

THE BOSTON CENTER FOR THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE

IDEAS FOR A NEW VIOLIN CHIN-REST/SHOULDER REST

A fundamental stipulation of the Alexander Technique is that a balanced use of the head-neck reflexes, when integrated with the trunk, can influence all specific coordination for the better - particularly the refined coordinations such as a violinist is called upon to use. Lessons in the Alexander Technique evoke within the performer the wish for the minimum of distortion in the carriage of the head. The less the head is locked or braced in any way, the better. Most violinists are required to distort the carriage of their heads much more than they would like to; and this distortion of the head usually occurs in a direction too far to the left combined with a direction either too far forward from the seventh vertebra or too far backward from it.

We have found the design and placement of all current chin-rests and shoulder-rests conducive to such displacements of the head and neck. And we have tried to approach design and placement in a new way that would allow for the most balanced opportunity to the performer with respect to head, neck, back and arms from the standpoint of the more balanced total coordination which the Alexander Technique tries to teach.

Given the relative thinness of the violin in comparison to the amount of space found in most people between the chin line and the collar bone/shoulder area (when the head is freely poised), a great deal of compensation and alteration of head poise and shoulder distortion is often required. With most existing apparatuses that we have examined, the designs and placement of them on the instrument induce an oblique application of pressure (in relation to the poised vertical of the head-neck region) in order to secure the violin between the chin and shoulder/collar bone area to free the hand an arm to shift from one position on the fingerboard to another. The traditional shoulder pad (for male performers) tucked under the coat lapel comes the closest to our requirements; but we have still found that unsatisfactory.

Since the head is situated so that its vertical rotation occurs most effectively between the base of the skull and the first vertebra (atlanto-occipital joint) and its horizontal rotation occurs most effectively between the first and second vertebrae (the atlanto-axial joint), that is the nodding and the turning of the head, we would like to design an apparatus which would employ a use of pressure only in these two dimensions. As implied above, other apparatuses require a displacement of the whole neck (cervical column), the shoulder girdle and the collar bone - with, perhaps, having a further detrimental effect on the whole spinal column and rib cage to a greater or lesser degree.

We would also prefer to create a situation where the main places of support occur between bone surfaces instead of between muscle bodies. In other words between the bone of the chin (rather than the fleshy part underneath the chin and just above the thyroid cartilage) and the clavicle or collar bone (rather than the pectoral or trapezius bodies - shoulder or chest muscles). We feel that direct pressure on muscle body, particularly if sharp or pointed, is most conducive to shortening and tightening of muscle, whereas an equalized distribution of pressure along the length of a bony surface can supply a more secure and comfortable source of strength, particularly if there is an adequate softness to the texture of the apparatus suited to the particular person's structure of chin and collar bone.

If it is first established at what horizontal angle to the trunk the violin should be held for each particular performer so that both arms are given their maximum chance for balanced use (so that the left arm doesn't have to curve too far under the instrument and so that the right arm doesn't have to reach too far around to play at the frog of the bow), then the best positioning of the chin-rest on the instrument can be determined.

The collar bone naturally presents itself as the most effective opposite surface to the chin if we consider what the direct plumb-line from the chin downwards would be in someone standing or sitting erect and maintaining the kind of free head poise that the Alexander Technique advocates.

Texture of apparatus is considered highly important too, particularly with concern not to interfere with the sound of the violin any more than is absolutely necessary. The closest solution to our design that exists is met by the use of foam pads or inflatable devices; but we feel that they are detracting from the sound, insecure, indefinite, and unaesthetic.

The main problem in design that we have come across is that of finding a way to attach the shoulder-rest apparatus to the bottom of the violin so that it would lie at a place most vertically and diametrically opposite to the chin rest. It would also have to be easily detachable so that the instrument could fit into its case. So far no one can suggest a mechanism of clamp, screw, or clip which would serve that purpose well, being both completely secure and quickly and easily put on and taken off.

Joe Armstrong,
Alexander Teacher

Janet Packer,
Violinist