

Playing Violin without Using a Shoulder Rest

How to Do That with the Alexander Technique?

Esther Visser



Fig.1.

This workshop was meant for musicians and Alexander Technique teachers who work a lot with violinists and viola players. As you might have noticed, a lot of violinists openly or secretly have the wish to be able to play their instrument without the use of a shoulder rest. Most string players agree that a violin or a viola sounds fuller, freer, more open and more beautiful when not using a shoulder rest. There is less need to ‘clamp’ the violin with the neck or shoulder muscles, and as a result the neck can be much more free (!), and the head can go forward and up (!) easier, than while using a shoulder rest.

However, it seems a ‘lost art’ how to do that. The skill how to balance a violin in a free and healthy way seems almost to be ‘forgotten’ since the invention of the shoulder rest around 1920. It is easier (but not better?) to teach children to hold the violin using a shoulder rest and even for adults this solution is easier than acquiring a skill that needs balance and poise. Gradually developing over the last 100 years we have now arrived at a situation where most modern violinists use a shoulder rest, having no idea anymore how on earth they could play without using this tool. But all centuries before that (1500–1920), violinists have managed beautifully without using it and for a long time a lot of top violinists refused to use it (Perlman, Oistrach, Menuhin, Anne Sophie Mutter, etc.). Paganini for example played his caprices without using shoulder rest or chin rest.

In his book *Violin: Six lessons with Yehudi Menuhin*, Menuhin writes about balancing the violin:

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We speak of holding the violin, but the word ‘hold’, with its implication of a firm and static grip, can be misleading. We should remember that the violinist, unlike the pianist or cellist whose instruments rest on the floor, must support his instrument unaided . . . Here, as with the bow, *the development of a sense of balance and flexibility* will form a far freer and healthier basis on which later to apply strength and effort, than would clamping the violin between shoulder and head, or clutching it between the thumb and first finger of the left hand . . . *It is preferable to do without a shoulder-pad or a shoulder-rest.* If used as a support, the shoulder is restricted in its freedom of movement, and if actively ‘clamped’, the shoulder is ‘frozen’. (Menuhin 1974, lesson III)

As an Alexander Technique teacher I very much agree with this. The question remains: How to develop this balance and flexibility, and how to teach it to others?

I am a professional violinist (specialised in historical performance practice) and certified Alexander Technique teacher for seven years (specialised in working with musicians), living in The Netherlands. In 2019, I won a full-time scholarship at Canterbury Christchurch University (UK) to perform a PhD study about the different ways violinists supported their violin before the invention of the shoulder rest and the implications of that on performance practice and health in our time, in combination with applying Alexander Technique to the balancing of the violin. I am researching how violinists back in their time balanced the violin without the help of a shoulder rest and how we can apply this skill in modern performance to avoid the many injuries there are nowadays (that is why I won a scholarship – as it potentially could save a lot of pain and costs). By researching old treatises on violin playing and combining it with Alexander principles I am searching for the best way how to teach this skill to violinists. I love to play without using a shoulder rest myself. At the moment, I am in the final stages of this research.

From October 2022 I have been running an international experiment in which I teach professional violin/viola players how to play without using a shoulder rest while applying Alexander Technique principles during a series of 12 weekly online lessons. So it’s a free three month training. In this workshop I also spoke more about my research, this experiment and the background for it. My aim was to involve more international Alexander Technique teachers in my project and this worked out wonderfully! Several Alexander teachers from for example Sweden, USA, Germany, and Italy have convinced their (violin or viola) students to take part and many participants came through these teachers and/or the teachers are taking part themselves. You can read more about the experiment on my website www.esthervisser.com.

It is fantastic, currently 106 professional musicians signed up for the program: 55 people learning to play without shoulder rest and 51 people learning to play without shoulder rest and chin rest. That is a great number of participants to make it a serious scientific study. People joining the experi-

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ment are coming from Finland, Brazil, Korea, Germany, Austria, Spain, The Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden, Cyprus, Italy, Hungary, and the USA.

FEEDBACK DURING THE WORKSHOP AND AFTERWARDS



Fig. 2.

Around 15 Alexander Technique teachers/violinists took part in this workshop. Around ten of them brought their instrument and wanted to try it themselves in the workshop, so it became a very practical one. For the other participants it was nice to observe the active participants.

First I have been explaining about my own background as a ‘modern’ violinist playing without a shoulder rest and as a baroque violinist playing without a shoulder rest nor a chin rest. When I participated as a violinist at the Aspen Music Festival (USA) for three summers (nine weeks each), my teacher there (David Halen) asked me why I used a shoulder rest playing my modern violin while I could play without one on my baroque violin. I didn’t really have a good answer. It was just the way I always had been playing and I never had any discomfort or pain, so why to change a winning team? But he didn’t give up so easily and challenged me to play one week in this festival completely without using a shoulder rest and see how I would like it. This meant: All orchestra rehearsals, all concerts, during chamber music, and in my main subject lessons. Hesitantly I agreed. Already after one day, I was completely convinced and happy I tried it . . . because I discovered that my violin sounded so much better and in fact, technically, I could do

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it, just like on my baroque violin. Even with Romantic repertoire it seemed to work out! The Alexander Technique teacher at the Aspen Music Festival was Lori Schiff, I had weekly lessons with her, and she also encouraged me to just try it and she was also happy with the result. I never returned to using a shoulder rest, but already during the summers in Aspen I started to interview some of the famous violinists who are performing there, asking them about whether or not to use a shoulder rest and why, for example my own teacher David Halen, concertmaster of the Houston Symphony Orchestra, and Sylvia Rosenberg, teacher at Juilliard school of Music, and Alexander Kerr, former concertmaster at the Concertgebouw Orchestra. I also started to ask my colleague violinists how much they would think their violin would weigh. The answers were amazing: some even said up to two kilograms, while an average violin weights around 450 kilograms. This started me thinking about the support of the violin and many misconceptions about that . . . and it really made me wonder why so many violinists are using a shoulder rest while the disadvantages seemed so clear to me.

Two years after my last summer in Aspen I started my Alexander teacher training with Paul and Tessa in Amsterdam. Everything I learned in the training resonated with my ideas about supporting a violin: The importance of a free neck, the importance of alignment, the importance of balance. I started researching the ways violinists had supported their instrument in history, before the invention of the shoulder rest. In the meantime I also followed the teacher training to become a Shaw Method teacher with Steven Shaw in the UK and started a swim school in The Netherlands based on that method. It made me very aware that things that seem generally accepted (like the Olympic way of swimming, or playing violin using a shoulder rest), may absolutely not be the most healthy or effective way to do things. I got trained in actively instructing clients how to perform an activity in a different way, based on the Alexander Technique. I learned a lot from this.

So, when I saw the advertisement to perform a PhD in Music and Health at Canterbury Christ Church University in 2019, I immediately knew what I wanted to research and I applied. I was selected and I won the fulltime scholarship. The only thing they asked in return for the scholarship, was that I would teach Alexander Technique to the music students at the university regularly, which I love to do anyway, so that was a very good deal.

From that time I have been researching historical ways of supporting the violin, interviewing violinists who can do it and asking them how they do it, comparing these different ways, approaching it from the Alexander Technique, trying it myself, etc. From the information I collected, I composed a 12-step training plan to teach this to professional musicians by letting them practise ten minutes per day in this way. In this program, I used a lot of the same principles we used with the swimming as well: I broke it up in very small steps, not continuing if the previous step was not good yet, let them enjoy the process and work from curiosity rather than ‘do it perfect’.

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In this workshop I gave the ten active participants a small taster of some of the first steps in my program. We started with finding a nice spot on the collarbone, where the violin can rest. We then discussed the direction of the violin (how far to the left) by moving the forearm from the elbow joint and see where it ends up. This already gave some eye-openers to the participants; they told me later on. I then explained the position of the thumb, where it can support the violin and we practised balancing the violin between the collarbone and the thumb, without using the head on the violin. So the neck could stay free and we could keep thinking the directions. We also spoke about the balance on the feet while doing that. The participants found this rather difficult, and I expected this, as in my 12-step program this takes at least a week, to get used to this balance and develop this skill. However, they could feel what the idea was and even play some open strings while doing it. The other participants could comment what they observed, and they saw for example that the shoulders stayed much more relaxed than when some of the violinists used them in their 'old' way (sometimes pressing against the back of the violin for example). The violinists also gave feedback that the sound of their instrument seemed more open. That is my own experience as well, as the whole skeleton resonates with the violin by the contact with the collarbone. This effect is lost when the violin is lifted by a shoulder rest and often damped by the clothing touching the back of the violin.

The last thing we spoke about was how to perform shifts with the left hand. I explained how it works and showed it to the participants, but of course this was very hard to suddenly do this without practising. They seemed to understand it and could feel a bit how it works.

The participants reacted very enthusiastically, and I gave them a list to leave their email if they wanted to join the experiment a few months later, or if they would like to keep being informed about it through my newsletter. They all filled out their email addresses! I also could share my leaflets about the experiment with them and they would give these to their students in their own countries, for violin and viola players to invite them to take part in the experiment. Apparently, they actively spread these, as I have a lot of people taking part in the experiment who tell me they came through these teachers. Thank you so much if you were present and helped me inviting musicians!

Currently, we are in week five from the 12 weeks in the experiment (November 2022), and I am getting feedback like this:

I've sent my fourth video today. If you can see any problem, please write me per mail!

After my accident last year, I have now diagnosis CMD (Craniomandibuläre Dysfunktion). I feel a lot of benefit with your lessons.

Thank you so much for your newsletters. They are extremely helpful and interesting for my practice. I think I am making the same mistake you mention in your last meeting, having my left wrist bent a little too much outwards.

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I will work on that a little more

Thank you for this really inspiring training!!

I hope to join next week's Zoom

In my orchestra work as a concertmaster, I already feel much more freedom in my neck and shoulders, even if we are only at lesson four in the series . . .

Thank you!

That feedback is very encouraging and at the moment we are having lovely weekly Zoom sessions with some of the violinists participating and discussing many ideas about supporting an instrument, ways of learning, ways of teaching, avoiding injuries, Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais, old master violinists, etc.

I will be very happy to report the results of this experiment to you during the next International Alexander Technique Congress in Dublin and present the results of my PhD research.

If you have any Alexander Technique students who are professional violin or viola players, please invite them to have a look at esthervisser.com and still join the 12-step experiment, I expect it will be running for a while in order to collect as much data as possible. They can start any moment they would like and it is for free. Thank you!



Fig. 3.

Bibliography

Menuhin, Y. (1974). *Violin: Six lessons with Yehudi Menuhin*. Faber Music Ltd: London.

Esther Visser is a Dutch violinist specialised in historically informed performance practice, a PhD researcher and Alexander Technique teacher. After gaining her Bachelor of Music Degree in the Netherlands she was invited to continue her studies with Vilmos Szabadi at the Franz Liszt Academy in Budapest, completing a three-year postgraduate program. She followed a two year program 'Formation Supérieure' with the Orchestre des Champs-Élysées in France, where she was coached by Alessandro Moccia, and performed at the 'Spotlight on Young Artists' concert series of the Festival de Saintes. She gained her Master of Music degree for baroque violin with Sigiswald Kuijken in Brussels. Esther acted as a concertmaster at several orchestras and during two years she was leader in the European Philharmonic Orchestra. She worked a.o. at the Netherlands Chamber Orchestra and the Arnhem Philharmonic Orchestra. Esther performed as a soloist with orchestras in The Netherlands, Belgium, France and Finland. As a baroque violinist she collaborates in concerts and CD recordings a.o. with La Petite Bande, Collegium Musicum, Concerto d'Amsterdam, Florilegium Musicum, Musica Aeterna, and the Harmonious Society of Tickle-Fiddle Gentlemen. Esther received prizes and study grants from the SNS REAAL Fonds, the Marti Keuning Eckhardt Stichting and the Ben Remkes Cultuurfonds. During three summers she participated at the Aspen Music festival, USA, following Alexander Technique lessons with Lori Schiff for nine weeks each summer. Esther did practical artistic research on authentic performance practice of Romantic repertoire at Leuven University, winning the 'Excellence Prize' from the Roger Dillemans Foundation Belgium for this research. Since 2013 Esther works as a guest lecturer at Codarts, Rotterdam Conservatory, coaching Mmus students. Since 2017 Esther also works as a guest lecturer at the Royal Conservatoire in The Hague. Esther is running a successful Alexander Technique practice in Haarlem (NL) specialised in musicians. In 2019 Esther won a fulltime scholarship to do PhD research through the Canterbury Christ Church University (UK), researching the way how violinists supported their violin between 1790 and 1830 and the implications of that on performance practice and health. Esther trained as an Alexander Technique teacher with Paul and Tessa in Amsterdam, 2012–2015.

www.esthervisser.com
visser.esther@gmail.com
