



THE ULTIMATE VIOLA WARMUP GUIDE

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Introduction

We all know that there is no single warm-up routine that works for everyone. If no two faces are exactly alike, why should two warm-up routines be the same? We each have our own preferences, skill levels, and needs when it comes to warming up and practicing.

To me a warm-up routine on the viola has certain parallels to an everyday morning routine. Most of us do not wake up, instantly ready to jump into their running shoes, in expectation of a new, personal 5 mile record. I assume most of us would rather prefer to have some time to prepare for challenges of the day ahead, maybe a few stretches, a shower, healthy breakfast, reading up on some news, enjoying a few calm minutes listening to your favorite music.. In other words, laying a good foundation for the day ahead, both mentally and physically.

Similarly, a good warm-up routine ideally lays the groundwork for what will follow during the practice session. Making sure our body feels at home with the instrument, our posture is in good shape and comfort, our minds calm and in control of our extremities, before everything is being stress-tested by practicing technically demanding repertoire, or complexities of orchestral excerpts, for example.

On the following pages I will share a few exercises that I find very beneficial, many of them being trusted companions throughout my career, exercises I always come back to, because every single one is focused on a specific task, a specific fundamental aspect of Viola playing. With this singular focus of each etude, it is much easier to tackle technical aspects individually, which in essence is one of the big difference between repertoire and etudes.

Whereas the order of the exercises presented is my preferred progression through this routine, don't feel obligated to follow this routine exactly, or even in its completion every day.

If you're just starting out in your viola journey, think of this as a starting point. Don't play anything that's too difficult for you, warming up should always instill a sensation of relaxation and suppleness. If you're a more advanced player, consider this a checklist of common exercises to get to every few days in your routine!

Stretching

Violists, violinists, and flute players (among other instrumentalists) face a common challenge: the physical posture required while playing these instruments is highly asymmetrical. Of course, we always strive to maintain an efficient and comfortable posture, but given the nature of our instruments, less-than-ideal posture is often inevitable.

Considering that many of us spend several hours a day practicing, taking precautions is important. Many years ago, I came across an article by Pilates instructor and physical therapist John Black, who published 11 stretching exercises for musicians. These exercises are suitable for warm-up and warm-down routines. The following stretches only take a few minutes but can significantly help prepare and reset our body before and after practice sessions.

1. Standing Tall

Stand with feet hip-width apart, draw your lower tummy in and up (a little) and lengthen up through the crown of your head, looking straight ahead. Let your arms hang by your sides, palms facing into thighs. Relax your shoulders and draw shoulder blades gently down your back, but without sticking out your lower ribcage.

Then take a few deep breaths, breathing IN to the sides and back of your ribcage and OUT drawing your abs in slightly more.



2. Big Shoulder-Circles

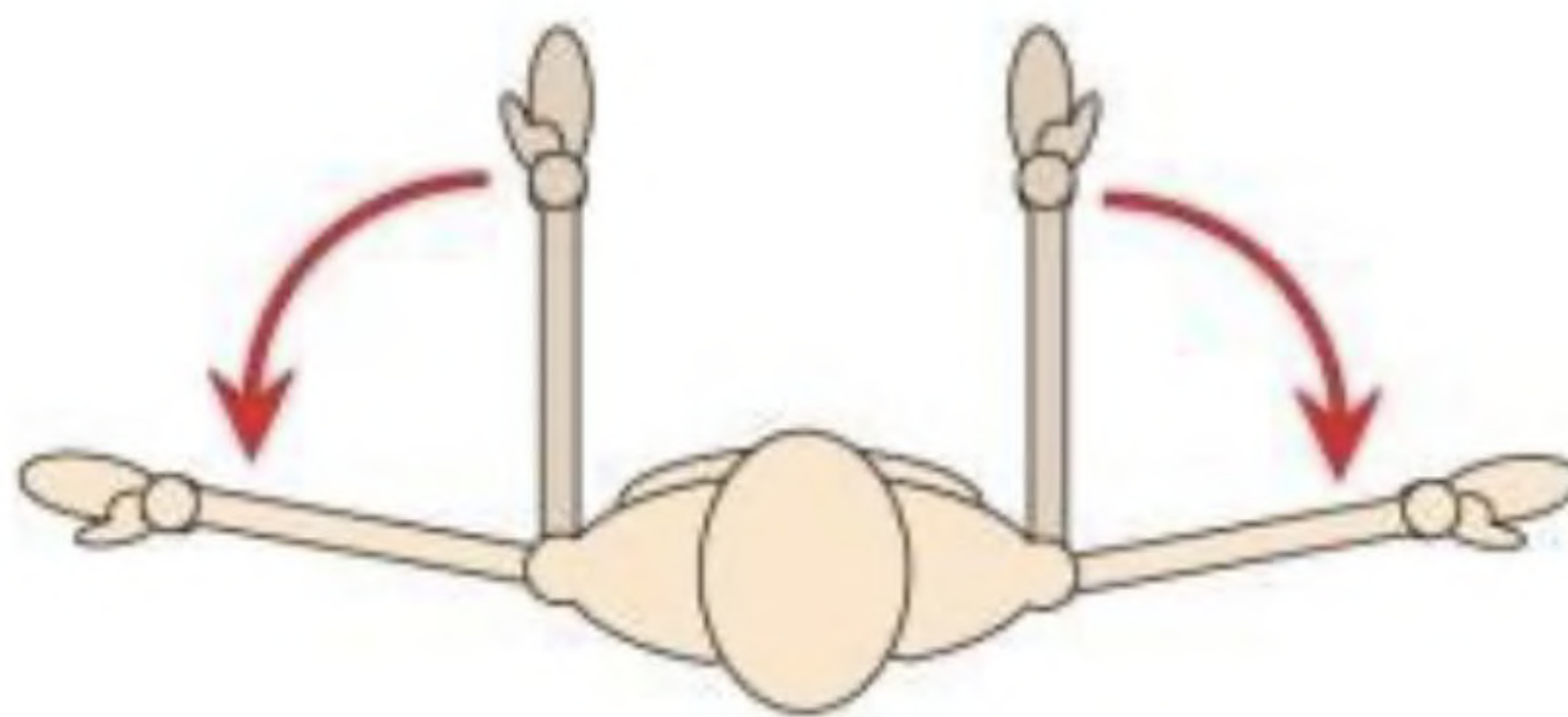
Bring your shoulders up to your ears, letting the arms just hang. Then try and touch shoulder blades behind, as you circle your shoulders. This is purely to loosen up your shoulders. Reverse the circles.

3. Dumb Waiter

Have your forearms parallel to the floor and each other, with palms facing up and elbows into your sides. As you breathe OUT (drawing your tummy in a little), rotate your arms out, keeping your elbows into your sides as much as possible. Breathe IN to return them to parallel.

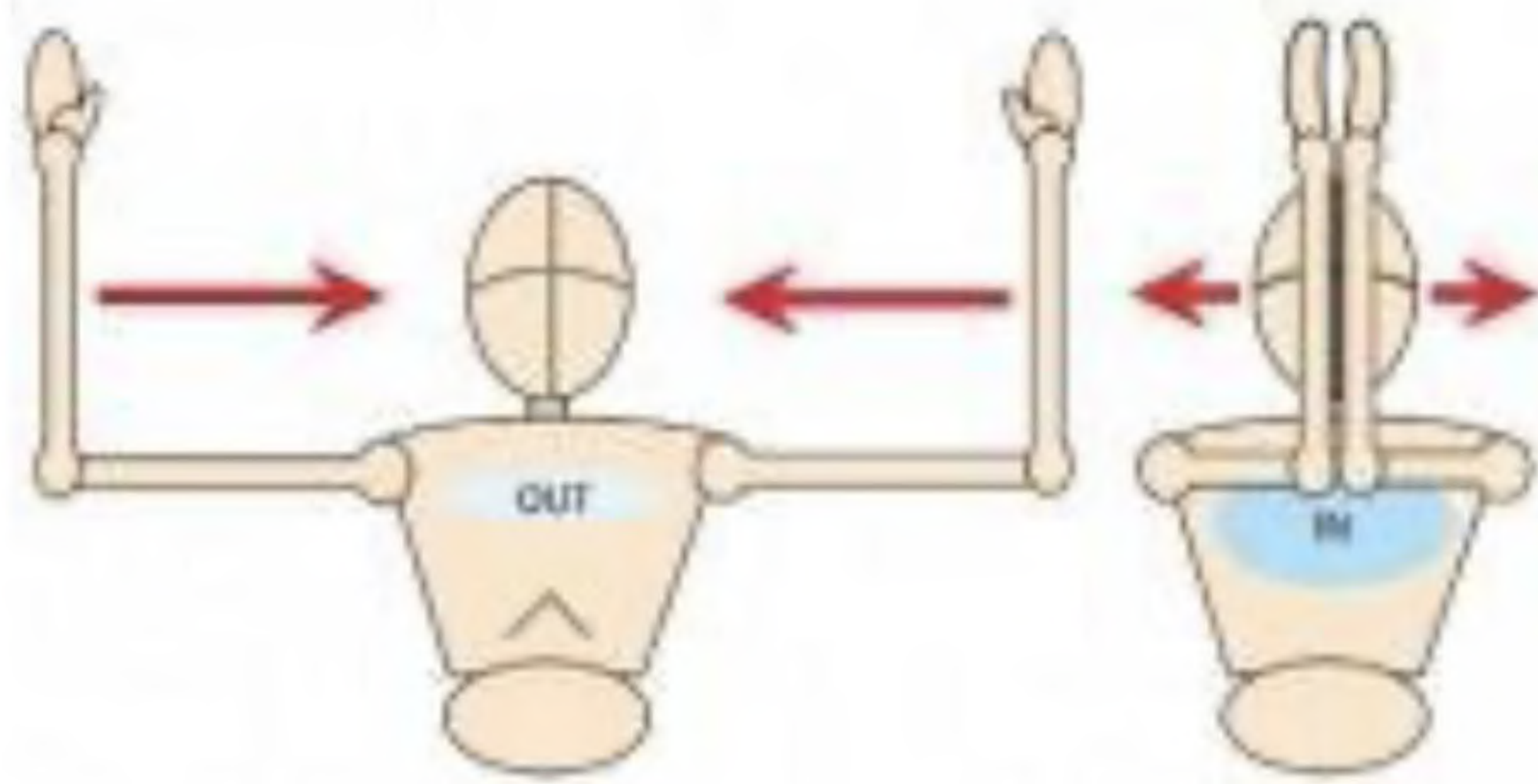
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4. Openings

Have upper arms in line with shoulders and have a right angle at your elbows, palms facing front. Breathing OUT bring right-angled arms tightly together (elbows as well). Breathe IN as you take them wide and stretch back.



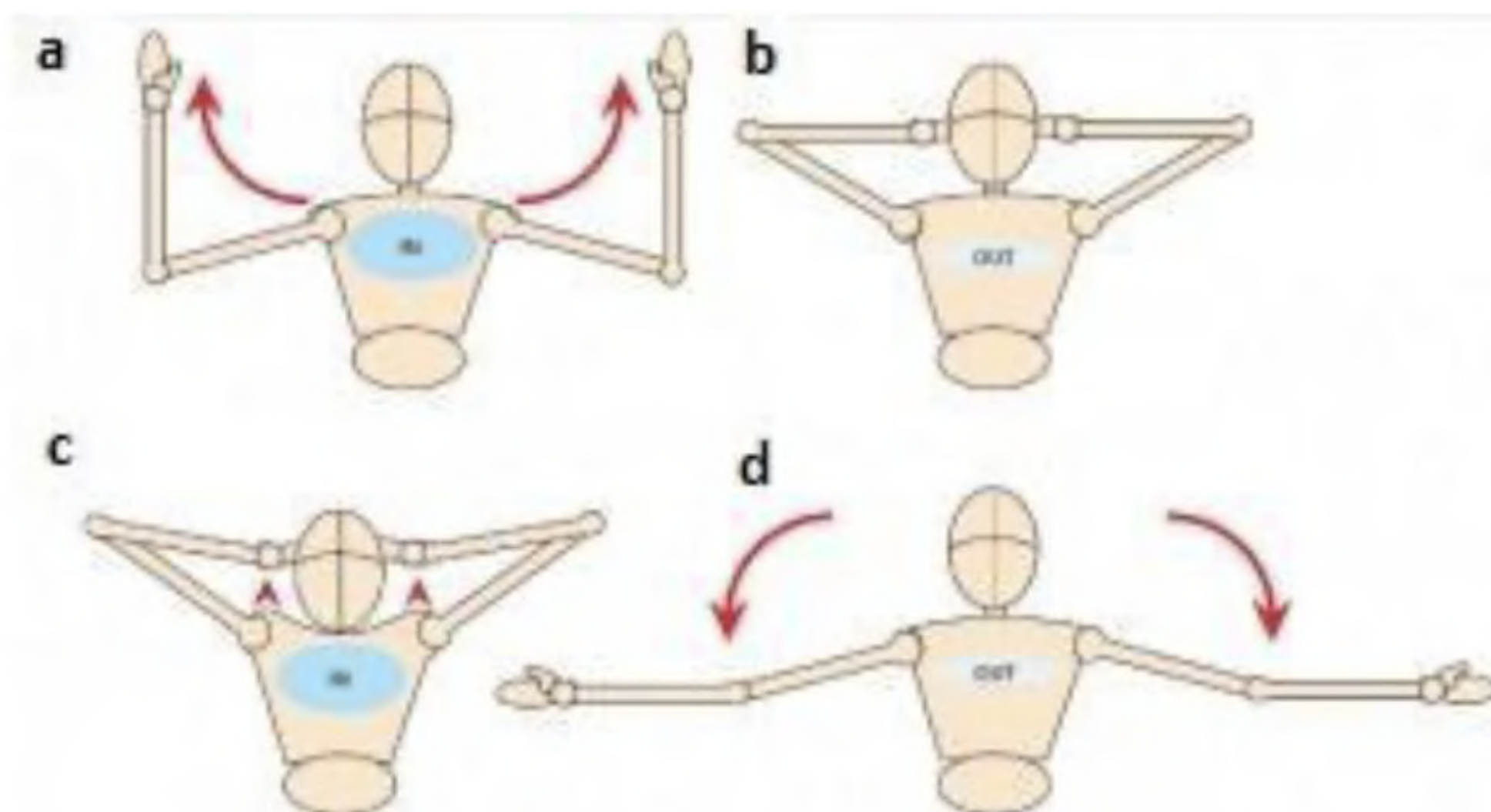
5. Floating Arms

[a] On an IN-breath, float your arms up (hands just forward of shoulders), keeping your shoulder blades drawn down.

[b] Breathe OUT, bringing your forearms behind your head.

[c] On an IN-breath, shrug your shoulders as high as possible.

[d] On an OUT-breath, lower shoulder blades as far as possible and float the arms back down, keeping shoulder blades drawing down.

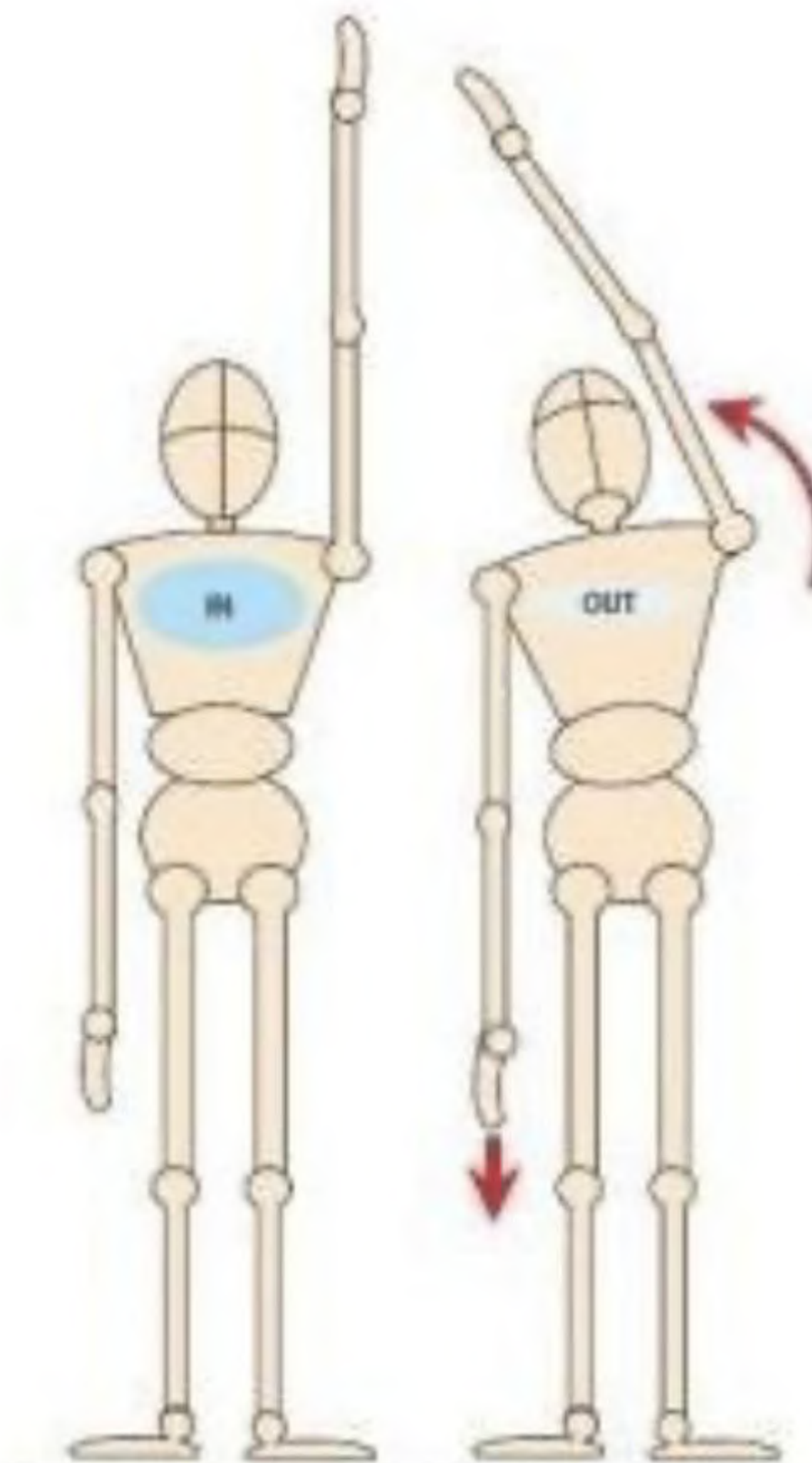


6. The Cossack

Place one forearm lightly on the other, keeping shoulders relaxed and open, with shoulder blades drawing down your back, and breathe IN. Breathing OUT, rotate arms and head as one unit to your right, keeping your pelvis facing forward. Breathe IN to return to the front and OUT to turn to the left. Keep alternating. This exercise is easier to do sitting (as illustrated), because your pelvis is fixed.

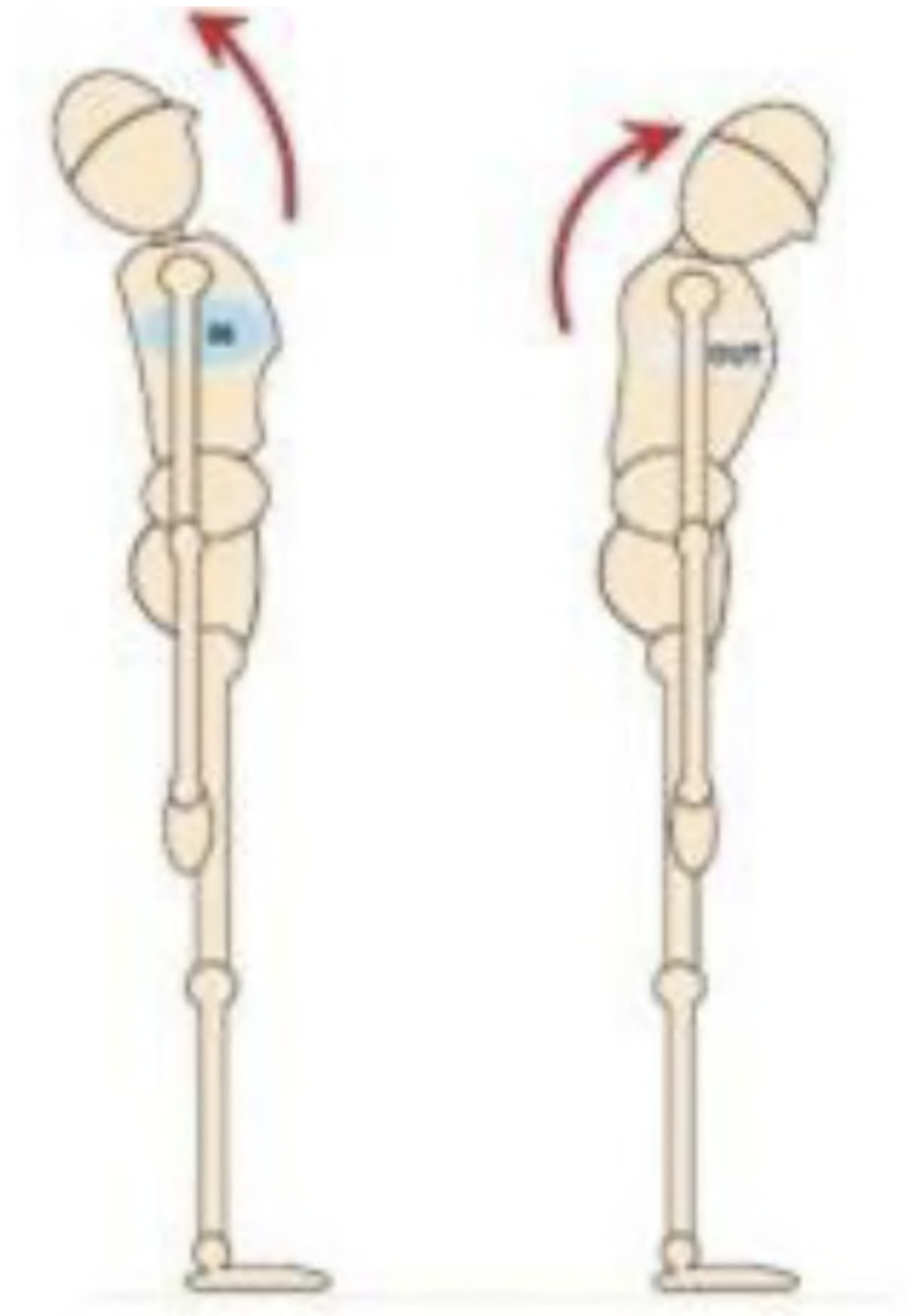
7. Side Reaches

Stand with feet parallel and hip-width apart. Breathe IN to lengthen up through the spine, raising one arm as you try to keep that shoulder blade drawing down: breathing OUT lengthen as you reach upwards towards the opposite corner of the room, the other hand going down your thigh. Make sure you only go over to the side. Breathe IN to lengthen up again. Alternate side to side.



8. Flex & Extend

Breathe IN and lengthen back and up through the crown of your head, extending your spine back a little while drawing in your tummy. Breathe OUT as you nod your head (chin to chest) and curl your neck forward.

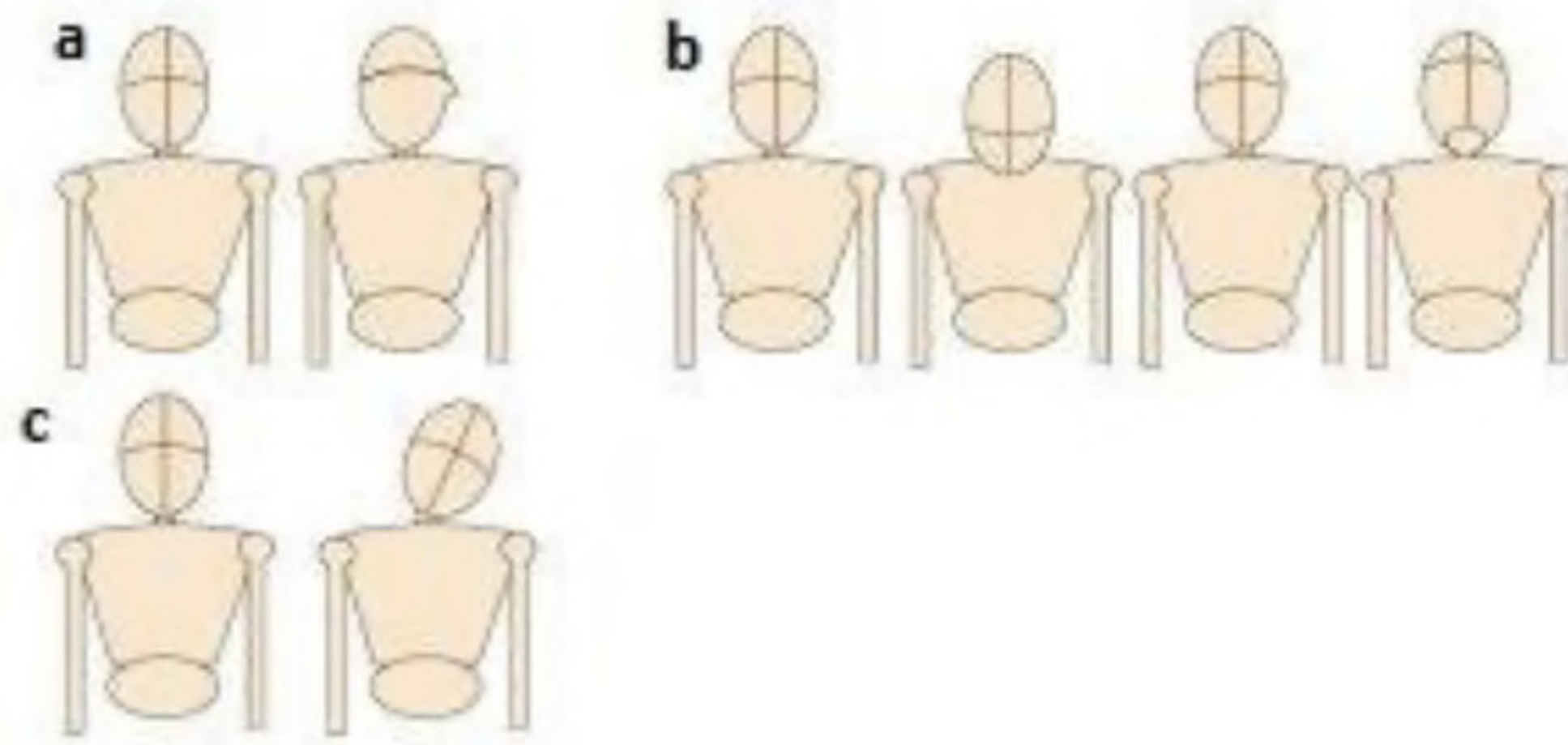


9. Neck Turns

[a] Standing tall (eyes straight ahead), keeping chin parallel with the floor, gently turn your head from side to side to look over each shoulder.

[b] Be tall and look straight ahead, drop chin to chest, then take the head directly back to look over your head, before coming back to look horizontal again.

[c] A side neck bend. Keep your head to the front throughout, and take your ear over to your shoulder each side. (Any neural 'zing' – stop!)



10. Arm & Finger Stretches

Hold your right arm out straight in front of you, palm down and elbow locked. With your other hand, gently draw back your fingers. Keep your arm the same, but this time bend the wrist over, drawing the hand back towards you with the other hand. Repeat on the other side. Hold your hands out in front of you, elbows soft, take first and second fingers together away from the fourth and fifth, also together, creating a gap. Return, and alternate with separating first and fourth fingers from the middle two, which stay together

11. Roll Downs

If you have no serious issues with your back, roll downs (standing with the knees slightly bent, dropping the chin to the chest and letting the rest of the spine gradually curl down towards the floor) are a great exercise to include somewhere in your routine. Do them either with your back against the wall (easier on the back) or free standing.

Left Hand

The importance of the left hand for a string player is hard to overestimate, as it is responsible for determining every pitch, except for the open strings. Intonation, sometimes jokingly referred to as 'the bane of a string player's existence', is often the first aspect by which a string player is judged. Consistent intonation requires continuous attention, and there is no better place to start than during a warm-up.

Schradiack – School of Viola Technique

The first exercise I would like to recommend is a classic for violists and violinists alike, an excerpt from Schradiack's School of Viola Technique.

On the first page of Book I of Schradiack's School of Viola Technique, the author focuses exclusively on fingering patterns in the first position on the D-string. Practicing slowly gives us ample time to assess comfort, finger activity, and control, while the bow arm maintains a steady legato. There is no obligation to slur 16 notes at once; in a recommended slower tempo, starting with slurring 8 or even 4 notes is absolutely sufficient."

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Practice recommendations:

- Start very slowly, with a tempo of an eighth note equals 40-60 beats per minute.
- Ideally fingers with rounded knuckles
- Leave fingers on the string for as long as possible
 - e.g. 1st line: 0-1-2-3-4-3-2-1 -> 1st, 2nd, 3rd finger can stay on the string, until it is their turn again, when the figure descends
- Slur 4, or 8 notes at first
- Continually check for tension in your body.
 - Are my shoulders relaxed?
 - Am I gripping the neck of the viola too tightly?
 - Can my left hand be more relaxed?
 - Evaluate the effort needed to press the strings, it may not be as much as you think.
 - Observe the position of your thumb. Is the thumb relaxed?
- Focus on actively lifting your fingers rather than pressing them down forcefully.
 - Fingers should FALL on the string, determined, but flexible and relaxed
 - Only LIFTING the fingers requires active effort

Scales

The natural progression from Schradieck exercises is to practice a simple scale. Even a 2-octave scale introduces one aspect that we have not yet needed to pay attention to: simple, progressive string crossings, all the way from the C to the A string, for both the left and right hands. The main focus still remains on the left hand for this part of the warm-up. Don't hesitate to start with a trusty C-major scale in two octaves to get things rolling.



You could start with separate bows at a slow tempo; I prefer grouping the notes by twos at first. It is important to continuously monitor your left-hand activity, with all aspects previously mentioned regarding Schradieck still being relevant.

Practice recommendations:

- Start very slowly, with a tempo of a quarter note equals 30 beats per minute.
- Keep the fingers curved, with rounded knuckles.
- Start with separate bowing or slurring two notes together.
- Gradually increase the tempo with each repetition, eventually grouping four and then eight notes per bow.
- Continually check for tension in your body.
 - Are my shoulders relaxed? Am I gripping the neck of the viola too tightly? Can my left hand be more relaxed?
 - Evaluate the effort needed to press the strings, it may not be as much as you think.
 - Observe the position of your thumb. Is the thumb relaxed?
- Focus on actively lifting your fingers rather than pressing them down forcefully.
- Maintain a steady bow for consistent sound production and be mindful during string crossings.

Scale routines are an entire universe by itself, for those who are interested I included a few advanced scale routines on pages XYZ (in the end)

Shifting

The concept of shifting on a string instrument involves moving the left hand up the fingerboard to reach higher notes or to create different sound colours. Gaylord Yost solidified his legacy in violin and viola history with his comprehensive work, *Exercises for Change of Position*. The fundamental practice routines described in this book can be adapted to all positions and key signatures, making it an excellent starting point for personalising these exercises.

1 1 1 1 1 2 2 1 1 3 3 1 1 4 4 1

5 2 1 1 2 2 2 2 2 3 3 2 2 4 4 2

9 3 1 1 3 3 2 2 3 3 3 3 3 4 4 3

13 4 1 1 4 4 2 2 4 4 3 3 4 4 4 4

Yost suggests using the 1st position as a starting point and the 3rd position as the target. This routine progressively involves all four fingers as both the starting and target fingers. In just these simple four lines, we cover all variations of shifting from 1st to 3rd position.

Regarding the execution of the shifts, it is of utmost importance to lighten the finger performing the shift. It should not press onto the fingerboard during the shift, but instead gently glide along the string until it reaches the target position, where it can then land gently on the fingerboard again.

As this is a warm-up, we are not striving for speed but for accurate, clean, and relaxed execution. Therefore, feel free to practice this routine as slowly as you wish. Also, do not worry if the shift itself is audible; a soft, audible shifting sound as the finger glides gently up and down the string is preferable to an abrupt, jolt-like execution.

This routine is incredibly adaptable, from starting on different strings to beginning in different positions. For example, consider a routine on the C-string, starting in the 3rd position and aiming for the 5th position.

Practice recommendations:

- Very slow, relaxed, and accurate execution is key.
- The shifting finger should not press into the string while shifting but should glide along the string gently.
- Audible shifts are welcome.
- Continuously check for tension in your body, especially in the shoulders and thumb.

Bow Arm

Kreutzer No. 1

It is difficult to discuss etudes and technical fundamentals without mentioning Rodolphe Kreutzer. His landmark collection, the 42 Etudes, has shaped generations of violinists and violists and remains relevant and incredibly adaptable to this day.

To warm up our bow arm, I recommend the widely used Kreutzer No. 1 (edition-dependent), which is simple and approachable enough for violists of all levels and can be adapted for numerous variations.

Allegro moderato.

The image shows a page of musical notation for Kreutzer No. 1. It consists of eight staves of music. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one flat (B-flat), and a common time signature (C). The tempo marking "Allegro moderato." is placed above the first staff. The first note of the first staff is marked with a forte dynamic (*f*). The music is a continuous exercise of sixteenth notes, alternating between the upper and lower staves of the violin/viola. The notation includes various bowing techniques such as slurs and accents. The piece concludes with a final double bar line and the numbers "4 2" at the bottom right of the eighth staff.

As our focus is on warming up the bow arm, I suggest starting with a slow and controlled tempo. This allows time to focus on actively relaxing the shoulders and producing a round, warm, and even sound. The bow should lay on the string, not forcefully but with a healthy amount of natural weight from the arm, transmitted through secure, yet subtle, fingers. In a slow tempo, we can also anticipate string crossings and control our sounding point—the contact point between the bow hair and string.

I recommend beginning in the middle of the bow and gradually extending the length of the bow strokes until you use one full bow per 16th note, while maintaining the sound quality and sounding point throughout. Feel the stretch when extending towards the tip and the shift in weight balance when approaching the frog, keeping the right shoulder low and relaxed. Another variation would be to play the etude using only the tip or only the frog of the bow, continuously monitoring tension in the right shoulder—this is particularly important near the frog.

After this initial slow approach, we can gradually increase the tempo, or even double or quadruple the value of individual notes, to maintain focus on the bow arm without distraction from a busy left hand.

Kreutzer himself, along with many editors of his work, have recommended various bowings, groupings, rhythms and bow stroke techniques. Feel free to explore these in addition to these simple warm-up exercises.

Practice recommendations:

- Very slow, relaxed, and accurate execution is key. A tempo of a sixteenth note equals as slow as 30 beats per minute
- Maintain a good sounding point (straight bowing) and a round, relaxed and singing sound
- Continually check for tension in your body, especially in the right shoulder, while expanding the bowing from tip to frog
- While gradually increasing tempo, doubling individual notes can help maintaining the focus on the bow arm

Kreutzer No. 12

This etude is dedicated solely to repeated string crossings. The left hand remains in one position for the duration of each bar, while the bow arm facilitates repeated crossings between two strings.

12. **Moderato**

The musical score for Kreutzer No. 12, Moderato, is presented in ten staves. It is written in G major (one sharp) and 3/4 time. The piece is characterized by repeated string crossings, with the left hand remaining in a fixed position throughout. The score includes various fingering numbers (1, 2, 3, 4) and accents. The piece concludes with a final cadence on the tenth staff.







For warming up, I recommend initially ignoring the staccato markings on the separate notes and focusing solely on an efficient, relaxed execution of the string crossings, while maintaining a nice, round sound. This approach allows us to evaluate the movements of our shoulder, arm, and wrist during repeated string crossings, ideally promoting a flowing motion throughout the arm and wrist rather than solely engaging the shoulder. Also, for the purpose of warming up, it is not necessary to play the tune in its entirety.

The most natural way to play this exercise is around the middle of your bow, but it can be interesting to explore the same exercise further towards the frog or tip, while maintaining a relaxed shoulder and a good sounding point.

Practice recommendations:

- A slow tempo, that leaves opportunity to actively monitor the bow arm, while maintaining a good sound
- Monitor tension, especially in the shoulder
- Aim for seamless, but conscious string crossings, with clear activity from lower arm and wrist

Afterward

Needless to say, as each exercise touches upon fundamental concepts of viola playing, this collection of etudes is not intended to provide a complete technical overview of the entire universe of viola technique. Instead, it is meant to ground us in some core fundamentals every time we warm up before a practice session.

Warm-up routines are individual, and you have the flexibility to expand each aspect in many ways. You can add technical elements such as vibrato or specific bow strokes to the routine, or choose to omit certain aspects.

As mentioned at the beginning, warming up is not just a routine to prepare physically, but also mentally, making the instrument a place of comfort and familiarity.

Best of luck, and I hope you find this warm-up routine helpful!

Christian Kim

Viola Lead @ tonebase



Bonus: Extended Scales Routine

The following scale routines lend themselves perfectly for different groupings, two, three, four, six, eight, twelve, twenty-four notes per bow, at increasing tempos.

3 Octave Scales

C major

D major - D \flat uses same fingering

E \flat major - E, F, F \sharp /G \flat , and G use same fingerings
F and F \sharp /G \flat will start in 2nd position, G will start in 3rd position

A major - G \sharp /A \flat , A \sharp /B \flat , and B use same fingerings

C minor

Musical notation for the C minor scale, measures 1-6. The piece is in 4/4 time and C minor. The bass clef part starts with a 0 (open string) and the treble clef part starts with a -4 (natural 4th fret). Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-4 and -1, -2, -3, -4.

14 D minor - D \flat uses same fingering

Musical notation for the D minor scale, measures 7-13. The piece is in 4/4 time and D minor. The bass clef part starts with a 1 (1st fret) and the treble clef part starts with a -4 (natural 4th fret). Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-4 and -1, -2, -3, -4.

27 E minor - D \sharp /E \flat , F, F \sharp /G \flat , and G use same fingering

Musical notation for the E minor scale, measures 14-26. The piece is in 4/4 time and E minor. The bass clef part starts with a 2 (2nd fret) and the treble clef part starts with a -4 (natural 4th fret). Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-4 and -1, -2, -3, -4.

40 A minor - G \sharp /A \flat , A \sharp /B \flat , and B use same fingering

Musical notation for the A minor scale, measures 27-39. The piece is in 4/4 time and A minor. The bass clef part starts with a 1 (1st fret) and the treble clef part starts with a -4 (natural 4th fret). Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-4 and -1, -2, -3, -4.

Arpeggios

G Arpeggios - same fingerings for G \flat /F \sharp , A \flat /G \sharp , A, B \flat , B

31

35

39

42