SUPREME STRING SECRETS

ETHAN NORVILLE

To my parents – Alston and Alice Norville, my (non-biological) brothers, and those who know what holding a violin (and not knowing what to do with it) feels like.

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Introduction

It's happened to musicians everywhere. They would practice a piece religiously, and concentrate on repeated revisions until its musical blueprint is burned into their brain. They would know the music by heart, and what they could not remember their muscles would. That's only a single page in the storybooks of most musicians worldwide—a page that music teachers think is necessary.

I've been playing the violin since childhood, and like many children, did not like to practice. I hated the postures I had to contort myself into, and playing some instruments felt like a chore. I did the bare minimum, but I loved music.

I watched famous violinists on TV occasionally, and wondered what I needed to do to be able to play like they did. I could find no words to describe their abilities. In my immature mind, I thought that some kind of "violin mastery" had been instilled into them, and they could make no mistakes. It seemed beyond natural to me—like something out of an X-Men movie.

My teacher continued to gently nudge me to practice more, and highly commended me when I played well. She once told my mother that I played the violin "as if I was born knowing how". Before long, I was practicing for hours almost every night. My skills improved considerably over time.

As my circle of acquaintances in the arena of music widen, I realize that many musicians feel that playing their instruments is not as fluid and easy as it can be, even though they might have been doing so for years. I have been driven to find solutions to the problems players experience at elementary and intermediate level ever since I discovered how many others have the same problems I did. Although violins have been around for years, there's either something still missing—or we've lost something along the way—that's made playing it less straightforward and more difficult. Muscle memory, understanding skills and technical experience are all required to be a good instrumentalist. However, as you gain those skills, playing the violin (or other string instruments) should feel liberating instead of restricting. Sometimes it doesn't.
Music and its creation is no stranger to evolution. Genres, styles and the usage of music evolve constantly over time. Even the ways that instruments are used evolve too. I think that we are on the cusp of another evolution. This evolution will take musicians to new levels of instrumental freedom, using mostly the same techniques that are already known. We are finally realizing how to make our instruments—our violins, violas, cellos—feel like a part of us.
And this time, it won't only be the accomplished grandmasters knowing that feeling.

Every chapter in this book will address a different pivotal, high-leverage point that will bring your string playing closer to becoming natural to you. In each chapter, I'll introduce you to the "tweak", show you how most people don't use it or misuse it, then reveal how it can be used for more intuitive playing. By the end of this book, you will know the few breakthrough tweaks that can be made to your violin playing, that will make it not only easier, but second nature. Playing your violin will soon feel like a skill that's been yours since birth.

Chapter 1

Where To "Aim" Your Fingers

This is an issue that has plagued beginners for centuries past, and sometimes may creep up on the unsuspecting intermediate or even advanced player.
Knowing where to keep your fingers on the fingerboard is a simple task, but the execution and actually KEEPING them in the best place is harder.

My violin teacher used to tell me to "bite" the fingerboard with my fingers. Keep them in a "C" shape over the fingerboard, instead of having them too straight or facing upward.

When placing your hand in playing position, it's crucial that your fingers are over the fingerboard and held in a way that they're ready to quickly press a string, and able to REACH the notes they have to play as well. If they're not, then they won't only take long to hit a note, they'll also be unable to stretch far enough to reach some of them – a horrible issue for some scales on string instruments.

One other tip that can help here is remembering that you need to keep them relaxed – even though they're bent. Think of it as a way of keeping them curved, but not vigorously bent over. If your fingers aren't relaxed, then the tension will cause a plethora of annoying drawbacks, such as taking too long to hit a note and slowing your playing speed, causing pain after extended play, and reducing your playing fluidity. Fluidity is important for many reasons – including the basic enjoyment of playing the instrument. Not to mention, if you aren't fluid, you'd be unable to correct yourself if your intonation is ever off.

Your wrist also plays a part in the angle of the fingers to the fingerboard. The way you use the wrist to your advantage is by keeping it straight – or bending the wrist toward your body. In other words, *avoiding the "lazy wrist" is crucial to you having a good hand posture.* Violinists across the world – beginner, intermediate and even (but rarely) advanced players are guilty of letting the "lazy wrist" sneak into their playing and affect their positions and playing quality. The better you get at this and the more you remind yourself of this, the less it will happen.

The reasons for keeping your fingers in a "C" shape are almost innumerable because of the unbeatable impacts it can have on your playing.

First, having your fingers in that shape allows speed because they'll be "on standby", technically. Your fingers would be positioned to easily attack almost any note, no matter the placement of the note or distance from the finger – even if you're a beginner. One of the reasons why this topic is significant is because speed is something everyone wants, and being flexible with your speed is always a sign of mastery or comfort with the instrument. Plus, having more speed will allow you to play more up-tempo selections. It should be noted that having your fingers in this position also allows you more freedom with faster-paced freestyles. Another reason why finger positioning is significant is because you now have more control of the notes you are able to play.

Second, having your fingers curved widens your range horizontally and vertically. First off, it allows you to be able to hit more strings at will. That means you can go to your G string, hit your A and E strings, then if you feel like going to the D string, it's within reach too. You'll be free of inconsistencies and unwanted obstacles just because some strings might have been far from your reach. Many people blame their lack of reach or speed on themselves, saying they have "small hands" or some other violin-related personal impediment. While it's true that those things can adversely affect the options you have when it comes to note-reach and timing, most of the possibilities lie in the positioning you use. Your vertical reach will also be greatly impacted by this. You'll see an enormous difference. The further notes, that may involve stretching your 4th finger further than usual will become almost normal for you – and eventually unnoticeable.

Key Takeaways:

- Keeping your fingers arched over the fingerboard is always a good choice, as it keeps you ready to hit a note.
- Speed is also increased by arching your fingers over the fingerboard.
- Your finger reach range is widened by keeping them arched while playing.
- Be sure to keep your fingers relaxed, as having a rough, rigorous hold will only decrease your speed – along with making you tire more quickly.

Chapter 2

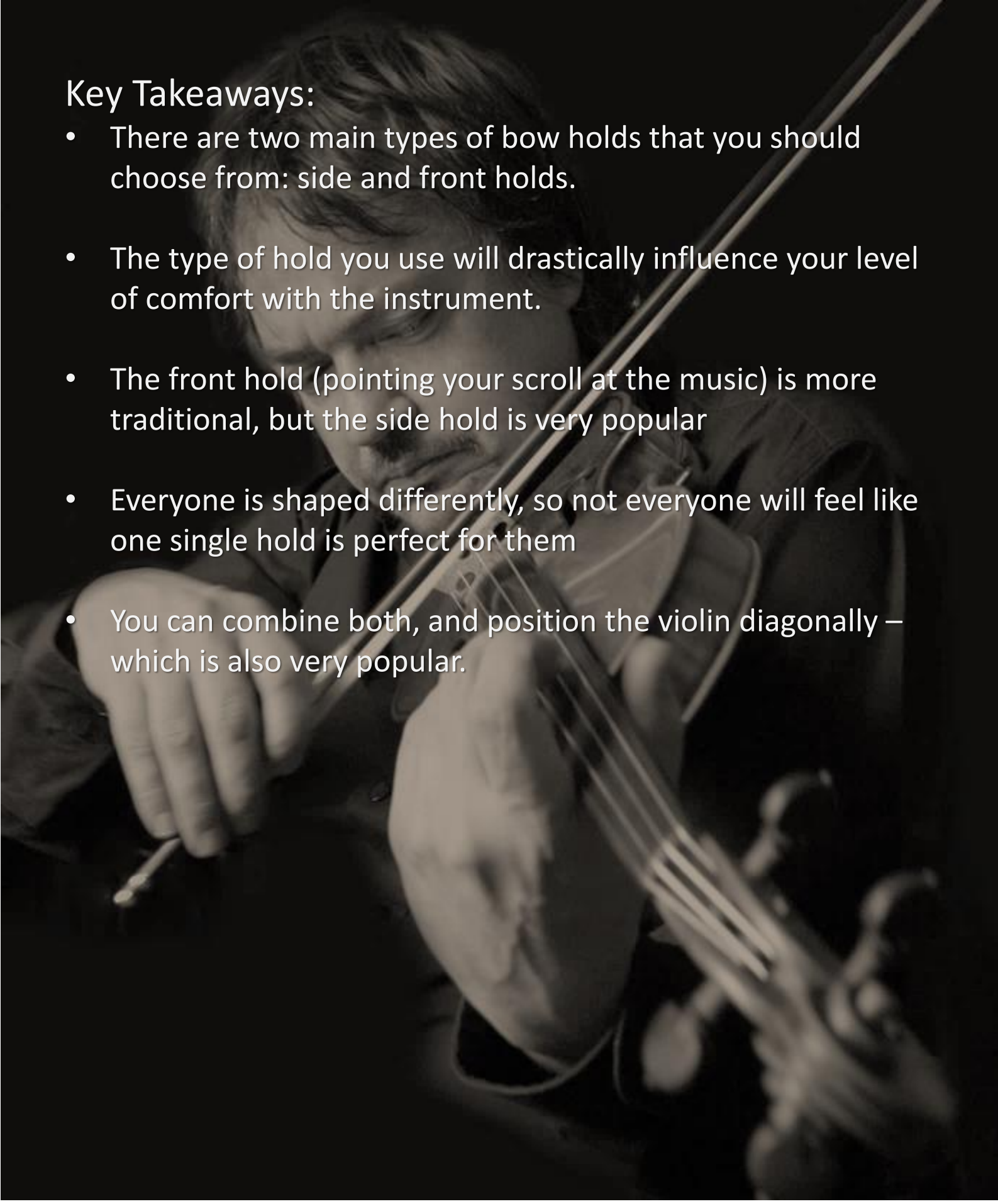
Determine what type of hold suits you

Different people have different shapes and sizes. Not everyone will be able to comfortably hold an instrument like a violin the same way.

Violin holds are not something the typical violinist hears about often. I've heard people talk about how to hold a violin as if there's only one way to do it and it's set in stone. I can understand why it is – the same concept exists for every violin hold, and the same contact points must be utilized the same way. The violin should ideally rest on your **collarbone.** Your elbow should be directly **under** the body of the instrument. Your neck should be relaxed and your head should provide a little gentle weight to keep the instrument in place (*but not enough weight to drill a hole through the instrument with your chin*). The base of your left index finger should be in contact with the right side of the neck, while the left thumb can lightly hug the left side of the neck. These four contact points are the basis of a violin hold. However, my violin teacher once told me that different people have different shapes and sizes – which is actually true. Everyone knows that people are shaped differently, but the impact this could have on how you play your instrument surprised me.

Many people aren't suited for the traditional front hold. In fact, I think it's a bit robotic to try to make it suit you. It can be a rigid, set-in-stone, stiff effort for some, while it can also feel effortless and natural for others. Never assume that what someone else does **has** to work with you. Sure, sometimes what you're doing may be wrong and someone else is doing it right, but sometimes you just have to operate a bit differently in some areas. Very often, musicians have their own way of doing certain things, which is totally fine. Guitarists have different ways of holding their picks. Drummers have different ways of holding their sticks. Music is an art form, and the freer you can be while getting the job done, the better. Remember, the **minimum requirement** of good playing is to be comfortable.

Violin holds can differ – slightly – from person to person. The two main different holds are front holds and side holds. In a front hold, the player aims the scroll directly in front of him/her. The arm reaches forward, and the bow is pulled horizontally. In a side hold, the player aims the scroll diagonally or northwest, and the arm reaches almost out to the side of the player instead of in front. The bow is pulled diagonally as well, almost toward and away from the player or in an "in-and-out" motion.
Being able to choose the optimal one for your body/shoulder type is very beneficial for ease of play.



Key Takeaways:

- There are two main types of bow holds that you should choose from: side and front holds.
- The type of hold you use will drastically influence your level of comfort with the instrument.
- The front hold (pointing your scroll at the music) is more traditional, but the side hold is very popular
- Everyone is shaped differently, so not everyone will feel like one single hold is perfect for them
- You can combine both, and position the violin diagonally – which is also very popular.

Chapter 3

Instrument Placement

It might seem weird, but some people actually aren't suited for just resting their violin/viola on the same place on their collarbone. Some people have unusually long (or short) necks that can't always accommodate a hold on their collarbone in the same way. I'm not saying you have to put it somewhere else (really, where else do we have?), I'm just saying some people have to specify where on their collarbone it needs to be.

I know of a violin teacher (not mine) who was very strict about this. She did not allow any of her students to experiment and be flexible with where they placed their violins. They had to have them neatly tucked into their necks (like a necktie that's tied so tightly that getting oxygen could become a formidable challenge) and it just wouldn't work for some students.

Based on the length of the neck, you may need to place your instrument either closer to the inside of your neck, or more on the edge of your collarbone or even further out toward the shoulder. Longer necked people would typically be more pleased with having it further out, while those with shorter necks may work better with it closer to their body.

Your shoulder position can also vitally aid you in having a better instrument position.

Having your shoulder pivoted either to the right or the left – in a relaxed way, of course. It can give you the little needed boost of position that can close the gap between the violin and your jaw/head. For shorter-necked players, relaxing your shoulder fully and bringing it down can help by relaxing you, and letting any more possible room for the violin be made.

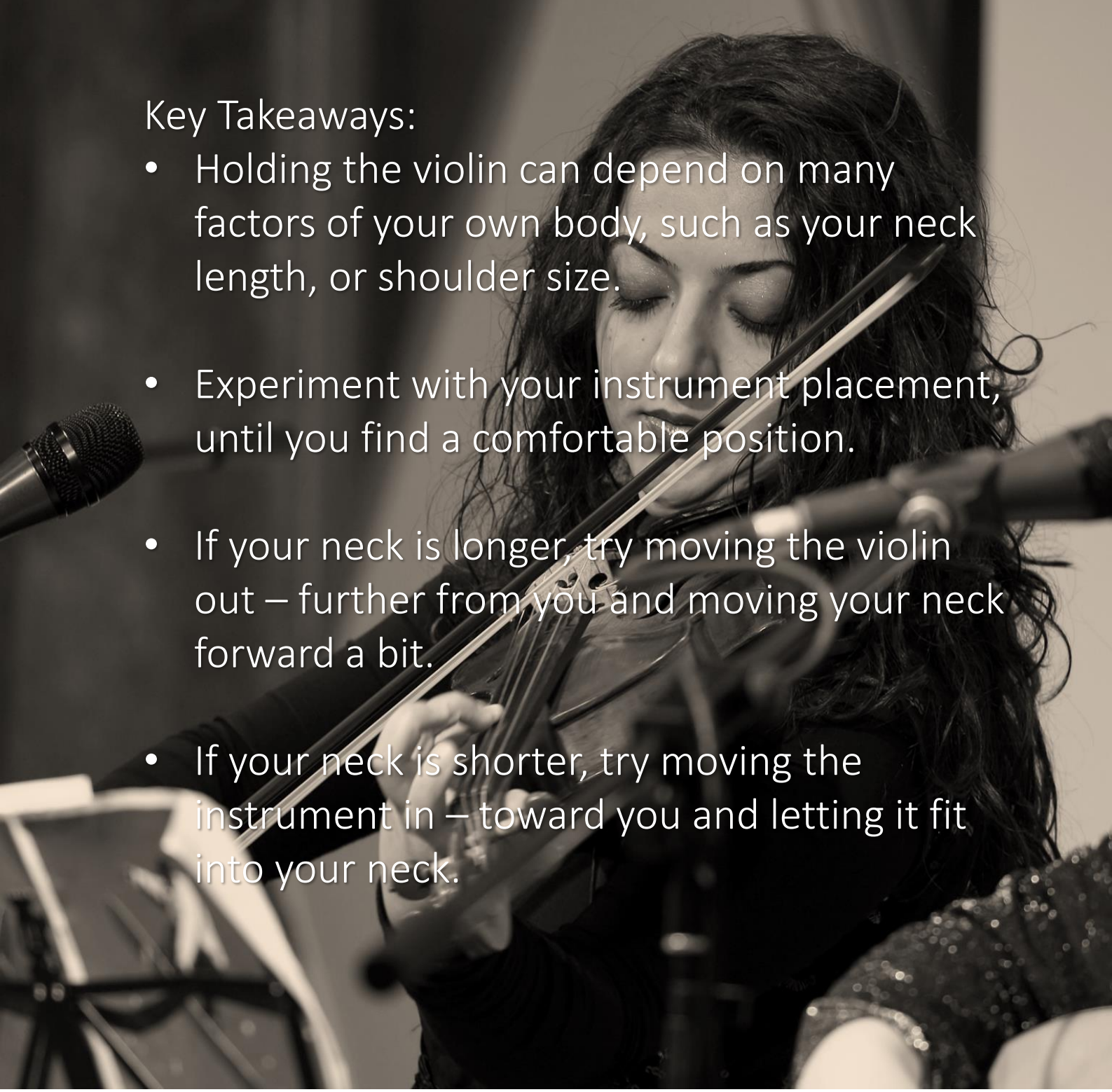
Work with it and find your own sweet spot. Things like these are actually quite customizable. They vastly vary from person to person, which gives you full authority to go wild with it – and find the way that really fits you snugly.

From what I've seen, if you have a longer neck, the best way to tackle this would be to move the violin further out from under your neck. This would give you a little more breathing room and spare you from having to arch down your chin to meet the chin rest (yes, I've seen people with long necks struggle with this). As you move the violin outward, you bring down your chin to meet the chin rest with a slight bend. Now, this helps because it offers some extra stability, and at the same time, allows you to be more comfortable – even though you may be a bit tense at first.

For those with shorter necks, one thing you can do is tuck it under your neck a bit more. This will ease your head movement, because you won't be arching your neck down to your instrument. In some cases, you can actually go with a side hold, and get away with that because the side of the chin rest will contact the side of your chin. This will help you because you have a higher contact point, which will allow your neck more space and give you a bit more breathing room. Another thing you can do is tilt your violin up (point the scroll more upward). This allows the violin to contact your neck and collarbone at an angle – which can also give you some more breathing room.

"The goal here is to be as comfortable as possible with the violin under your chin. You want to be able to put no pressure on your neck or collarbone."

Everything you do in this stage should be aimed at getting a more comfortable hold and an easier way to play while being fluid.
Never try to be a statue while playing. It's always beneficial to have a way to play that makes it easy to express yourself. The more you can express yourself with your body, the better. The goal here is to be as comfortable as possible with the violin under your chin. You want to be able to put no pressure on your neck or collarbone.



Key Takeaways:

- Holding the violin can depend on many factors of your own body, such as your neck length, or shoulder size.
- Experiment with your instrument placement, until you find a comfortable position.
- If your neck is longer, try moving the violin out – further from you and moving your neck forward a bit.
- If your neck is shorter, try moving the instrument in – toward you and letting it fit into your neck.

Some people just aren't suited for having the instrument in exactly the same place on their body.

Chapter 4

Positioning the Bow Arm

As a violin student in Trinidad, I had ups and downs. I had days when I (shamefully!) didn't practice at all during the previous week. My beloved violin teacher would be ecstatic when I arrived and she'd hear me play masterfully; she'd be equally dejected if I came and I felt like I barely knew what I was doing. My violin teacher would look at me, eager for me to unveil and wield my instrument – and I'd be calmly devising ways to **seem** like I touched my instrument **even once.** I was one of her best players.

One day, I walked into her room feeling **especially** lethargic. My left hand position was lazy and limp, my bow arm felt as tired as if my bow weighed **fifty extra pounds**, and to make things worse – my neck was in pain. Something was different that time though. I didn't get the "oh, you didn't practice" gaze from her. Instead, she told me something that would change my view of bow position for a long time – possibly for the rest of my life. She said to move my right shoulder forward (but keep it relaxed), and extend my arm a bit to bring it more in line with the bridge area.

The result was a very straight bow that almost never moved up on the fingerboard or too far back on the bridge. What you can realize from this is that since different people have different shapes, some people may have the violin in different positions. If you pull your bow diagonally, and it's not straight and causes an uneven tone, bring your shoulder forward and extend your arm a bit. **This is especially useful for a side hold.**

Moving your shoulder up **in a relaxed way** can make the world of a difference in how you move your bow, and the tone you get from it. Some of the benefits of a shifted-up shoulder include:

1. Straighter bowing
2. Faster bowing capabilities
3. More fluid bow movements (for that tear-inducing "Meditation from Thais" type of sound)
4. A more consistent, solid tone
5. Easier – and more dynamic – volume control. You have the freedom to press harder on the bow and get a more aggressive sound, and soften the sound more than usual when you're ready.

There is risk, with this approach though. Sometimes, you may slip up and keep your shoulder tense. This can be a grave problem, because tensing your shoulder will cause fatigue while playing for extended periods – and possibly even damage your shoulder.

Always keep in mind the fact that you need to have your body **relaxed** while playing.

Bow arm positioning should not be relegated to instances when:

- You're in the upper echelons of violin studies, and you're focusing on the intricate details that make a player a GREAT player.
- Your teacher is very focused on advanced topics, and adamant that you understand them.

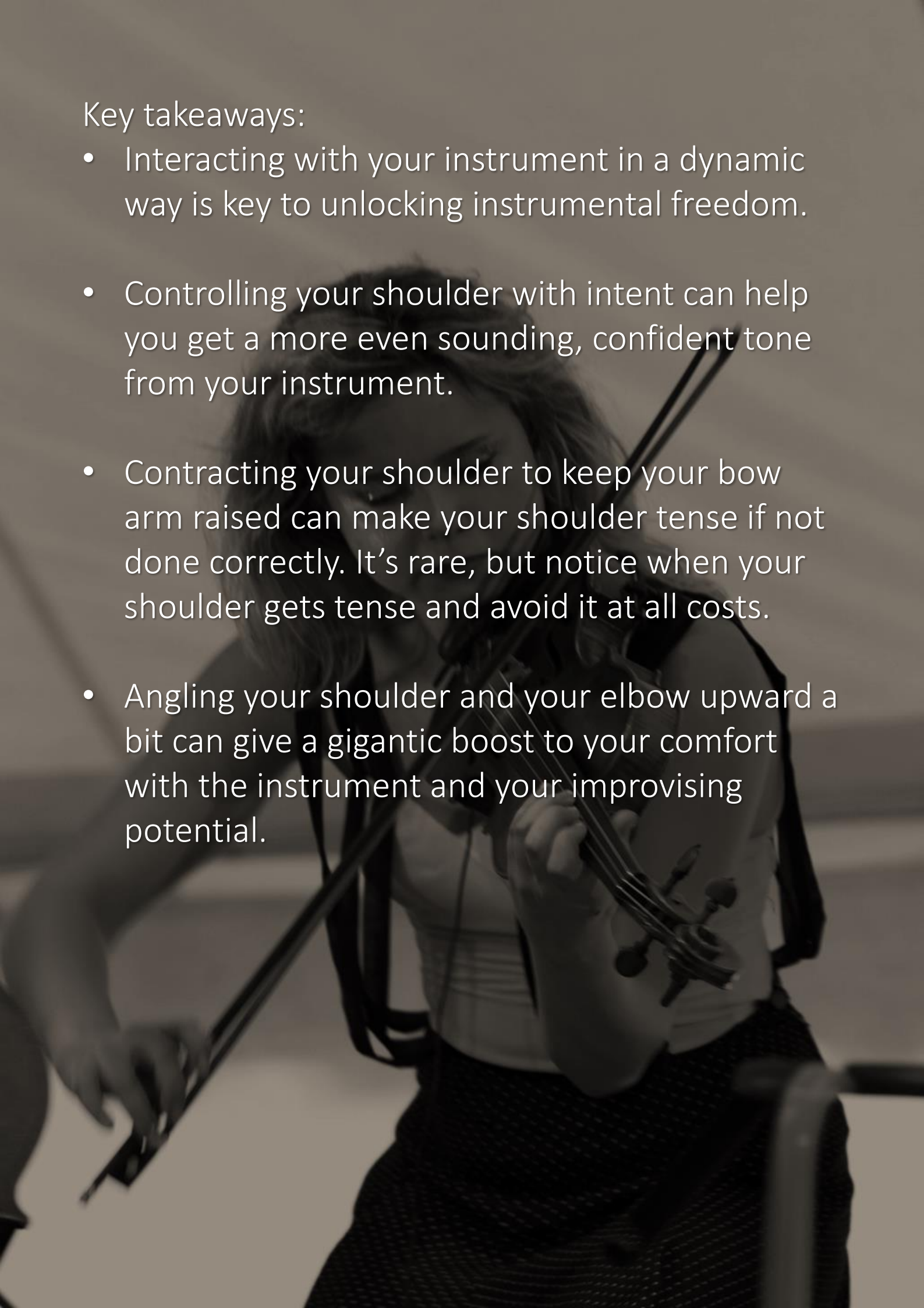
I think it's very counterintuitive for people to focus on bow arm positioning when it comes to advanced topics, because it can have an equally great impact on beginners. It can also help them avoid the small *but important* struggles they'll run into if they don't pay attention to the placement and small details of their bow arm.

Bow arm placement is honestly a very dynamic subject. The important thing about it is that it CAN vary at any time, as you move and tilt your instrument and move around yourself in the process. There's nothing wrong at all with doing that, and it's actually quite helpful to be able to move with your instrument and be comfortable. Part of becoming a virtuoso is being able to move and interact with your instrument in a dynamic way – in a way that your instrument is almost part of you.

"Part of becoming a virtuoso is being able to move and interact with your instrument in a dynamic way."

Moving your shoulder up and around is a very common and practical way of practicing this. I recommend you see your shoulder as a joint that's moveable and **should** be free to move. Keeping a joint like that immobile – one which has such a wide range of motion – is almost making it useless. The stiffer and stricter you are with your shoulder movement, the worse off you will be.
You should aspire to keep your shoulder as mobile as possible, and aim for a contact that always puts the bow as **perpendicular** to the strings as possible, no matter what position or angle the violin is in.

The picture below is a prime example of someone with his shoulder pulled up a bit. Check the angle of the arm, or the shoulder's straightness and start noticing when someone has their shoulder up.



Key takeaways:

- Interacting with your instrument in a dynamic way is key to unlocking instrumental freedom.

- Controlling your shoulder with intent can help you get a more even sounding, confident tone from your instrument.

- Contracting your shoulder to keep your bow arm raised can make your shoulder tense if not done correctly. It’s rare, but notice when your shoulder gets tense and avoid it at all costs.

- Angling your shoulder and your elbow upward a bit can give a gigantic boost to your comfort with the instrument and your improvising potential.

Chapter 5

Hand-Neck Contact

Hand to neck contact is usually covered when telling anyone how to hold a violin. "Contact the first joint of the index finger with the neck of the violin, blah blah blah."

It's good advice – very good advice, in fact. Actually, it's borderline invaluable. The reason for this is that your violin NEEDS a good stable place to rest on where your hand is concerned – and it has to be positioned in a way that you can still comfortably play, with ease and versatility.

Benefits of improving hand-neck contact:

- Allows you to improvise with more freedom and responsiveness.
- Makes it easier to slide up and down the neck, into different positions with more tonal accuracy – this way you don't slide into the wrong note.
- Makes it easier to play in different violin positions, so you can transition from a side hold to a front hold and even a downward or diagonal hold. (One example of this is Bran Fitzy and his freestyle violin playing). This helps with more body-oriented freedom when playing live, moving around and being physically active and multitasking while playing.

Here's the catch, though. Most people do NOT tell you **exactly** where the best place for the first finger and neck contact is, from my experience and many others'. I usually refrain from telling people **exactly** how to position or to do a certain thing, but in this case it's important and applicable enough to do so.

It's right under the first knuckle, a bit under the lowest joint. This varies from person to person on finger length, I've realized. Typically, it allows a lot of finger freedom, since no part of the active finger is jammed against the neck of the violin. Then, this allows you to play with more speed since the finger is free, and as a result, it lets you have more reach as well.

I tend to keep the contact point as low as possible – for the sake of playing freedom, and speed. I recommend the same, no matter how long your fingers may be.

Nevertheless, experiment and augment as much as you may need to, to find your ideal posture and position.

Holding the neck well can be simple, and very impactful.
I see violinists struggling with their holding of the neck so often, yet it's something that should never persist as a problem with any violinist.
Working on hand-neck contact has helped me a great deal when it comes to playing live, playing in different positions, freestyle play (improvisation) and just general versatility.
I had a friend who started playing the violin the same time I did. He was great at theory, but had a problem with a specific skill that seemed like the bane of his existence. He contacted as many violinists as he could that he knew personally. Every violinist had some type of valuable advice to give to him that helped them in their playing journey. My friend practiced, studied and improved his play in incremental amounts with each piece of advice. I took a look at his posture periodically, and made little adjustments to whatever positioning he used. After about a week of doing this, I told him to let the lower side of his knuckle (something he'd never heard before) contact the violin neck. The next week, he was improvising fluently.

Hand to neck contact is one area that I wouldn't call dynamic. There is a very clear "ideal" way of positioning your hand, and it doesn't change much.
However, it revolves more around how you actually feel, than what this seems like on paper. You shouldn't feel like one of your fingers is jammed against the fingerboard and has to work to hit a note.

> You should never have to do work to hit a note.

A friend of mine, who is also a great violinist, gave me some personal advice on this that I think was spot on. He strongly emphasized the importance of being able to leave fingers fully relaxed. He said that **when fingers are not needed**, they are always in the best condition falling limp, just as the average person is when they're about to fall asleep.
I thought this was great advice, because many beginners and intermediates keep their fingers stiff – especially their index finger. They do that because they're putting (and sometimes jamming) their index finger against the neck, but subtly putting the wrong part of the finger against it, restricting it.
The more interesting part is that since they're restricting their index finger – one of their most important fingers, if not the most important one. Such restriction results in a big slowdown on all of the other three fingers. Avoid that at all costs.

Chapter 6

The Vibrato Factor

Vibrato. It's a thing that people absolutely LOVE to hear, LOVE to do, yet struggle to master. I've seen countless violinists stumble on even understanding the idea of vibrato. Many even struggle with understanding how to move their wrist at the same time they move their bowing arm. Unusually, some people catch on extremely quickly and make no mistake when it comes to the execution of good quality vibrato. When I ask them what allows them to understand it so quickly, they have a simple response.

"Vibrato isn't something hard. You need to think about it as a spice rather than an action. It's not something that you're actively engaging in, it's something that you're using to add a slight variation to what you're already engaging in. It's an enhancer." It can be a bit of a complicated reply to some people.

So, I ask them what they mean by that. "Vibrato is easy because you have to NOT think about it. If you think about it, that's when it starts becoming difficult." That was the response of 5 of my students who were the best at vibrato, and as I think about it, I realize it's the truth.

Sure, there's muscle memory involved in vibrato, but that's not the real key to getting strong vibrato. Most people try different ways to move their finger back and forth – creating the vibrato-ish sound – and then they just stick with whatever seems to work for them. This isn't the ideal thing to do for a few reasons: One, you totally rely on your muscle memory. Two, there's very little technique involved, and three, there's almost no space for you to customize the type of vibrato sound you create.

Instead of blindly trying to move your finger back and forth and going with what sticks, there's a way to obtain the most effective traits of masterful, strong vibrato. I've studied many great violinists, and found what they all have in common when they execute great vibrato. We call them the foundational vibrato guidelines. I've used them myself, then gone on to teach it to my students, and observe how they improved with them. So far, many of my students have shown huge improvements from knowing these guidelines alone, whether they were already great at vibrato or just learning it.

Why does vibrato have guidelines?

By observing many of the world's greatest violinists and violists, you can always notice trends. The violin is a very free instrument – it has no frets and nothing to help you 'figure out' how to play it. That being said, there isn't an exact best way to play the instrument, but we can get closer to an ideal way. This 'ideal way' would be the way that get us the best-sounding results the easiest.

Since we can aim for an 'ideal way' to play, one of the easiest ways to build up that method would be to find things that successful sounding playing and techniques have in common. As we look for these cues, we can try them out ourselves. If they work repeatedly and prove to consistently have a positive effect on our playing, then we can start using them to improve at will. The foundational vibrato guidelines are simple, effective guidelines that won't force you to play differently, but will positively impact your playing.

We know that many violinists stick with the first thing that works for them when they try to learn vibrato, but simply knowing the wrong thing isn't enough. What should we do instead, then?

The first thing that is required when it comes to vibrato is knowing where to place your focus. Vibrato is a unique technique, because it cannot stand on its own like trills or pizzicato. Vibrato is a note enhancer, and it's never the main focus of your fingering hand.

If you focus on moving your finger back and forth too much, it will take up too much of your mental space. This will distract you from the rest of the piece, and cause your timing and rhythm to fall in quality. In addition to that, focusing on vibrato too much will also ruin your intonation if you're not careful.

Instead, focus as little as possible on the motion of your finger. It might seem like a bit of an empty piece of advice, but I can assure you that it's effective. You'll want to focus more of your attention on the note you're playing and your rhythm and timing. Keep your mind off of the vibrato. For reference, about 10-20 percent of your mind should be on vibrato. 30-40 percent of your mind should be on the notes you're going to play (or your sheet music) and the rest of your mind should be on the notes you are playing and your bowing.

The reason why this works is because of the role of vibrato. As a note enhancer, it's best performed intuitively, without much focus. Focusing less on it allows you to make the main note stronger as well as develop your bowing better while you're playing. (Ever heard someone's bowing get soft and scratchy when they're distracted from playing? You want to avoid that.) As your bowing and fingering is stronger, you'll want to then start the 'back-and-forth' finger movement – which we'll cover later on, and make that as easy as possible too.

For now, the first guideline of vibrato is to not focus on it. The more you mentally focus on vibrato, the weak you make your playing. Instead, treat it as a muscular movement that you don't think about – like walking.

How many guidelines are there?

Four. At least there are four right now – we're always making more and adding to our list of things that makes vibrato easy and high-quality.

A large part of vibrato depends on your playing posture. If your posture is off, you can forget performing vibrato well because your finger movement largely depends on your wrist position, fingering arm elbow position, and your hand-neck contact.

The best way to internalize these guidelines is to work on them one at a time.

A simple way to practice keeping your mind off your vibrato is to practice your wrist movement while doing other things.

Flex your wrist forward (make your knuckles face you) and backward (make them face away from you) while doing things like watching TV, walking down the street, and other things. It'll gradually ease vibrato and the movement will become more ingrained – even if it's difficult for you. You can do this for other vibrato types too, and we'll discuss that soon.

The second guideline is all about posture. There's nothing that makes good vibrato more impossible than bad posture. However, some aspects of posture are more important to vibrato than others. Your wrist (which is a hugely important factor in your vibrato) cannot afford to be affected by bad posture. The same goes for your arm, elbow, and hand-neck contact. Wrist position, however, is by far the most critical and most often badly-positioned aspect of posture.

I'm quite sure you've seen violinists play with their wrist bent, up against the neck of the violin. You probably held your head down in shame or immediately pointed it out. You've also probably done it at some time, too. (I have too, don't worry I won't judge.) That's what happens when we allow laziness to take over. We let our wrist stop holding our hand up, and we let it slump down to the neck of the violin, where the violin lays on the limp wrist. There are many reasons why that's a bad habit to have your wrist bent like that, but one of them is that it absolutely kills your vibrato.

The reason why allowing your wrist to be bent back kills your vibrato is because vibrato depends on your fingers having space to move. Vibrato is created when your fingertip moves back and forth on a string, and the slight variation in pitch makes an alternating, vibrating sound. That being said, for vibrato to happen, we'll need your finger to be able to move. Your fingertip will have to be on the string, so that it can roll or pivot back and forth. When your wrist is bent back, it forces your fingers to lie to the side and contact the strings from a different angle. From that angle, your fingertip will likely not be the only thing touching the string, giving your finger less freedom and space to move.

To straighten your wrist, there are a couple things you can do. First, you can just remember it**. You can imagine there's a string pulling your wrist away from you constantly – which has proved to be a helpful enough que for most people.** However, there is one other way that my students find extremely helpful: **move your elbow up. Just tilt your upper arm up, making your elbow move up or forward.** That forces your wrist to jam against the violin neck and helps you keep it straight.

"Bad wrist position is one of the biggest vibrato killers."

Now it's time to dive deeper into performing vibrato. First, you should know that there are three types of vibrato – finger vibrato, wrist vibrato and arm vibrato. They're named after the part of your body that causes the 'back-and-forth' fingertip motion. The most popular type is wrist vibrato, then arm vibrato, and finger vibrato is the least performed – often because some people feel it's an incorrect type of vibrato (however it IS the most incorrectly performed type).

First, let's go into the next general guideline. No matter what type of vibrato you want to perform, this guideline will be front-and-center in your technique.

The goal of performing vibrato is to move your fingertip back-and-forth while it's on the string. What you want to avoid is putting energy into moving your fingertip backward and forward. **Instead, you want to use energy to move your fingertip forward (toward you) only, and then let it move backward by relaxing.**

Now let's see how this applies in each vibrato type. To perform finger vibrato, you press slightly harder on the fingerboard, and then relax the finger. Pressing harder is what causes a vertical 'forth' motion, and relaxing it causes the 'back' motion, which creates the sound of vibrato. It's the simplest type of vibrato, yet often misused because people either press too hard, curl their finger against the fingerboard or tilt their wrist while doing all of that.

To perform wrist vibrato, flex your wrist toward you (try to bring your knuckles toward your face) and then relax it – while playing a note. What that will do is cause the angle of contact of your fingertip on the string to change, resulting in the fingertip rolling forward and backward. That causes a smooth vibrato sound that is easy to control.

To perform arm vibrato, slightly pull your entire forearm toward you, then relax it, letting it return to its original position. This results in your fingertip's contact on the string to roll backward and forward, creating vibrato.

How to use each type of vibrato

Every type of vibrato has slightly different uses. Why? The reason why is because some types of vibrato naturally have different types of sound. Finger vibrato sounds the most abrupt and noticeable. Wrist vibrato sounds subtle and bold. Arm vibrato typically sounds the most gentle.

Generally, when you're playing at faster tempos, you'll want to use finger vibrato because it's the easiest to use quickly. It sounds great when used in small bursts, and it does not require much preparation in your arm or wrist.

Wrist vibrato requires very good wrist posture, and will be significantly more difficult if you have it in a sub-par position. You can use wrist vibrato any time you want, because it can be very easily varied and tailored to your desired sound.

Arm vibrato is the most difficult type of vibrato. It's the hardest to control, and very often doesn't product the most striking sound. Arm vibrato is more suited to slow, emotional, subtle pieces of music.

Chapter 7

Bowing Setup

Roles of the Fingers

When thinking about bowing, many people are only concerned about holding the bow in place so that it doesn't fall out of their hand. While that is a sensible goal, it's definitely not the only thing you should be thinking about. This approach lets you miss out on so much potential that you could have with your tone, sound quality and even rhythm. I believe that every part of your body that touches the instrument has a special part to play in making music with it.

When watching any seasoned professional or virtuoso, you get the feeling like they're not even trying to play the instrument. They make it look easy. That wouldn't be possible if they're just holding their instrument like everyone else, would it? If that were the case, then they would just sound amazing by chance. If that's not the case, then their decades of practice must have helped them. The thing is, their extensive practice helped them do exactly what everyone else is not doing, even if the virtuoso is unaware of it.

The good news is that we can fast-track our progress by breaking down what professionals unconsciously do. We can take those little things that are only built up by practice and actually develop them faster. One of the central things vital to your violin playing when it's well-developed is the way you hold and use the bow.

The Thumb

The thumb has the most basic job of all of the fingers of the bow: to support it. The thumb goes on the bump of the frog. It doesn't need to slide between the narrow space in the frog, just on the edge. Your thumb should apply a bit of pressure upward toward the bow stick. I believe that it doesn't matter much whether it's straight or slightly bent.

The Index Finger

Every finger that touches the bow has a unique role to play in balancing the bow, and creating a strong sound. Let's start with the index finger.

The index finger is most people's most dominant finger. It's used to point, lead, direct others and many other actions. There's a reason for this. The index finger is also the most independent finger on the hand. Most people have no problem moving their index finger independently in any direction, unlike their little finger or ring fingers. This contributes to the index finger's importance.

The main role of the index finger is to help direct the bow and control volume. Since it has so much independence, it can take a more active role in controlling the bow. This finger comes into play when you want to adjust the direction you're moving the bow in, or if you want to adjust the volume of the sound you're creating.

The way the index finger impacts the bow is through slight pressure. When the finger is on the bow, you can apply a little pressure to the bow through it. This pressure acts as a very precise volume control for the violin's sound through the bow. You can also apply this pressure across the bow to move it if you want a straighter bow stroke. Perhaps, though, the most important function of the index finger is to help hold the bow in place.

The Middle Finger

This finger is also extremely instrumental in managing the bow. In fact, there are rumors being passed down right now about secrets used by violinists of old that helped them perfect their skill, centered around this finger. One of those violinists was Niccolo Paganini, who is widely respected as the best, if not one of the best violinist that ever lived. There's a story about him holding a stick or pencil in his bowing hand and using that as practice for holding the bow. Why would someone do that? Surprisingly, there is a sensible reason for it. Holding a pencil in your bowing hand allows you to get a smaller-scale feeling for the forces that each finger puts on the bow. You get to understand balance and get a deeper view of the fingers' roles.

The middle finger's role is to keep the bow balanced. The middle finger pushes down against the thumb to neutralize the thumb's force and keep the bow stable. Some schools of thought teach that you should be able to hold the bow and keep it stable with only your thumb and middle fingers touching it.

The Third Finger (Ring Finger)

This finger adds supporting forces to the bow, much like the middle finger. It sits next to the middle finger, so the force it exerts is very similar to it. There's a small difference, though: the focus here is more to hold the bow than to help the middle finger push against the thumb. Together, these two fingers provide a broad force that creates a secure bow hold when the thumb is involved.

The Fourth Finger (Little/Pinky Finger)

The little finger or pinky is also important. It plays a central role in volume control just like the index finger. In addition, the role of the little finger is often misunderstood. People tend to use it to assist with holding the bow, but that's not its job. Its job is to provide a small supporting force, balancing the bow against the index finger and assisting with volume control.

Finger Placement

Thumb:

As before, the thumb goes on the bump of the frog. It doesn't need to slide between the narrow space in the frog, just rest on the edge. Your thumb should apply a bit of pressure upward toward the bow stick. I believe that it doesn't matter much whether it's straight or slightly bent. This allows it to do its job and stay stable, while providing a steady base for you to hold the bow.

Index Finger:

The index finger should be on top of the bow stick, and rest on the bow grip. The first to second joint should contact the grip of the bow (the subtle little rubber part) and your finger should naturally curl around it.

Middle Finger:

The middle finger should rest on the white dot (the "eye") of the side of the frog facing away from you. It should apply a bit of pressure on the bow to counteract the thumb's pressure. You shouldn't force the positioning too much or else it'll feel too unnatural.

Third Finger:

The third finger should sit next to the middle finger and apply slightly less pressure. The two fingers should be both on the eye or have a little space between them.

Little Finger:

The fingertip of the little finger should be on top of the bow stick, right before the screw. You want to avoid letting this finger touch the screw of the bow as much as possible, because that will result in less bow control and a dull sound. Normally, this finger should apply very little pressure. The only time you'd apply more pressure to the bow is when attempting to lower the volume and play more softly. Applying more pressure with the little finger takes pressure away from the index finger, resulting in a softer sound.

Finger Pressure

Thumb:

Here's a quick recap of the pressures created by the fingers:

Thumb: The thumb creates a basic pressure that keeps the bow up and acts as a pivot (or fulcrum) that the other fingers can apply pressure around to manipulate the bow's action.

Middle finger: The middle finger applies a neutralizing pressure against the thumb, so they both hold the bow in place together.

Third finger: The third finger/ring finger applies neutralizing pressure as well, along with the middle finger to help the bow remain stable.

Index finger: The index finger directs the bow and applies pressure to control the volume of the sound of the strings.

Little finger: The little finger applies supporting pressure and creates pressure against the index finger, also assisting in volume control and creating a softer sound.

The violin is the smallest of the string instrument family. In the hands of an accomplished player, the violin can make one's heart ache with uncertainty, pulsate with anticipation, or relax to it's smooth, lulling sounds.

It's pure joy to listen, and observe as a violinist deftly interprets cultural realities. The player injects his/her own peculiar color into the music of our time, environment, diverse population, and moves us physically and mentally.

Playing the violin does not have to be limited to some of the stereotypes that many people have placed on it. Violin playing can have the attitude of trap music, the power of big room EDM, or the sharp shock of salsa.

When you pick up your violin, take the limits off, and use the guidelines found in this book as you constantly evolve and hone your skills.

This is what music is about. This is what string supremacy is about. (This by no means implies that string instruments are superior to any other. We love all instruments here.)

There are two kinds of musicians. Those who find ways to express anything – and everything – that they want to in almost any way, and those who stick to the rules, play instruments the way they were told they "should" be played, and never venture into musical freedom. It's your choice.

You have the freedom to make instruments speak any language.

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This book was built upon observations of how people interact with their instruments, and how our bodies respond to the act of playing them. This book is also the beginning of a budding change of tone towards how we play our instruments. It is by no means the end, or a conclusion drawn from any findings. It's the beginning.
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