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Introduction

During my graduate studies at the University of New Mexico, I was fortunate to be able to pursue several diverse subjects not usually associated with string teaching. One of these subjects was an in-depth inquiry into how muscles learn movement patterns and how our awareness can modify those patterns. Combined with previous course work in human anatomy and physiology, extensive personal reading and many sessions with Alexander specialists, I began to notice that even though the language and/or approaches differed, there seemed to be a few principles about which these disciplines appeared to agree. These principles are the core of this publication, which is not meant to be a course in kinesthetics, Alexander, biomechanics or physiology, but rather an approach to teaching the violin.

For the sake of clarification, a brief description/definition of the following might be helpful:

The Alexander Method/Technique: An "owner's or operation manual" which helps students to re-educate and restore beneficial postures and movements. It engages the mind and body to reduce and eliminate body misuse in daily activities.

Physiology: A branch of biology that deals with organic/bodily processes in living organisms. Most of these processes are unconscious. Examples might be biochemical transmission of nutrients and electrolytes, composition/function of fluids in the body.

Kinesiology: The study of muscles during movement. For our purposes, we will define these as conscious movements, or those under willful control. Examples might be opening a door or pouring cream into your coffee.

Biomechanics: A link between biology and physics that investigates movements from the perspective of joint and muscular design. Examples might be range of motion studies of various joints and optimal angles/pressures to accomplish certain tasks.

Physical Therapy: The treatment of disease or injury by physical and/or mechanical means. Examples might be movement therapy, massage, heat treatments.

Researchers in each of these fields, as well as many others, are interested in the workings of the human body, and all have a potential contribution to make to upper string teachers and players. For violinists and violists, the effort to obtain "hands on" information from all the potential sources can be difficult and time-consuming, especially since the research must be ferreted out, read, interpreted and then finally applied to violin playing. An added frustration is that most musicians are not trained in research methodologies and do not understand the language in which most research is written. An additional complication is that violin and viola teaching tends to focus on performance, whether in public school programs, universities, conservatories, private studios, summer camps, institutes, or master classes. Oftentimes, the means whereby any performance is achieved are overlooked, or taken for granted until injury or discomfort occur. All of these reasons, combined with the time necessary for daily practice, make a reasonable argument why more upper string players have not sought out this data.

Researchers Frank Wilson and Franz Roehmann acknowledge that because of the multidisciplinary nature of the problem, it is difficult to ferret out meaningful or pertinent information…"there is no such thing as a 'field' of movement science; instead, there is an ad hoc and shifting affiliation of psychologists, biomechanical engi-

Principle Number One...

The Importance of Good Posture

Consideration of the Nose, Elbow, Scroll and Toe:

Most violin teachers repeatedly tell their students to "stand up straight," knowing intuitively that good posture is the basis for good playing. Some teachers have tried to simplify the teaching of posture by insisting that each of their students, regardless of body type, stand with Nose, left Elbow, violin Scroll and the left Toe vertically aligned (NEST). While such a posture might work for some body builds, it is by no means a cure-all for everyone, and is not a quick fix for the posture dilemma.

Well-balanced posture is more than standing up straight, or aligning nose, elbow, scroll and toe vertically — either of which has the potential of producing tensions and/or less-than-optimal movement patterns. Good posture must be analyzed on an individual basis. The best description of points to look for in establishing good posture in violinists was recently published in the journal, Medical Problems of Performing Artists [December, 1999] by Lynn Medoff, M.A., M.P.T.