the left shoulder down; to rotate the elbow under the instrument to get your fingers in a better playing position; learn how to shift without the need to “hold” the instrument with no hands; and to learn how to secure the instrument using the collar bone, head weight, and the left hand.

1. Put first finger on the note B on the A-string in first position (viola-use the note E on the D-string). Keeping the finger on the string, shift into fifth position and pluck the open D-string with your third finger and then shift back into first position. Keep the first finger on the A-string as you do this.
2. Repeat this procedure, this time plucking the open D with your fourth finger. This brings the elbow under the instrument even more.
3. Next, with bow in hand, repeat #1, only this time, keep the third finger on the D-string and bow the note. See if the instrument wobbles as you bow. If it does, nod your head “Yes” to use more head weight to stabilize the violin. Don’t confuse head weight with bearing down hard on the chinrest with your jaw.
4. Repeat #3, this time using vibrato. Use more head weight if the instrument wobbles from side to side.
5. Have a violin/viola-playing colleague observe you from behind as you do this. If he or she sees your left shoulder rising, place a 6”x7” piece of 3/4” thick foam folded into a wedge shape between your shoulder and the back of the violin. Repeat 1-4 training the shoulder to move freely so the elbow can swing freely under the instrument.

“Playing on the Chinrest” By Gary Frisch

A good rule of thumb for string players is “the equipment should work for the player, not the other way around.” For example, musicians who try to support the instrument by locking it in place using neck and shoulder muscles, are doing the chinrest’s and shoulder pad’s job.

Balancing the instrument by placing it against the neck and using head weight, the collarbone, the left hand, and the bow enables the player to gently turn his or her head left and right. The jaw pivots around the chinrest’s hump and cutaway. This helps to keep the neck relaxed; it allows the player to cue others at key junctures; and it can help a player produce a greater range of tone color that projects with greater ease.

Gently turning the head slightly to the left flattens the instrument. This is ideal for playing on the treble strings. The bow is less vertical when playing, which enables the weight of the bow and arm to pull and push the string more efficiently. As a result, a bigger, fuller sound is easier to activate.

Gently turn the head to the right to play more efficiently on the lower strings. One can raise the left hand slightly to increase tone projection. Playing on the lower strings with a flattened instrument requires a lifted right elbow, which is fatiguing and can lead to pain problems. This approach is best used for sustained playing on the bass or treble strings.

Finally, there is no law that requires a player to have the head on the chinrest all of the time. Players should seek out passages that can be played head-free. And remember, the key to moving freely is balanced posture. Work on aligning the head and neck with the spine; keeping the shoulders relaxed in their natural position; activating core muscles to align the hips with the shoulders thus avoiding playing with a sunken chest; playing with relaxed knees; and keeping the feet positioned under the hips.

Frisch and Denig Custom-Fitted Chinrests (patented) and Chinrest Fitting Kits (patented):
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