

VIOLIN & VIOLA: TUNING UP – WARMING UP

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Introduction

This set of notes gives helpful reminders about getting ready to practise or perform. Some musicians experience muscular discomfort or other physical problems, which are usually due to poor technique and/or tension; some simple and quick physical exercises can help to ensure that this never happens.

Learning to tune your own instrument is a very important skill and involves listening carefully as well as some tricky, precise and dextrous movements. Be patient in practising this!

TUNING UP

THE VIOLIN MUST BE TUNED WITH GREAT CARE EVERY TIME IT IS USED, AND IF YOU PLAY FOR MORE THAN HALF AN HOUR, YOU SHOULD 'RE-TUNE'.

Why? Well, this much should be obvious! If the violin is out of tune, all attempts to play correctly are wasted effort. Indeed, it would be better to leave the violin in its box, because playing on de-tuned strings will allow the pupil to learn the WRONG spacing between notes – which is far worse than not doing any practise!

GETTING STARTED

You will need to find the 4 notes of the open strings (G-D-A-E for the violin; C-G-D-A for the viola) on the piano or by using a set of pitch pipes (which you can buy from a music shop or online shops).

On the tail-piece of the instrument you will see four 'adjusters'. Turn these to the left (clockwise) and the string is pulled tighter, making it sharper, or higher. Anti-clockwise makes the string slacker and therefore flatter, or lower. These are 'fine tuners'. Because the lower strings are thicker than the higher ones, you will find that you need to turn the lower-string adjusters more than the upper ones in order to make a difference to the pitch.

N.B. IF YOU TREAT YOUR VIOLIN AND BOW WITH GREAT CARE AS IF IT IS A VALUABLE AND FRAGILE THING (IT IS!) THEN YOUR VIOLIN SHOULD STAY PRETTY MUCH IN TUNE AND ONLY NEED SLIGHT ADJUSTMENT. IF YOU BASH IT AROUND, LET ANYONE ELSE BASH IT AROUND, LET IT GET TOO COLD OR TOO HOT, IT WILL GO BADLY OUT OF TUNE – WHICH IS IT'S WAY OF TELLING YOU IT DOESN'T APPRECIATE THIS KIND OF TREATMENT!

WORKING OUT WHETHER A STRING IS SHARP OR FLAT

If you can't tell whether a string is sharp or flat then begin by making a guess, and see whether your adjustment (using the fine-tuning adjusters) improves it or makes it worse. With time, you will be able to hear flat and sharp easily – and as string players, you very soon have to be able to do this anyway! Flat tends to sound 'dull' and sharp sounds 'edgy'.

USING THE TUNING PEGS

If the violin is very out of tune (this is normal if it is new, or has new strings) then you need to use the pegs.

Many pupils say that they are afraid to use these because they might break the strings. It is very rare indeed with modern strings that this happens unless you are being careless. Make only very small turns to the pegs, being very careful not to over-tighten the strings. Unlike the fine-tuning adjusters, a small movement of a peg will have quite a big effect on the pitch of the string.

Using the pegs can sometimes seem a bit tricky...

Exercise

Sitting down, rest your violin or viola on your knees with the pegs at the top. Holding the instrument either by the end of the scroll, or on its shoulder, grasp the peg you want to move between thumb and forefinger and turn it a tiny way, noting the effect upon the pitch. Because the peg is wedge-shaped, you will have to turn and push in at the same time to avoid it becoming loose. Get each string roughly in tune (comparing with the piano or pitch pipes), then use the adjusters to finish the job off.

MORE ADVANCED TUNING

By Grade 3, we should be able to tune in a more mature way. The way we do this is to tune PAIRS of strings together, getting used to the rich and ringing sound of two strings a 5th apart sounding at the same time.

ALWAYS TUNE FROM A – in pairs – A & D, D & G then A & E.

Make sure that the bow-weight is not too much, otherwise you will get a nasty sound which will distort and stop you hearing properly. A hint is to let the bow come off the string and hear the strings ring on; another is to tune A and E together on a up-bow.

Use your adjusters to tune with. These can be turned with the left-hand whilst applying the bow, if you wish, by bringing the left hand all the way under the instrument's body and over to the adjusters from the right-hand side.

PROPER TUNING WITH PEGS

This requires pegs to be in good condition – they should turn smoothly but not loosely, should stay ‘put’ with a moderate amount of pressure, but not slip. If need be, consult me in the lesson for help, or take your violin to a repairer.

It is best if I demonstrate this, but the basic idea is to grasp the peg (starting on the A-string) with thumb and forefinger, curling other fingers around the scroll for firm grasp. Release the tension on the peg a little (ideally no more than a semitone effect in pitch) and then turn, whilst bowing on the string and listening for the pitch to become correct. Sometimes this takes a few attempts. Then tune in pairs as above. You need strong fingers to turn and push in at the same time! As ever, practise makes perfect.

Why bother with this difficult method? Well, you should only really have one fine-tuner (adjuster) because the sort that screw into a normal wooden tailpiece shorten the length of the string and stop the freedom of sound. Metal tailpieces are OK, but don’t fit all makes of string. Also, peg tuning tends to stretch the strings in such a way as to enable them to keep their tune better and for longer.

WARMING UP

EXERCISE 1: Slow head rotation, side to side. This helps to release neck tension.

EXERCISE 2: Put each hand's fingertips on the shoulder corresponding to the hand (i.e. left fingers on left shoulder) and rotate your elbow slowly.

EXERCISE 3: This can be uncomfortable if you are not used to it. Stand with legs a small distance apart then bend your knees (sticking your bottom out), and keeping your back straight. Go onto your haunches and then come back up VERY SLOWLY! This doesn't look very pretty (perhaps do these exercises in private!) but it helps to get rid of tension in the legs. Shake your legs to free them up.

EXERCISE 4: Bow-arm swing. Swing your bow arm in a big curve, at shoulder, then a hinge-swing at elbow, then a bowing movement.

EXERCISE 5: Violin-type hold up (without violin) – then rotate your wrist one way then the other.

EXERCISE 6: Practise standing – lead with left side, knees slightly bent, VIOLIN UP. Check the posture of both hands!

EXERCISE 7: on each string do the following, here for D-string (using 4th fingers):

D – E – F-sharp – G – A – G – F-sharp – E – D (over and over again, gradually getting faster).

EXERCISE 8: on each string, given here for the D string:

D – F-sharp – E – G – F-sharp – A – G – E (over and over again, gradually getting faster).

When I ask a pupil to tune up and warm up (if I wander out of the room) this is what I expect to be happening, and if you have the discipline to do this before every practise (it should take about 2 minutes) then you will play much better afterwards. After all, you'd expect an athlete to warm up! This is our way of getting our joints ready for action.