

LIVELY ELBOWS

Bayla Keyes

An important thing to know about our arms is that *they do not begin at the shoulders*. Each upper arm bone fits into the scapula or shoulder blade like a ball and socket. The proper connection of the arm back into its shoulder blade will ensure strength and ease of movement.

We often make movements with our arms leading with the muscles between the shoulders and hands. These are relatively small muscles which soon fatigue; our arms feel heavy, and our playing posture sags. We can avoid this by instead supporting both arms from the back, feeling their connection into the shoulder blades. The strong muscles of the back can easily maintain the lifting which is necessary for our hours of practice, rehearsal and performing. However we are sometimes not even aware of our shoulder blades and back because we cannot see them.

Creating the Lively Elbow Position

To learn how better to feel your shoulder blades and create optimal functioning positions for both your arms, put your arms in playing position for air violin and squeeze your shoulder blades together. Crack an imaginary walnut between them. Allow the tops of your shoulders to widen at the same time as they press back and down, following the blades. Relax the squeeze between your blades, but keep the shoulders open and down.

Still in this position, gently roll the tops of your shoulders forward, up, back, and down as you bring the shoulder blades together once more. Do this several times, feeling a soft massage of the area around your spine.

Now reach your elbows out *very slightly* to nudge an imaginary person on either side of you. This motion done correctly will open your chest even more and bring the tops of your shoulders back, down, and in towards the spine. Can you see and feel the large spaces underneath both arms? Can you feel the energetic connection across your upper back into your shoulder blades?

Circle your elbows gently backwards. Can you feel your shoulder blades circling too? Can you feel an energetic connection established from the tips of your elbows all the way through your shoulder blades into your spine? This is what I call Lively Elbows.

D. C. Dounis Exercise for Supporting from the Back

Stand with your arms relaxed by your side. Imagine that you are a puppet and that there are strings attached to your upper arms just above and behind your elbows. Imagine that the puppetmaster raises your arms twelve inches; notice how your upper arms are tilting because of the angle of the puppet strings. Now flip your left arm over into playing position. Notice how wide your arms are, and how open are the spaces between your arms and your body. Notice how your arms feel light, as if floating on columns of air. Your strong back muscles are supporting your arms.

As a contrast, drop your arms by your side again and lift first your hands and then your elbows into playing position. Can you feel the heaviness of your arms and the deadness in your elbows? Even if you lift the elbows into the same position as in the sequence above, they will not feel the same.

Using Lively Elbows in the Bow Arm

The genius of a good Galamian bow arm is that it sets up a continuous connection back into the right shoulder blade, producing a larger sound with less work. Key points to remember are:

At the frog or when moving across the frog, do NOT allow the elbow to droop. Keep the elbow lively, with a slight link back into the right shoulder blade. Feel the release in the back as the right shoulder blade moves away from the spine to allow your elbow to come forward.

As you draw a downbow and move to the middle of the bow, do not allow the elbow to droop; it does travel down but also stretches slightly out, so that the link to the blade is maintained at all times. The upper arm rotates internally.

At what Galamian called the middle bow square, when your elbow is bending at a 90 degree angle, feel the slight stretch out to the elbow. Even though your elbow is far from your body, your right shoulder blade will be nestling into the spine, and your right shoulder will be relaxed down.

At the tip, even if you are trying to bring the tip in close to the bridge, keep a lively elbow as your hand reaches forward; do not pincer or collapse the right shoulder in; feel how the shoulder blade releases away from the spine to allow you to reach farther.

As you pull an upbow, do not allow the hand to rise faster than the elbow. At middle bow square your upper arm, forearm and bow will be more or less in the same plane. Feel the slight stretch to the elbow.

Using Lively Elbows in the Left Arm

In the left arm, a lively elbow can prevent the very common and hazardous habit of raising the left shoulder and shoving the upper arm forward, pinching the armpit. While in position to play air violin, roll your left shoulder forward, up, back, and down; feel your left shoulder blade tucking under and settling into the spine. Notice how your upper arm has externally rotated. Now create the lively elbow, stretching your elbow forward and away from your body. Circle your left elbow, feeling the slight movement reflected in the left shoulder blade. Your arm should feel light and the space between it and your body should be wide open. *This is your optimal playing position.* Repeat these steps holding your actual violin.

Try to maintain this openness in every activity:

- When shifting, do not allow your upper arm to come into the body; as the forearm moves toward you, stretch your elbow away. This will mean for a high shift you will need to raise the violin, just like Jascha Heifetz!
- When vibrating, feel the tiny circles of your shoulder blade. Always begin to vibrate by circling back and to the left; notice how this opens your armpit slightly.
- Relax your left thumb. Although the effects may seem infinitesimal, squeezing it in will cause the shoulder blade to leave the spine, the shoulder to lift, and the upper arm to rotate in, contracting the armpit.
- When playing rapid notes under a slur, keeping a lively elbow will give clarity to the fingers.

Taking the slack out of your upper arms to create Lively Elbows will increase strength, create open pathways for nerve signals, and allow the relaxation of smaller muscles. Learning and using this important postural principle will have an immediate effect on your playing.

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