

THOUGHTS THAT COUNT

Violinist and Alexander technique specialist **Alun Thomas** details pathways to effortless expression using three real-life student examples

Over the course of the recent lockdowns I've been re-evaluating some of the fabulous body of violinistic exercises and methods – and how, possibly, we might use them more profitably. These comprise, among others, the studies and methods of such luminaries as Auer, Capet, Dounis and Stolyarsky, as well as the publications of more recent pedagogues such as Galamian and Rolland – whose work, in particular, I have presented in workshops and masterclasses. Nowadays, we might also add excellent and deservedly popular resources such as *Basics* by Simon Fischer.

All these methods serve to inform us wonderfully well about the essential building blocks of playing – and sometimes the larger patterns. But I often feel they don't consider in necessary detail the higher levels of neuromuscular organisation, particularly the way in which thinking itself might inform violinistic action. It is an understanding of the deep, collaborative, psychophysical processes involved in how we perform any exercise – the 'invisible' inner dynamics of a consciously directed 'use' of ourselves – that helps harmonise mind and muscle. In our individual bid to actualise our playing aspirations, it is this immanent agenda that makes all the difference.

Great players are often so impressive because of the wonderful ease that defines their playing. This appears to be, in large part, a result as much of what they *don't* do as it is of what they actually do. This profound sense of 'non-doing' is a central



ILLUSTRATION 1
Many violinists lose balance through an uneven distribution of weight on their feet

operational principle of the Alexander technique, and this non-doing, paradoxically, does not mean 'nothing doing'. It's always a puzzle trying to figure out why similar pedagogic strategies and methods can result in players of wildly differing skill; and why we or our pupils can progress at such differing rates – swiftly at times, haltingly at others.

For students, teachers and performers, one route to making sense of this conundrum is to engage with a process of clear, constructive, consciously directed attention. This is a mental process involving a projected *active wish* that seeks to encourage actions we desire – and, importantly, inhibit any actions we seek to stem. In terms of avoiding too much muscular effort, this helps to make sense of Frederick Matthias Alexander's acute observation that in learning new skills we need to stop doing the wrong things first – before adding anything else on top!

To make clearer violinistic decisions that are more consistent with inherent neuromuscular structure and function, it is important to focus on integrating small muscle skills, 'partial patterns', with the intrinsic support of the dynamic relationship between the head, neck, back and legs.

To play with good 'use', we need to create a stable platform for the violin from the ground up. Supported by the collarbone and arm from below, the violin is never fixed but able to respond to the full spectrum of the bow's dynamic energy in such a way that this is not dissipated. Tighten your neck

habitually and you will lose vital proprioceptive input – a sense of where you are or even who you are – and the ability to move your head freely. Lock your knees and ankles, and the ground reaction force, gravity's fabulous freebie, will be unavailable in helping you stand tall without effort. Indirectly, these factors have a huge collective influence on our chances of enjoying the positively reinforcing nature of higher-level skill.

Teaching directives such as 'use your back,' 'use the weight of your arm,' 'lead with the fingers,' 'lead with the elbow,' 'keep your balance,' 'shift by moving your arm first', or the ubiquitous but practically useless admonition to 'relax' (tension is only ever redistributed, never 'lost'), can be more fully realised if the arms are understood as true ambassadors of the back. This mutually supportive relationship starts at ground level. As Charles Sherrington, the highly influential neurophysiologist put it so succinctly: 'To take a step is an affair, not of this or that limb solely, but of the total neuromuscular activity of the moment, not least of the head and neck.'

As I attempt to demonstrate in the following case studies, violin playing involves the whole of ourselves, and any action we take to improve individual skills should take this fact fully into account.

PATHWAY ONE: GRAVITY, OUR CONSTANT ACCOMPANIST CASE STUDY 1 – SIMON

Simon often struggles to present his playing in what he considers the best light under the objectifying gaze of an audience, as he perceives it. Although he is a capable player, the stimulus of auditions, exams and performances tends to reveal serious insecurities in his playing. Helping him become aware of his 'end-gaining' – his overwhelming anxiety to 'get it right' – and noticing how this relates to a loss of an easy balance and energetic relationship with the ground has proved invaluable in addressing and solving these and other violinistic issues.

Simon takes Mozart's Violin Concerto no.5 in A major K219 and plays the Allegro aperto of the solo exposition (**example 1**). Differences of opinion about musical gesture and characterisation aside, Simon's playing is full of minor textual errors, rhythmic instability, muddy intonation and insecure shifts. It is, despite his obvious ability, musically incoherent. In playing for me, he might appear to have registered a challenge to his sense of self – the experience, perhaps, of being tested, rather than of 'giving'. I sense an overarching, causative thread of 'over-doing' which is spoiling his playing, and decide that an exploration of his basic balance will be key in uncovering and eventually solving his problems.

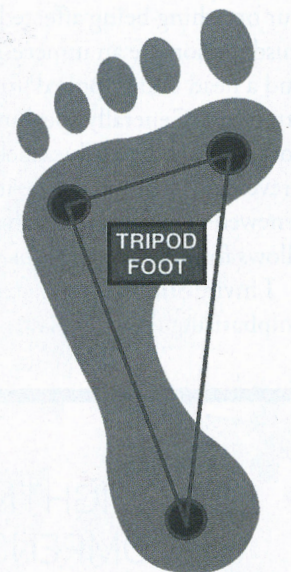
GREAT PLAYERS ARE OFTEN SO IMPRESSIVE BECAUSE OF THE EASE THAT DEFINES THEIR PLAYING. THIS IS A RESULT AS MUCH OF WHAT THEY *DON'T* DO AS IT IS OF WHAT THEY ACTUALLY DO

'GREAT PLAYING STARTS AT THE FEET'

That is violinist Pinchas Zukerman's opinion, and (agreeing completely with his observation) I often suggest, rather drily, that violinists sometimes seem not to have legs. The hefty wear on the outside of Simon's shoes is a clear indication of the precarious foundational platform he reveals in his playing and more generally. The inseparability of physical, mental and emotional balance is laid bare: Simon's performance behaviour resembles someone skating on thin ice (**illustration 1**).

In common with many players, Simon has a tendency to lose the balance under his feet – an easy three-point contact (involving the so-called foot tripod, *right*) – at just the point where it is needed for maximum stability.

This lack of easy balance stimulates to varying degrees a subtle form of what physiologists and Alexander teachers call the 'startle pattern': neck clenched, head pressed back and down, legs and arms extended and stiffened, breath held. The ribs fix in response, restricting free movement in breathing and the visual field, as overall awareness is narrowed. ▶



The three contact points needed for good balance

EXAMPLE 1 Mozart Violin Concerto no.5 – I. Allegro aperto, bars 46–51





ILLUSTRATION 2
Playing with tension in 'startle pattern' is a modified panic reaction, like slowly slipping on a banana skin

Like slipping slowly on a banana skin, it is a modified panic reaction and is, surprisingly, more common than we might imagine in the practice room and on the stage (**illustration 2**).

Another process that sometimes mimics this effect is 'concentration'. 'To concentrate' originally meant 'to bring towards a central point', but in order to realise our musical intentions, it's so important that we maintain an expanded field of awareness and do not misdirect our efforts. As well as our breathing being affected, other common signs of this misdirection are an unnecessarily furrowed brow, lip-pursing and a head that is 'poked' forward towards the object of our attention. Generally speaking, overtightness in one area is compensated by undue slackness in another. Working to prevent all this well before it starts to appear can lead to a renewed sense of joy in playing – a refinement in skill that allows for more musical insight.

I invite Simon into an exploration of 'balance under the feet', emphasising that this is not in any way an attempt to feel or

OVERTIGHTNESS IN ONE AREA
IS COMPENSATED BY UNDUE
SLACKNESS IN ANOTHER.
WORKING TO PREVENT THIS
CAN LEAD TO A RENEWED
SENSE OF JOY IN PLAYING

find 'the correct balance' – to promise any such thing would be to invite more misconception. 'Trying to feel' is a most insidious contradiction, but just coming to an awareness of where we are contains within it the means to lessen habits' hold on us.

Exploring the slight changes in foot contact and the muscular 'tensing' (balance reactions) that is engaged to stop us falling over, Simon describes 'holding on to the front' of the thighs when leaning slightly back from his ankles, and arms that 'stop moving' when at the 'point of no return' just before falling. Leaning forward will elicit in most of us similar bracing, as well as more universally specific tightening in and behind the toes (**illustration 3**).

Interestingly, the area behind the toes is of crucial importance in enabling tightrope walkers – like Charles Blondin pictured crossing Niagara Gorge (*right*) – to maintain balance. Together with the anterior parts of the heel, this area describes a mechanically advantageous three-point balance for violinists within which to work (as illustrated in the foot diagram on page 45).



The next step is to discover how much movement is possible without losing the three-point contact: forwards and backwards, to the right and to the left – in all directions. If free movement in the ankles and knees is allowed, it is pleasantly surprising just how much >



ILLUSTRATION 3
Exploring balance reactions to slight changes in foot contact points

ILLUSTRATIONS ADELAIDE ZAT



ILLUSTRATION 4
Discovering how much movement is possible without losing the three-point contact in the feet

WHEN THE LEGS ARE FREE TO MOVE AS WE PLAY, THE STABILITY AND STRENGTH OF THE BACK IS ENHANCED, ALSO ALLOWING BETTER POISE OF THE HEAD ON THE NECK

movement can be enjoyed before any tightening balance reactions kick in.

An important direction that ensures the legs are not pulled together or stiffened is to 'send' the knees over the second toes (see **illustration 4**). A purely preventative direction (not involving any placement, 'doing' or 'correct' stance), it helps create the best conditions for good overall balance. And when the legs are free to move as we play, the stability and strength of the back is enhanced, also allowing better poise of the head on the neck. Finding their place in this hierarchy and chain of connection, the arms and hands become true ambassadors of the back – and the music.

Simon now replays his Mozart, stopping and starting at strategic points, for example at each shift or after each group of four semiquavers (♩), to notice deviations from easy three-point contact and redirect it accordingly. His playing starts to transform, this process being intrinsically self-correcting. By revealing unnecessary balance reactions, the negative aspects of musical anticipation can be stemmed in real time, allowing a sense of space and, in this case, a clean string change to the top D immediately after the descending semiquavers.

Simon reports, with a hint of swagger, that he is enjoying a new sense of stature (**illustration 5**). He is standing straight without strain and his knees are free to bend if he chooses. He is achieving the control that he seeks in the process of 'not doing'. In more ways than one, he is back on his feet.



ILLUSTRATION 5
Standing straight and without strain gives the player greater control

ILLUSTRATIONS ADELAIDE IZAT

PATHWAY TWO: PRESS WITHOUT PRESSING CASE STUDY 2 – JOANNA

Joanna already has a hectic schedule as a student violinist. She has made great progress in her Alexander lessons, but she is concerned that her violin playing still lacks colour and dynamic range and she has been exploring new ways to handle the bow in an effort to remedy this perceived lack. She also reports that in her efforts to play louder – and more quietly in the orchestra – she has started to feel more tense as she plays, and her arms feel tired and achy at the end of a practice session.

HOW DO YOU PRESS? ENGAGING WITH THE 'ACTIVE WISH'

Standing quietly behind a table, in front of a chair, Joanna is engaging in some constructive thinking – noticing the balance under her feet, 'asking' her head to ease upwards, so allowing the whole of the 'middle' of her body, the trunk, to lengthen. Knees are thought 'forward and away' from each other, preventing them from being pulled together or braced back – a common pattern generally, and in the standing violinist particularly.

Joanna folds her knees forward under the table as she comes to sit, maintaining good body-length. I stress the importance of giving time to each discrete action and maintaining an easy attention on her surroundings and the whole of herself. The next step is to explore what happens when a finger – any finger – is pressed down into the tabletop.

Joanna's first attempts at pressing a finger into the tabletop reveal many patterns also present in her playing. The process of giving attention to herself as a whole as she presses a single finger into the tabletop is unusual for her. It's a steep but vital learning curve.

For many people, a request to 'press' results in a general stiffening throughout the trunk and limbs – especially the

biceps and neck. This stops the free flow of energy from the back to the arms and vice versa. Moreover, it is extremely tiring and potentially damaging in the longer term. I have never come across anyone suffering with tendonitis or painful arms who was able to press into the table without a general tightening throughout the neck, back and legs, and this is the case with Joanna.

In **figure 1**, my hands and arms are placed on the table in such a way that they describe the six sides of a hexagon. 'Asking' for length on each side encourages a coordinated expansion that enlivens the back and enhances the connection of the arms into my back.

It seems that everyone's challenge in using the fingers is to minimise the work of the biceps (flexors) and thus reconnect the arms into the back. For any string player, finding extensor length before practising is a very valuable warm-up.

In **figure 2**, I am supporting the violin on a gently extended arm, lengthening out through the fingers and building a sense of its connection deep into my back. When I fold my arm back in, ready to start playing, length is remembered and muscles are primed to start working from a greater resting length. (In the words of Alexander: 'You cannot lengthen a human being really, but you can in the sense of *undoing* the shortening.')

Similarly, when 'pressure' is properly applied, there will be no feeling of tightness or heaviness but a mutually supportive connection between hands and back. It will seem as if the 'hexagon' is starting to expand. In fact, the harder the 'press' the greater the opportunity for release and expansion throughout the whole self. Hands, thus, become true ambassadors of the back – not deceitful emissaries attempting to steal the limelight! >

FIGURE 1 Hands and arms placed to form a hexagon

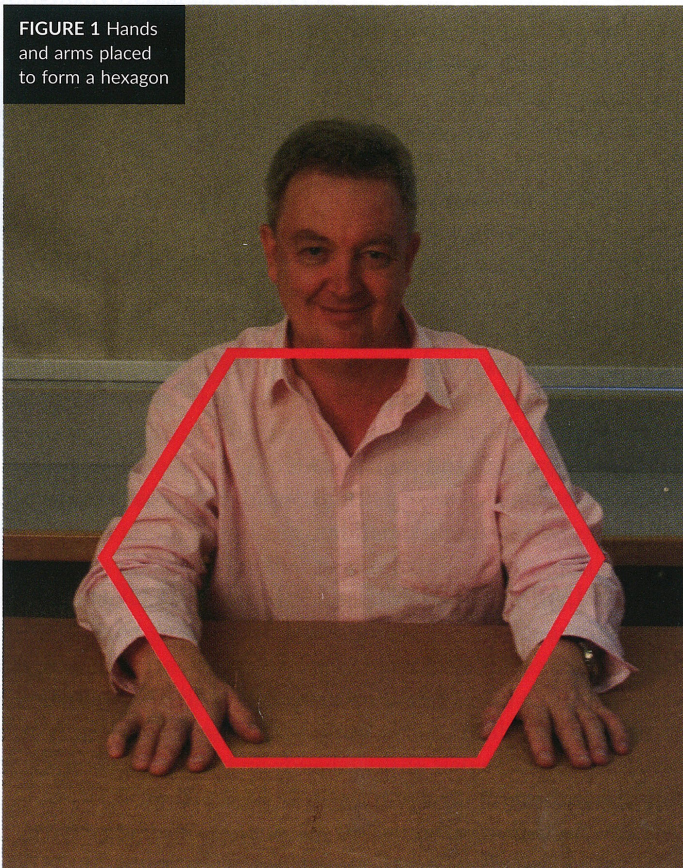


FIGURE 2 Supporting the violin on a gently extended arm



FOR MANY PEOPLE, A REQUEST TO 'PRESS' RESULTS IN A GENERAL STIFFENING THROUGHOUT THE TRUNK AND LIMBS – ESPECIALLY THE BICEPS AND NECK



FIGURE 3 The Franco-Belgian bow hold



FIGURE 4 The Russian bow hold

Repeating the process of pressing a finger into the tabletop, Joanna starts to access different muscular pathways. In connecting her arms to her back in such a way that her shoulders do not block the free flow of energetic thought, her back starts to 'breathe' and expand due to the counterpressure from the table's surface. The difference is that 'global' support for the fingers is now engaged. This exploration can be repeated in different rhythms, with varying degrees of pressure across all the fingers and thumbs of both hands.

Joanna starts to make connections between bow speed and pressure, uncovering more power and colour almost as a by-product. The phrase 'having hands of steel and arms like spaghetti' is a useful aide-memoire for violinists as it reminds them of this ultra-efficient, energy-saving system and is foundational in basic détaché in all dynamics and articulated bowing styles, namely, martelé, portato-type strokes and accents, as well as in left-hand articulation and finger independence.

The easily recognisable external shapes made by fingers, hands or arms – for example, in the Franco-Belgian (figure 3) and so-called Russian (figure 4) bow holds reveal only half their story if the underlying matrix of elastic support throughout the body has not been inculcated. Joanna has started to see that it's far more important to look for better conditions generally than to apply predefined positions of the left or right hand, however cleverly explained they are or brilliantly they may appear to work for some.

THE PHRASE 'HAVING HANDS OF STEEL AND ARMS LIKE SPAGHETTI' IS A USEFUL AIDE-MEMOIRE FOR VIOLINISTS

PATHWAY THREE: CREATING MULTIPLE POSSIBILITIES IN PLAYING – 'IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO HAVE A PREVIEW OF THE UNKNOWN' CASE STUDY 3 – JAMES

Branching out into a new and more challenging repertoire, James reveals that he feels inadequate in his ability to 'get around' the violin. In particular, he has developed a fear of wide shifts from one end of the fingerboard to the other, despite his conscientious approach in practising scales and studies. I engage with his concerns by encouraging him to think differently about 'action' in general – and live a little more dangerously into the bargain.

Drawing on images of powerful multi-armed creatures such as those from Hindu and Greek mythology, including the former's Durga (right), has a wide metaphorical application for string players and can yield a change in our conceptions of ease in movement. These might include picking up the violin or bow, shifting from high to lower levels on the fingerboard, navigating polyphonic passages and numerous bowing contexts – changing strings, rapid juxtapositions of dynamics and various articulations.



THE WELL-ARMED VIOLINIST – LIFT WITHOUT LIFTING

James sits quietly, arms hanging at his sides, sitting bones providing an easy platform for easy upright balance. He is to imagine that he has hundreds of arms and hands growing out of his sides in addition to his 'everyday' set. In due course, I ask him to place a pair of these hands on his lap, one on each leg (illustration 6).

This exploration embodies the essence of non-doing as it depends on thought as a means of change. In helping James

EXAMPLE 2 Elgar Violin Concerto – II. Andante, bars 38–42

EXAMPLE 3 Sibelius Violin Concerto – I. Allegro moderato, bars 222–228

find alternative neural pathways, it will provide him with some less common tools to explore movement, and encourage him to engage a more playful attitude in his practice.

The game explores the effect of a new perceptual pathway – that what you think is what you get and that the hands, one of the many available pairs, are already there, already placed. In the sense that any ‘real-time’ decisions we make about movement can be shown to have been hatched as ‘readiness potentials’ in the nervous system some milliseconds beforehand (originally Benjamin Libet et al, 1983), we are engaging and acknowledging a nervous system that works slightly in the future yet does allow us inhibitory control.

As it’s impossible to have a preview of the unknown, there is a sense in which the journey of the arms to the lap will seem to happen on its own. In the words of Eugen Herrigel from his book *Zen in the Art of Archery* (1948), it should be like snow slipping off a bamboo leaf, at the point of highest tension.

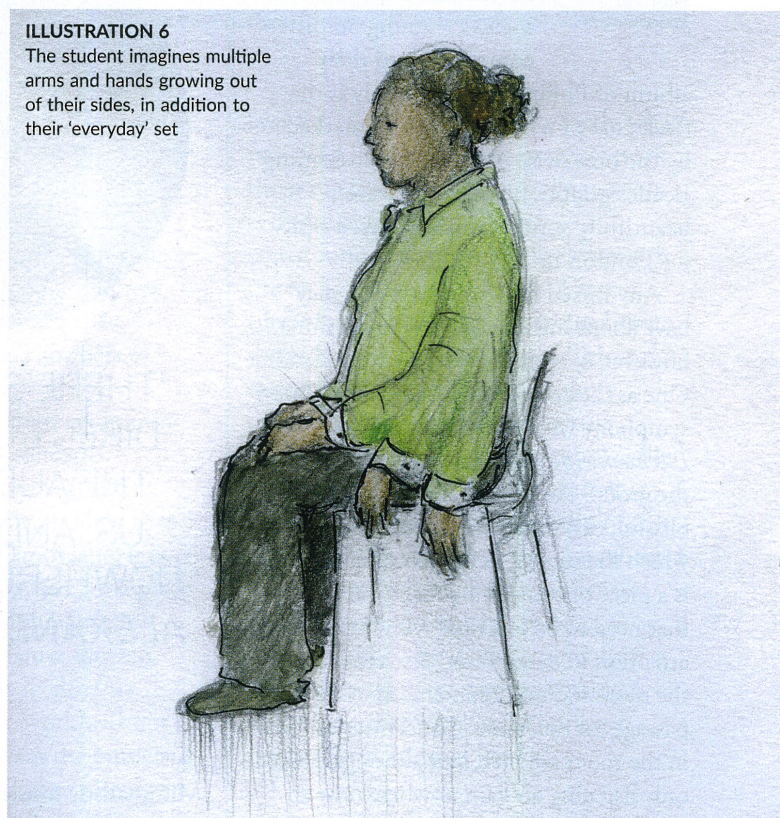
Like James, many students who persevere with this reimagining of their arms, hands and fingers find that it alters their sense of effort and leads to a new experience of ease. It can be immensely useful in complex polyphonic passages, for example in a Bach fugue, when navigating leaps in the general repertoire and in improvisations.

The beauty of having so many hands and fingers at one’s disposal was something, perhaps, that Schoenberg knew when he acceded to the complaint that his Violin Concerto was difficult to play, replying that he was happy to wait for a six-fingered violinist to come along to play it properly.

After a few ‘false starts’, James is discovering a new sense of freedom and a world of multiple possibilities: if arms and fingers are everywhere, always, then there’s never a time when they’re not! I am enjoying his growing accuracy in the Elgar and Sibelius Concerto excerpts, reaching the E flat and top B flat, respectively, nine (instead of three) times out of ten (examples 2 and 3). He is pleased that such a seeming ‘nothing’ – just thinking – can elicit such a change. Mission accomplished.

ILLUSTRATION 6

The student imagines multiple arms and hands growing out of their sides, in addition to their ‘everyday’ set



END NOTE: WORK ON YOUR USE, NOT ON YOUR PLAYING

The students briefly depicted here share many habits with us all. However, they now have one larger thing in common: the embodiment of new conditions using the Alexander principle of ‘non-doing’ to create new musical possibilities. These processes, according to several students, are simplicity itself – after all, ‘It’s only thinking,’ they say. With a partial nod in the direction of T.S. Eliot’s searing line from *Four Quartets*, I often reply: ‘Yes, simplicity itself, but costing not less than everything.’ ●