

Left hand tension: harmonic, half down, how much is needed?

The following exercise effectively helps relieve left-hand tension from over squeezing by the thumb or fingers on the fingerboard. Violists will individually learn how to develop and maintain a healthy hand weight and tone in any position, shift, tempo, or while using vibrato. It may be used in any composition or exercise.

Special thanks to Jeffrey Irvine for introducing this method to me.

1. Start by releasing the tension in your whole body by stretching, taking deep breaths, and drinking water. Be aware of your body balance.
2. Choose a short passage that causes uncomfortable left-hand tension. Identify the locations where tension is an issue, for example a shift, run, string crossing, or vibrato.
3. Slow down the passage and lightly plop the fingers on the strings as though all are harmonics. Feel the bounce of each finger as it drops to the string. The thumb remains cushy and passive. A good contact point and arm weight should be maintained along with posture and fingerings. The pitch will not be clear. Shifts will be reinforced by focusing on the elements of the motion (elbow, thumb, finger). Is the motion fluid and balanced?
4. Repeat the passage slowly working up the tempo while using various rhythms and bowings. Continue adding challenges until you feel relaxed and confident at the harmonic level.
5. Slowly begin to experiment adding more finger weight ($\frac{1}{4}$ weight, $\frac{1}{2}$ weight, etc.) until a beautiful rich tone is maintained. Continue to be aware of unwanted increased tension and proactively adjust the finger movement. Fingers and joints should remain flexible. *Note: a beautiful rich tone does not necessarily mean the full weight of the left hand finger is necessary.*
6. Continue to spend time everyday experimenting with different weights and passages until you are confident and secure. You may discover maintaining a comfortable left hand and good tone is easier than you think!

Violist **Ayn Balija** is the Lecturer of Viola and the Principal Viola of the Charlottesville Symphony at the University of Virginia and violist of the Rivanna String Quartet. She has also taught at Belvoir Camp for Girls, and James Madison University. Devoted to the training of well-rounded students, Ms. Balija develops programs to bring a variety of musical opinions and performances to her students such as Violapalooza, an all-day Virginia Viola event. She engages in additional community building opportunities by being president of the Virginia Viola Society and collaborating with local schools. She has been invited to give masterclasses at Virginia Commonwealth University, West Virginia University's Viola Day, UNT's Viola Celebration, and the International Viola Congress in New Zealand. Ms. Balija celebrates all musical forms collaborating with composers such as Judith Shatin, Matthew Burtner, commissioning new works like from Libby Larsen, and celebrating the Classics. She inspires audiences at the Yachats Summer Music Festival, the Carolina Chamber Music Festival, and the Richmond Symphony and serves as guest faculty for the Tennessee Governor's School for the Arts. Ayn Balija's principal mentors are Peter Slowik, Jeffrey Irvine, and Karen Tuttle.