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An assessment of the fixed shoulder-rest, nearly 50 years on from the first Willy Wolf prototype.

The Willy Wolf shoulder rest was introduced in the 1970s with promises of ease of left hand technique, and more freedom of movement of the left hand due to its no longer being required to 'hold' the violin. There were hopes of simplifying left hand technique and, even, of release from aches and pains.

Contrast this with Ruggiero Ricci's opinion, expressed in his book, *Left Hand Violln Technique*, in 1988. "Virtuosi of the 19th century managed very well without a chin or shoulder rest. Today if a violinist did not have such security at the chin his/her left hand would have better contact with the instrument. For these devices give a false sense of security, and the left hand becomes reckless, the cause of most miscalculations."[1] I was present at a Masterclass given by esteemed American pedagogue, Ida Kavafian, in 2013 at the University of Auckland in which she informed the audience that she will not allow any of her students to use a shoulder rest.

Indeed, the choice of whether to use a shoulder rest or not seems to be one of the most contentious areas of violin and viola pedagogy. Vivien Mackie, cellist and teacher of Alexander Technique does not observe "freedom from aches" or any "sense of security" ("false" or otherwise). In her book, *Just Play Naturally* she says, "standards ..have spiralled upwards, as in sport, yesterday's record has become today's norm. …a marvellous abundance of fine players.. but a distressingly high proportion of musicians dropping out, at all stages of their professional lives through… musicians' injuries….we are not as good at managing our own bodies as we need to be."[2]

As a way of sorting through the debate let us start with the physiology of the arm structure. Barbara Conable, musician and teacher of Alexander Technique, founded the "Bodymapping" branch of Alexander Technique in the 1990s. She points out in her

[1] Ruggiero Ricci, *Left-Hand Technique Book,* New York; G. Schirmer Inc., 1988, p. 55.
[2] Vivien Mackie, *just Play Naturally,* Boston; Duende Edition, 2006, p. 162.

invaluable book, *What Every Musician Needs to Know About the Body*, that the arm structure has four major joints:

1. the sternoclavicular joint,

2. the shoulder joint,

3. the elbow joint

4. the wrist.[3]

Many violinists mismap the arm as having only 3 joints, omitting the sternoclavicular joint. This leads them to map the clavicle as a fixed, immovable thing called a "shoulder". This error is at the root of the debate about shoulder rests, about whether to use them, how to fit them if you do use one and how to benefit from that use. The clavicle, or collarbone, attaches to the shoulder blade (scapula) and the side of the scapula forms the socket for the shoulder joint. Ii is useful to explore the range of movement of the clavicle and also to investigate what is a neutral, or rest position. Conable calls this the "rest relationship" of arm joint number one. "The first joint, located between clavicle and sternum (also called collarbone and breast bone) is at its rest relationship when the collarbone is roughly parallel to the ground. It is neither too far up nor too far down, neither too far forward nor too far back, but just balanced. In some people the collarbone has been pulled so far down and back that it has nearly disappeared, a serious problem for violinists because the collarbone is the violin shelf."[4] Bodymapper and violinist, Jennifer Johnson, has written a book, *What Every Violinist Needs to Know About the Body*. In it she points out that the neutral position of this joint is sometimes difficult to find if the habit has been to pull it down and back.

Johnson suggests lifting the violin, using both hands, above the head and, from there, to playing position. She says that most violinists love having their violins on their heads as it involves the whole arm in movement whilst holding the instrument.[5] I would add that it involves the whole body in the stretching movement. The whole idea of being

[3] Barbara Conable, What *Every Musician Needs to Know About the Body,* Portland; Andover Press, 2000, pp. 43 – 44.
[4] Barbara Conable and William Conable, *how to Learn the Alexander Technique,* Columbus; Andover Road Press, 1992, p.53.
[5] Jennifer Johnson, *What Every Violinist Needs to Know about the Body,* Chicago; GIA Publications Inc, 2009, pp. 88 – 89.

'relaxed' to play the violin seems to also be a major factor in the misconceptions surrounding shoulder rests. Relaxation is described by Johnson as, potentially, a "disease" encouraging "downward pull" of the whole body.[6] Certainly an optimum stretch throughout the body, allowing simultaneously more length and width, and diagonal and spirallic expansion is more appropriate to the task of violin performance than is relaxation. This is only available with coordinated movement of the whole body. One fixed and tense joint, in this case sterno-clavicular or atlanto-occipital, will interfere with the movement and expansion of a coordinated whole.

I have often witnessed a young beginner being fitted out for their first violin and shoulder rest in a string shop. They are told to "relax and drop their arms by their sides" whilst the salesperson finds a rest that fills the gap. Of course, this does not allow for movement of the clavicle when the hand holds the violin. The shoulder rest forces the rotation back and down of clavicle, pulling together of shoulder blades in the back, and belly to protrude. With the overall balance of the body disturbed so, the arms are experienced as being very heavy.

The sternoclavicular joint forms part of the coordinated movement of arm joints available to the hand in order to accomplish any task. This can be demonstrated by comparing gripping the shoulder rest whilst extending the hand, and using the hand with the whole arm available. Hands use tools and are the 'foremen' to the coordinated movement of the arm and body. This results in precision and efficiency in any given task.

I have compiled a list of some specific techniques which are difficult with the clavicle rotated back and down:

a) Left hand techniques:

- reaching 4th finger
- multiple stopping
- shifting
- avoiding squeezing with the thumb

[6] Jennifer Johnson, *What Every Violinist Needs to Know about the Body,* p. 36.

- reaching upper positions

- reaching lower strings

- vibrato

b) Right hand techniques:

- playing at the heel

- reaching the tip

- string crossing to lower strings

- projection of sound

- playing at speed

- creating tone colours, at all dynamics and vibrancy

To quote Ruggiero Ricci again, ”I am not advocating their elimination, although the shoulder rest is indeed a clumsy appendage. But I do suggest that the violinist should guard against clutching the violin with the chin and shoulder. The violin should rest on the shoulder and in the hand.”[7]

Jennifer Johnson points out that there are five points of contact with the violin that help to keep it secure:

1. the collarbone shelf
2. the head (Weight only; mostly the head is required to just balance on its own structure and provide some intermittent stabilizing contact with the chinrest.)
3. the left hand
4. the side of the neck (Gravity only; not squeezing and maybe not necessary at all if one uses a shoulder rest)
5. the friction of the bow on the string (This may be illustrated, for an example, by the act of holding a book on a flat, upturned left hand. As the left hand tilts a gentle right hand on top of the book gives much more security to holding the book.)[8]

[7] Ruggiero Ricci, *Left-Hand Violin Technique,* p. 55
[8] Jennifer Johnson, *What Every Violinist Needs to Know about the Body,* p. 45.

Johnson cites two prevalent "mismappings" which impinge on effective and easy support : firstly that violinists must keep the shoulders down, and secondly that neck muscles must work to hold the violin.[9] One could theorise that these common misconceptions arise from a misunderstanding of the role, and a misuse of, the shoulder rest.

One other major problem created with badly-fitting shoulder rests is a loss of mobility of the head at its atlanto-occipital joint, thus badly affecting mobility, balance, weight distribution and support throughout the whole body. Jennifer Johnson advises violinists to watch footage of any of the great violinists from the last century (most of whom played with no shoulder rest), to observe how free their heads are on their spines.[10]

A shoulder rest needs to be correctly fitted, so that it is not creating inflexibility by being the wrong size or being misplaced. It must sit on bone, not muscle, and shouldn't impinge on the shoulder joint. It often needs to be closer to the neck in order to cross the collarbone. The wrong shoulder rest set-up will cause the player to experience the collarbone as immobile and rigid, the shoulder blades pulling closer together in the back, the neck muscles tight and the head pulled back and out of good balance. Violinists must choose which shoulder rest, if any, which height and placement gives them support and mobility for their needs. Phillip Pan, from Andover Educators: Teaching the Art of Movement in Music, has written a comprehensive article on choosing (or not) and fitting shoulder rests. It is entitled *Violin and Viola Shoulder Rests* and can be found at www.bodymap.org[11]. It offers lots of practical advice with tips like how to use extra foam rubber with shoulder rests for support and flexibility.

[9] Jennifer Johnson, *What Every Violinist Needs to Know about the Body,* pp. 141 – 146.
[10] Jennifer Johnson, *What Every Violinist Needs to Know about the Body*, p.45.
[11] Philip Pan, '*Violin and Viola Shoulder Rests',* Andover Educators, http://www.bodymap.org/main/?p=274/ accessed 11 May 2015

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