

It Don't Mean A Thing If It Ain't Got That Swing!

If you want to have a resonant tone, great bow articulation and springing left hand action at the viola, try seeking an easier feeling in the body. Imagine yourself as a dancer at the instrument, and how freely you might move. You can feel your feet on the ground and the bounciness of your knees and hips. Your heart is lifted even as you can feel gravity pulling your weight down. Now that you're becoming aware of your body's relationship to the pull of the earth let's take a look at one way you can use gravity at the viola.

Swing Your Arm and Touch Your Nose (from Building Violin Skills by Ed Sprunger)

This is an exercise for the left arm. First try it without the viola. Standing tall, swing the left arm forward and back at your side, and when it comes in front of you, glance down into your palm. The arm swings freely from the shoulder, but you can feel how the rest of the body adjusts to this movement by moving a little too. Keep feeling those feet as you swing several times. Then swing all the way up and touch your nose with the side of your pinky finger.



Violist Penda Sissoko swinging her arm



Penda and her teacher Miranda Sielaff at the Diller-Quaile School of Music in New York City.

Now try placing the viola on the shoulder before you swing up and touch your nose. As Karen Tuttle would say, “cuddle your viola” and feel it rest snugly against your neck and jaw. Have a teacher, parent or friend spot your scroll. This exercise can benefit violists at all levels: It's great for establishing a healthy posture at the instrument for beginners, good for those who might be trying to break habits like the pancake left wrist or a left thumb that grabs the neck of the viola, good for freedom of the left arm for shifting and vibrato, and good for reminding the left arm and fingers to be free to move quickly for fast playing.

Violist Miranda Sielaff plays and tours internationally with several ensembles including The Knights, String Orchestra of New York City, Wet Ink, and the Caravel String Trio. Highlights of the last few years include performing on Carnegie Hall's Making Music series with Pierre Boulez, performing with Yo-Yo Ma and the Silk Road Ensemble, and playing with The Knights and Itzhak Perlman at the Ravinia Festival. Miranda has recorded for Sony Classical and Ancalagon Records. She teaches at the School for Strings and the Diller-Quaile School of Music. Miranda holds degrees from Rice University and The Juilliard School, where she studied with Karen Ritscher and Karen Tuttle.