

## FINDING A HEALTHY SETUP ON VIOLIN AND VIOLA

Here is a link to an excellent article, “Finding a Solution to Pain-Free Playing,” by Jill Rothberg, interviewing Peter Purich, Montréal-based luthier and maker of custom-made chin rests and shoulder rests.  
<http://www.cammac.ca/Journal/Dec2007/page02.html>

And here is an account of my own experiences finding a pain-free setup.

## THE ABSOLUTE IMPORTANCE OF A HEALTHY SETUP ON VIOLIN AND VIOLA

by Michael Kimber

Finding a healthy setup hasn't been easy for me. Throughout half a century as a violist, first as a student, then as a professional (though I have never stopped being a “student” of the viola) I fought a mostly losing battle in the search for a comfortable and functional setup. Being tall, thin, and flat-chested, I am not one of those fortunate individuals who look like they were born to play the viola. I could never get comfortable with the instrument. For one thing, every shoulder rest I tried was too low in front and often unnecessarily high over my shoulder, forcing my head and viola to be uncomfortably tilted. The rigidity of most shoulder rests immobilized my shoulder and neck causing further pain. I cursed my body for not being suited to play a string instrument. There were times when I really wondered whether I should simply give up playing – really!

In desperation, at the age of 45, I designed my own shoulder rest. Made of poly-foam, its shape followed the slope and curve of my shoulder, a very simple concept that apparently had never occurred to the designers of commercially available shoulder rests. Both the shape and the flexibility of this invention, which I named the poly-pad, brought me immediate relief from pain related to playing. I decided to try it out on the college string methods class I taught – novice string players who typically struggled to hold a violin or viola and often complained of the discomfort of doing so. When my fall 1990 class of students picked up their instruments for the first time, fitted with their new poly-pads, the instruments instantly and naturally went into the correct position with barely any help from me, and I never again heard a complaint about discomfort! To make a long story short, I began selling these pads, word spread mostly by word of mouth (facilitated by email and the internet), and I now sell thousands of these things every year and receive constant thanks and praise for them.

However, my personal quest for a comfortable, secure, and functional setup was not yet over; I still had to deal with the matter of the chin rest. I always knew I needed a higher

chin rest. I tried the SAS and Kreddle, both of which offer exceptional height, but the shape of their plates irritated my neck. (Jordan Hayes, violinist and inventor of the amazing Kreddle, is aware of this and is working on it. I'm eagerly awaiting, since the Kreddle is remarkable for being user-adjustable to just about any height, tilt, or angle!) Every other chin rest I could find on the market was too low, and the shape and tilt of many chin rest plates actually forced my viola downward rather than encouraging it to be sufficiently elevated. I did what I could to elevate my own chin rest, but even after adding as many layers of cork as would fit between chin rest and viola, and putting padding on top of the chin rest, my head was still uncomfortably lowered. In fact, I was missing notes in orchestra, especially at the top of a page, because I could not see clearly enough through the upper part of the progressive focus lenses I must now wear. And how to look up at the conductor? Forget it! I just hope my stand partner is watching.

Finally, in my late 60s, I did what I should have done fifty years ago – and I urge anyone else who is having trouble finding a comfortable chin rest to do the same *now*, and not put it off for decades as I did! I spoke with a talented young luthier (Michele Bartos, who now works for A. Cavallo Violins in Omaha) about what I felt I needed in a chin rest, and she agreed to take on the project, which basically involved adding wood to the base of the chin rest I had been using. After a couple of trial fittings and some eager, anxious weeks of waiting, my personally customized chin rest was ready. It was elevated about half an inch on the right and more on the left, so that my head could be up and level; and it was tilted slightly forward so that when its edge engaged my jawbone, the viola was appropriately elevated, not drooping.

My first reaction to this chin rest was delight that I could, for the first time in my life, easily hold my viola at a “normal” elevation with my head in a “normal” position. My second reaction was utter astonishment at the effect this simple fact had on my playing! I noticed it first in my bowing; everything was easier, better coordinated. My bow stroke from frog to tip was smoother, more even. Expressive nuances that used to feel “blocked” now emerged as I had always wished they could. I could execute varieties of bow strokes and articulations with a clarity and ease that had always eluded me. Then I noticed the improvement in my left hand technique. Risky shifts to high positions were much more consistently accurate (what fun!!). Vibrato was easier. Playing in tune was easier. My left arm wasn't hurting.

After playing my viola with its new chin rest, my body felt better all over. (This had NEVER happened to me before!) As I walked away from practicing, I actually felt that my posture had in some subtle way improved. I wanted to go back and practice more, rather than feeling relieved that I had finished an uncomfortable, arduous task.

The message of this experience, or I should say, lifetime of experiences, is this: a good setup is absolutely crucial! Without it, all the Alexander technique, Feldenkrais, injury prevention advice, etc., will be of limited benefit. In fact, I am tempted to say that a good setup is the foundation of healthy playing and the best way to avoid injury. So, have a good look at your playing, and that of your students. If you notice anything in the posture that hurts or seems awkward, out of balance, unnatural – head leaning sideways

or forward, left shoulder pushed up or forward, neck or upper body twisted, etc. – do not ignore it! Look for possible causes in a setup that fails to fit the player. Maybe someday someone will invent a marvelously ingenious chin rest/shoulder rest combination package that is infinitely variable to suit every imaginable human physique and playing style. Until that wondrous day comes, explore everything available, and if you're not finding what your body needs, get help from someone who may be able to fashion something exactly right for you. There is no need to suffer for your art! Don't!