

THE SECOND GREAT CIRCLE: SCYTHING TOWARD THE BRIDGE

BOW, HAIR, STRING, AND BRIDGE

Violinists typically think of applying pressure *down* into the string, in order to get it to move maximally. However, the process of sound production is somewhat more complex. The movement of the string underneath our bow agitates the bridge; then the movement of the legs of the bridge is transferred into the entire top of the violin and through the sound post to the back of the violin as well. It is therefore more precise to think of applying pressure in the direction of the bridge, in order to create the most movement there.

Applying pressure with the stick of the bow angled slightly away from you, so that the wood presses toward the bridge, rather than directly downward into the string, can produce a warm, beautiful, rich sound. The wood when angled in this way has a feeling of softness and give, but if you make sure to keep all the hair in contact with the string, you can apply enormous pressure without ever scratching or straining. Kim Kashkashian calls this scything with the bow, because the circular motion you are making with the bow resembles that made by a scythe when used to harvest crops.



A clear advantage of using this sideways curving pressure is that you will be less likely to trap the string underneath your bow. The string needs to spin and circulate underneath your bow. If you press straight down, you can all too easily pin the string, restricting its movement and removing many of the overtones which add depth and quality to your sound.

THE FEEL OF THE HAND AND ARM

Use your left index finger as a substitute for the bow. Place your bow hand on top of the index finger and apply pressure directly downward. You may notice that there is a tendency of your right shoulder to come up and forward as you press down. You may also notice tension throughout the right arm, especially in the wrist, the upper arm near the shoulder, and the pectoral muscles at the front of the armpit.

Now place your right fingers around your left index finger and apply the pressure in a sort of curve in the direction of the bridge. Because you are curving toward yourself as well, you may notice how your right shoulder is opening back and your right shoulder blade is naturally tucking down and under. Your shoulder will feel freer and more open. You can feel the work in this

pulling motion coming from the strong muscles in the back of the shoulder, rather than the weaker muscles of the front.

Especially on the downbow, this pull also encourages a natural engagement of the fingers on the bow. You will not be straightening the fingers and pushing down, but instead gathering the bow with the fingers, encouraging them to relax and curl into the bridge. Not only does the bow hold feel looser, it also feels paradoxically stronger; your fingers feel secure and fleshy on the bow stick.

Now try the above on the bow and violin. What is the type of sound produced when you think of applying pressure straight down into the string? What happens when you curve toward the bridge instead? For most violinists scything will create a deeper and more sonorous tone. This kind of sound is often ideal for romantic and lyrical expression.

MUSICAL USES

Here are some pieces to which you can apply scything:

- Beginning of first movement of Tchaikovsky Concerto
- Beginning of second movement of Bruch g minor
- Outer sections of second movement of Brahms Concerto
- First movement of Brahms G Major Sonata
- Beginning of first movement of Sibelius Concerto
- Beginning of first movement of Barber Concerto

Here are some pieces where scything may not be the best choice:

- Beginning of first movement of Saint-Saëns b minor Concerto
- Brilliant fast passagework such as in the last movements of Sibelius or Tchaikovsky Concertos
- Beginning of first movement of Lalo Concerto
- Beginning of first movement of Brahms Concerto
- Middle section of second movement of Brahms Concerto

In these latter examples, the emotion you are trying to convey is not warm but is instead heroic, masterful, flashy, or even angry. Catchbows and slightly flatter hair will be better for this type of expression. Flat hair, which is what Ivan Galamian recommends for maximum sound production in the upper half of the bow, produces a brighter, more direct tone. Even a détaché sounds different when done with flat hair as compared to slightly angled hair.

Have fun experimenting with scything in your lyric melodies!

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