

How to play the violin without sounding like a dying cat

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Okay, so you want to learn how to play the violin without humiliating yourself and realizing you wasted over five hundred dollars worth of equipment and an entire summer on a failure of a hobby.

I know how to do that, so I guess it's only right that I teach you how, to save you the embarrassment. If you really want to learn the violin, or any string instrument, just make sure you're committed, because there's no going back. I'm serious. First, you have to have the equipment. By equipment I mean a practice book, a teacher, an actual violin, a case to put it in, a bow, some rosin, and a shoulder rest. A music stand would be a good idea, too.

There are other things that you might want but that all depends on your instructor. Just be prepared to spend that extra thirty bucks on a fancy string tuner or a set of back-up strings. Choosing a violin is also important if you want to play well. Beginners are better off with a simple violin; one with strings that are clear and loud, usually steel-core with nickel binding. You do not want to be committed to a super-expensive, custom-made violin, especially when you're starting out. Because contrary to popular belief, a high-quality instrument doesn't mean that you're going to sound any better.

In fact, you're most likely going to sound worse. Those high-end violins are actually better once you understand how to play, because it takes more control and skill to keep the sound level either high or low, while at the same time warm and coherent. A standard violin for students will do just fine. Also, make sure you get the right size violin. There are several different sizes, ranging from full size all the way to 1/16 size. Full size violins are the largest you'll find, and they are meant for adults and children ages eleven and up.

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Then there's 1/8, which is usually for elementary school kids. 1/8 sized violins 1/8 size instruments are for those with arm lengths of 17 to 22 inches. Sizes 1/8, 1/10, and 1/16 are all used by younger musicians between the ages of three and six. If you are choosing a size, the person selling you the violin will probably have you hold it under your chin and stretch out your arm. Your arm should be slightly bent when you hold it under the neck of the violin.

If it is too bent, the instrument is too small, too stretched out and the violin is probably too big. After you have chosen a proper violin and either rented or bought it, it would be a good idea to learn about actually creating sound with it. The violin is one of the hardest instruments to play, mostly because it's really hard just making sound with it. You should notice that there is a fingerboard on the neck and over the body, a set of fine tuners (optional) on a rack next to the bridge that holds the strings up, and a chin rest that is attached to one side. First, make sure you attach your shoulder rest to the back of the violin also. There are many different kinds of shoulder rests, but the basic rule of thumb is that the wider end of it should be on the side of the instrument just underneath the chin rest.

Be sure to read the directions that come with your shoulder rest or talk to your teacher. Hold the violin under your chin; your left jaw should be resting on the chin rest and your collarbone and the fleshy part underneath it should be holding up the shoulder rest and the entire violin. If you are holding it right, you won't need to use your hands, and the violin should be in a horizontal line sticking out of the left side of your neck at a slight angle (just be careful that you don't drop the instrument). It is advisable to do this

standing up straight, with your left foot pointed towards the same direction as the violin. Unlike the guitar, there is no “ left-handed” violin.

All players must play on the left side, holding the bow with their right hand. If you have any trouble, remember, your instructor is there for you. Why else would you pay them fifty to a couple hundred bucks a month, right? After you’ve figured out how to hold the actual violin, it’s time to learn how to use the bow. Many violin and cello instructors take a more “ modern approach” to learning how to play your instrument by teaching you how to use pizzicato, or plucking the strings, because it is easier to make sound that way. But I’ll teach you the way I learned, which was with the bow before anything else.

Looking at the bow, it is easy to tell where the grip is. This grip part is called the frog, and on the end of the frog is the nut, or screw, which will be important later on. There is also usually some sort of circle or mark on the frog. This indicates where you put your middle finger while holding the bow. On the wooden part of the bow, the stick, you should see a pad that looks kind of like a pencil grip just underneath plastic or metal wire that’s coiled up.

In between the wire and the grip is where you’ll hook your forefinger. Your thumb will hold up the bow by being in the roof of the U-shaped part of the frog, right next to the hairs. The ring finger should rest on the flat edge of the frog opposite your thumb, and your pinkie can rest on top of the nut. If you are holding it properly, you won’t be gripping it in a fist with your entire hand over the frog; you’ll have a light but sturdy grip that balances the

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bow's weight in your hand. The nut itself is important for tightening – and loosening – your bow hairs.

It's the basic righty-tighty, lefty-loosey concept, but to make sure your hairs are bunched together well. If the bow is tightened just right, the stick should have a slight curve inward towards the hairs that is barely noticeable, and the hairs should be taut when you pull them across the violin strings. If they are too loose they will fray, and if they are too tight, you might snap your bow. Sometimes it's a good idea to have a spare bow around. Just make sure they are both the same size and correct for your instrument. If your bow has a few hairs detach every now and then, it's okay, and you should just pull them off or clip them with scissors.

But if you start losing several hairs at a time, then you might be tightening the bow wrong. Keep in mind that after you play you should loosen your bow so that it isn't so tense all the time. Now that you know how to tighten and loosen your bow, and how to hold it, it's time to learn how to apply rosin. Rosin helps your bow create friction against the violin strings and create a decent sound. This is one of the main ingredients in not sounding like a dying cat, if used properly.

Chances are, if you have a brand new bow, it doesn't have any rosin on it. You will notice that the rosin either comes in it's own little wrapping or case. You don't have to take the thing out of the container; all you have to do is slide your tightened or loosened bow hairs (it's really up to you; I like to apply rosin on my bow when it's loose, but that's just me) like you're scrubbing it with a sponge. Do it a lot, and do it often, especially when you're

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first starting out. Just make sure you don't apply too much, because then when you play it will sound very scratchy and bumpy. If your bow has enough rosin, it will give off a white powder if you rub the hairs.

But don't rub the hairs with your fingers! Your natural oils will tamper with the hairs and stuff like that, so be careful. It's best to avoid touching the hairs if at all possible. It's best to test your rosin with a cloth or by rubbing it against the strings. But if your rosin starts making a powdery mess everywhere even with the slightest tap of the stick, you might have a bit too much. Another important thing about rosin is that it gets on your strings when you play all the time.

This is why you might sound scratchy when you play, even if you barely applied any rosin to your bow. To prevent this, it would be a good idea to use a soft, lint-free cloth and rub it along the strings. Make sure you get the finger board and underneath too, because they can get really dusty with rosin and it looks better if you have a clean violin. Anyway, I haven't even begun to explain how to actually play the violin! So I will tell you. If you know how to hold the violin, and you know how to hold the bow, all you have to do is lift your bow up to the strings, the hairs near the frog touching the string you want to play.

Your bowing arm (your right arm) should be bent at a seventy-degree angle or something like that, and your bow hairs should only be touching one string, or else you might make a really undesirable sound. You will probably learn about double-stops and chords and stuff after a few years of playing.

Balance is everything here, so just try hard to stay on the one string. For

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your first few notes you don't need to put your fingers on the strings, just so you can get to know the motion of bowing. Starting at the frog, you should apply pressure to the bow and pull downwards with your elbow; by the time you reach the tip of the bow your arm should be nearly straight.

That was called a down bow stroke, for obvious reasons. To do an up bow stroke, keep the same amount of pressure and push back up with your bow, bending your elbow again. If you did all of this correctly, then congratulations, you've just played your first two notes on the violin! If not, it's alright, it takes a lot of practice to get the motions correctly, all the while keeping the balance of the bow. Try again, and never give up! Chances are, you've noticed that the four different strings make different pitches. These four strings are called the G string, the D string, the A string, and the E string, from left to right.

The G string is the deepest, and makes a G₃ pitch when you play the open (without any fingers) string and your violin is tuned correctly. The A string makes an A₄ pitch, the D string a D₃, and the E string an E₅. There are many tuning devices that can help you get these four notes in tune, and the pegs and fine tuners on your violin can also help. As a beginner, you should let your instructor tune your violin for awhile, but once you get the hang of it and train your ear, you should be able to twist the pegs at the neck-side of your violin for large-scale tuning, and the fine tuners near the bridge for small-scale tuning (the righty-tighty, lefty-loosey rules still apply; the tighter the sharper the note will be). Tuning is very important for delicate string instruments like the violin because the strings are exposed all the time, and

the slightest change in temperature or humidity can make the strings too slack.

That's why you should make sure your violin stays in a room-temperature area with a consistent level of humidity. There are many devices such as hygrometers and hydrator thingy-ma-bobs that can aid you in keeping your violin wet enough or dry enough or whatever. Anyway, soon enough you'll be playing like a pro, and you can brag to all your friends, express yourself through music, and all that good stuff. Music is a wonderful thing and you've opened the gateway to a million possibilities, which are all possible with the right amount of hard work. Just remember that practice makes perfect, and you've crossed the Rubicon by deciding to learn the violin.

There is no going back.