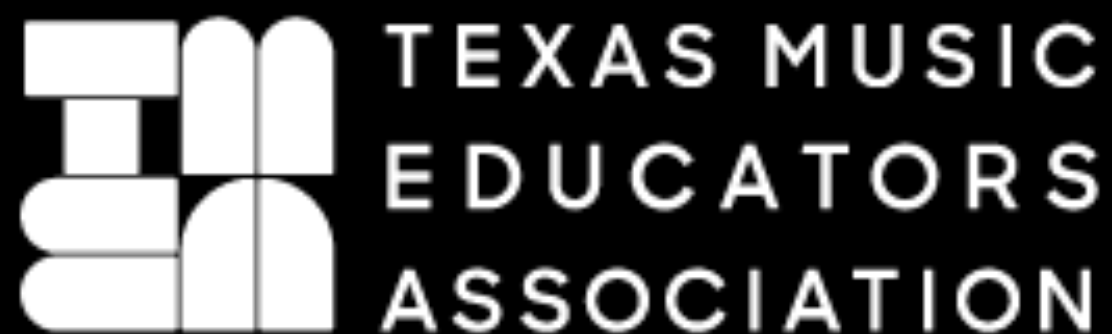


# Setting your string students up for success!

Diagnose and correct common technical problems to allow your students to play their very best.

**Dr. Charles Laux**  
*Lassiter High School*  
*Cobb County School District*



[www.orchestrateacher.net](http://www.orchestrateacher.net)

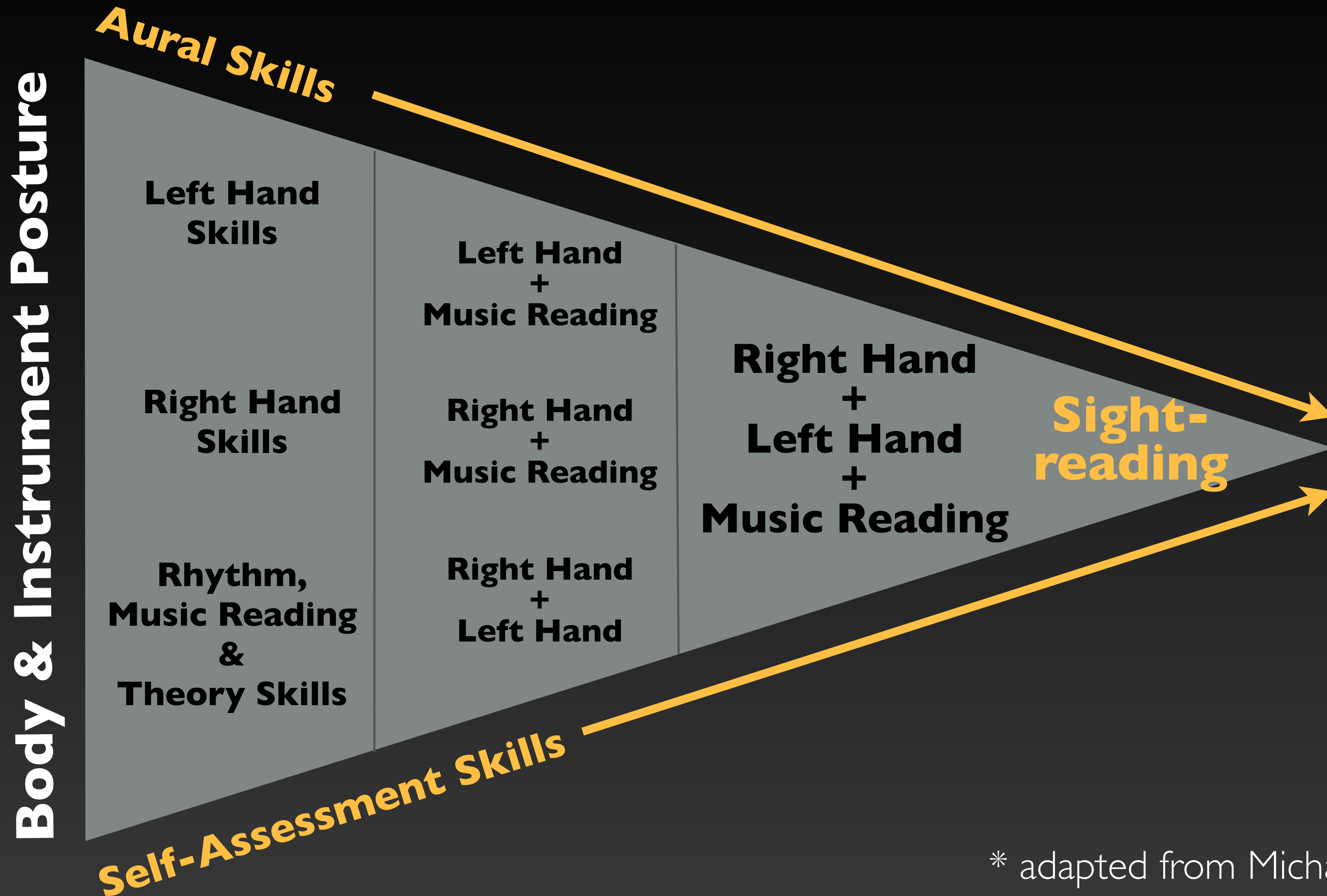
**Every orchestra teacher has  
hopes and dreams...**



# Where I'm coming from...

- Middle School Orchestra (*Nevada, Ohio*)
- Community College Applied Lessons (*Nevada*)
- High School Orchestra (*Florida, Ohio, Georgia*)
- University String Techniques (*UNLV, Ohio State, Kennesaw State*)
- Elementary Strings (Itinerant) (*Ohio*)
- Youth Orchestra Conductor (*Georgia*)

# String Pedagogy Sequence



\* adapted from Michael Allen

# Laux's "Priority" List

1. Set-Up (Essential Technique)
2. Tone Production
3. Intonation
4. Rhythm & Ensemble
5. Music Literacy
6. Musicianship Skills
7. Musical Understanding

# Diagnose Common Problems

- Body
- Instrument Position / Set-Up
- Left Hand
- Right Hand
- Combination of two or more of the above



# Set-Up is Key!

- Good set up is a prerequisite to be able to play efficiently, accurately, and without pain or the risk of injury
  - Body Posture
  - Left Hand Position and Shape
  - Right Hand Shape
- Educate students about the checkpoints and foundations of good set up
- ***Students should begin self and peer assessment from the start***

I fully understand how hard it can be to correct bad habits!



# Body Posture

- Goal/Purpose: Comfort, Injury prevention, Allows for proper LH technique
- If at all possible, stand! (violin and viola)
- **Key Principles:**
  - Body is lengthened and relaxed
  - Tall spine, head slightly forward
  - Players should always listen to their body! If something is uncomfortable or painful something needs to be adjusted.

# Problems:

- Feet not flat on floor
- Slouched posture



# Do you or your students have “tech neck”?

Smartphones are ruining our postures and stiffening our necks



0°  
10 -12lbs

15°  
27lbs

30°  
40lbs

45°  
49lbs

60°  
60lbs

# Body Posture Strategies (Sitting)

- Gillespie - "Grow an Inch"
- Shoulder Shrug
- Stand Up, Sit Down without moving your feet
- Foot Shuffle
- "Sumo Stomp" - cello

# Problem: Instrument Not Parallel to Floor



# Strategies: Instrument Not Parallel to Floor

- “Scrolls up!” Or find other key words that work for you
- Have students balance something on instrument so it doesn’t fall off
- Raise music stands
- Have students stand during rehearsal
- Peer evaluation
- Self evaluation with photo/video

# Problem: Instrument not under jaw bone



# Strategies: Instrument not under jaw bone

- Have student put fingers on end button and move instrument toward their neck
- Explain that the instrument should be an extension of the body
- "Lock it in"
- Try a cloth or pad on chinrest (may be a comfort issue)



# Problem: Instrument not on shoulder

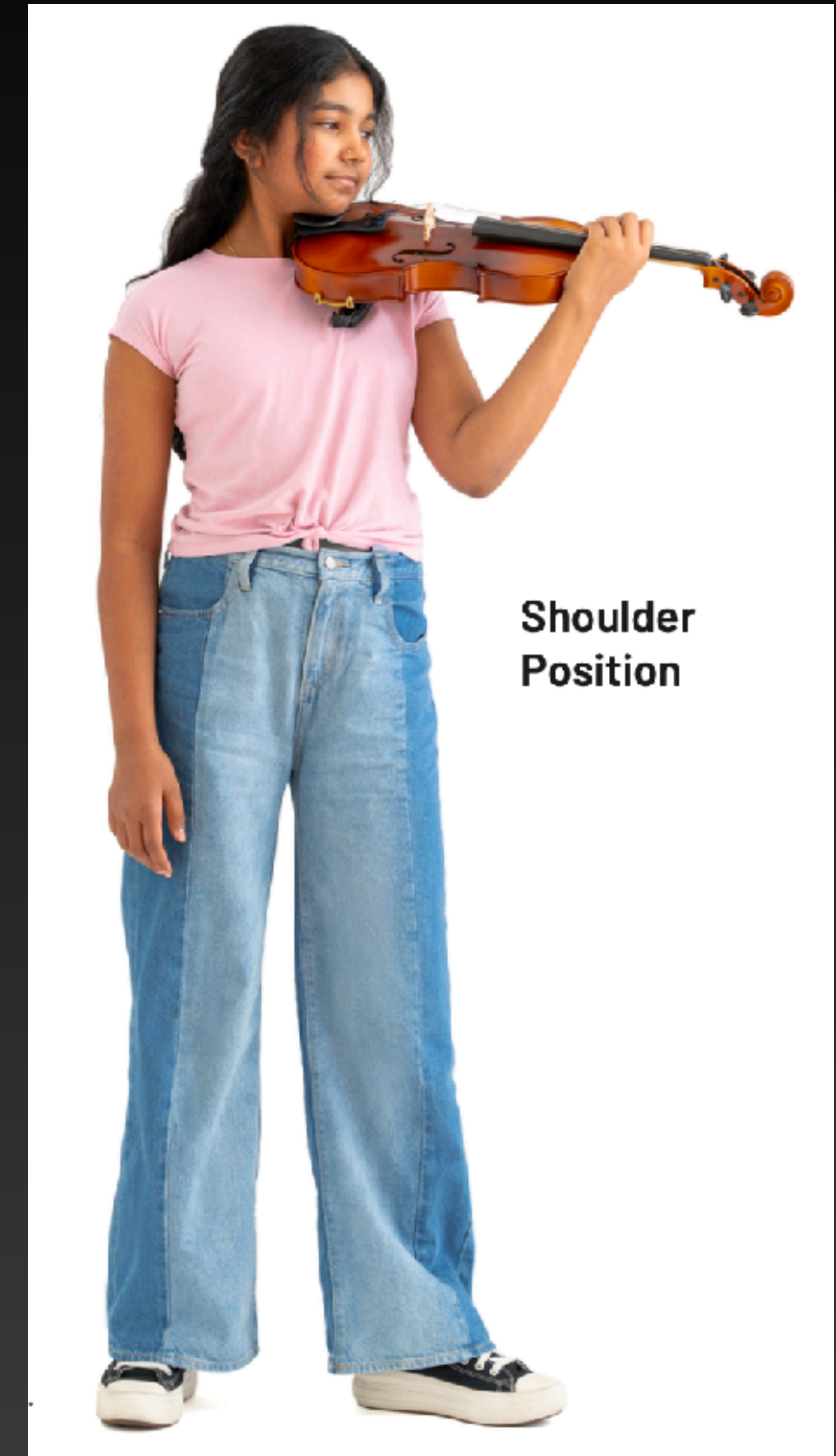


# Strategies: Instrument not on shoulder

- Have students lift instruments in the air with two hands and down into the correct position
- Physically move the instrument to the right position
- "No violin beards"
- "10 O'clock sharp"
- Cause may be the student trying to face the music stand. Remind them to reposition their body/chair!

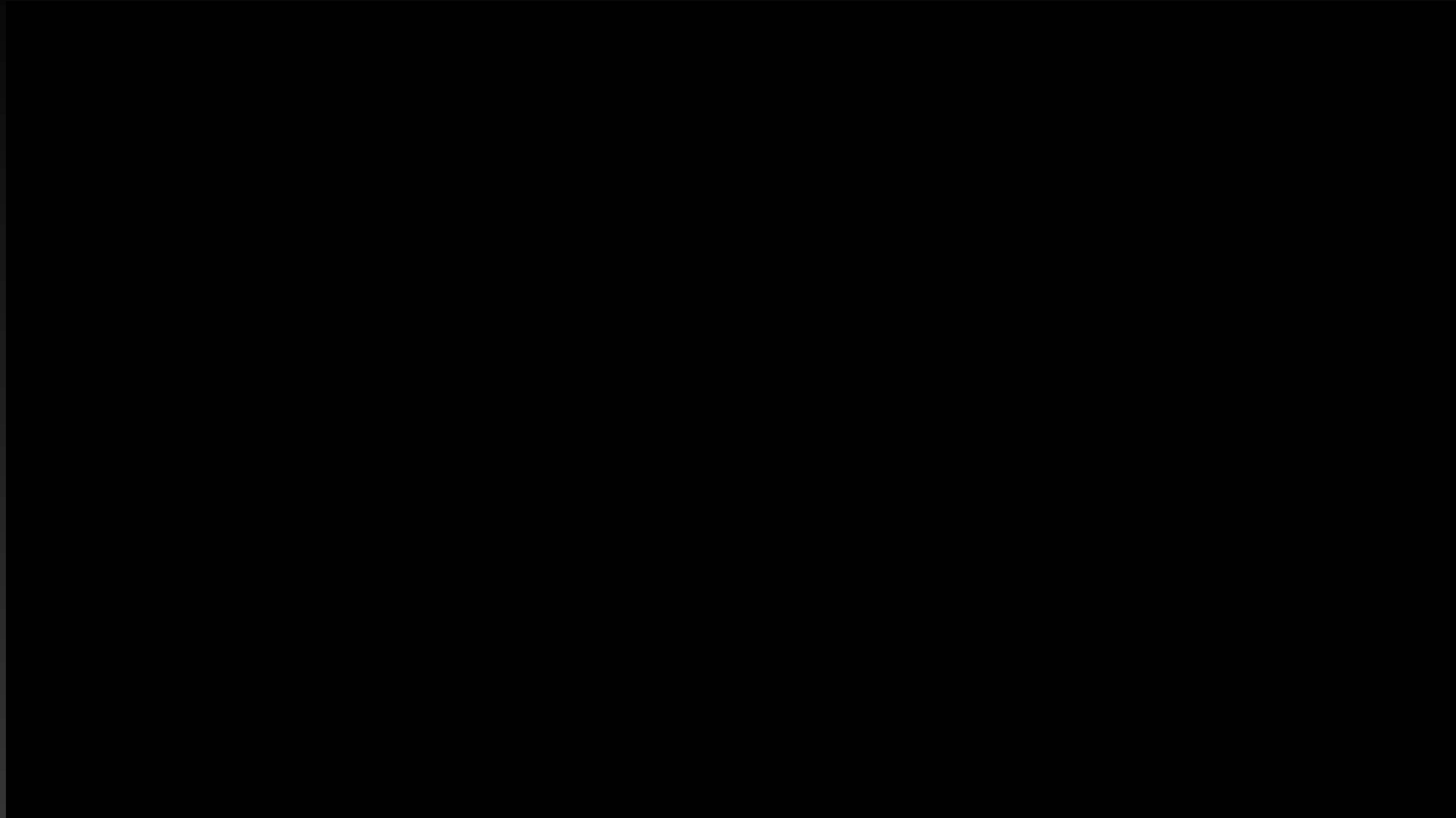
# Check points for Violin/Viola Instrument Position

- Instrument is parallel to the ground
- Instrument/Shoulder rest fully covers shoulder
- Instrument is positioned at 10 o'clock
- Nose aligns with strings (head turned slightly to the left)



From *Essential Elements for Strings, Book 1* (2025)

# Setting up violin/viola shoulder position



From Dr. Michael Hopkins' String Technique YouTube Channel



# Guideline for use of a Shoulder Rest

*“If you have  
a NECK,  
you must  
use a  
shoulder  
rest!”*



# Cello instrument position



## Cello Problems:

- Chair too low
- Student sitting back
- Rounded shoulders



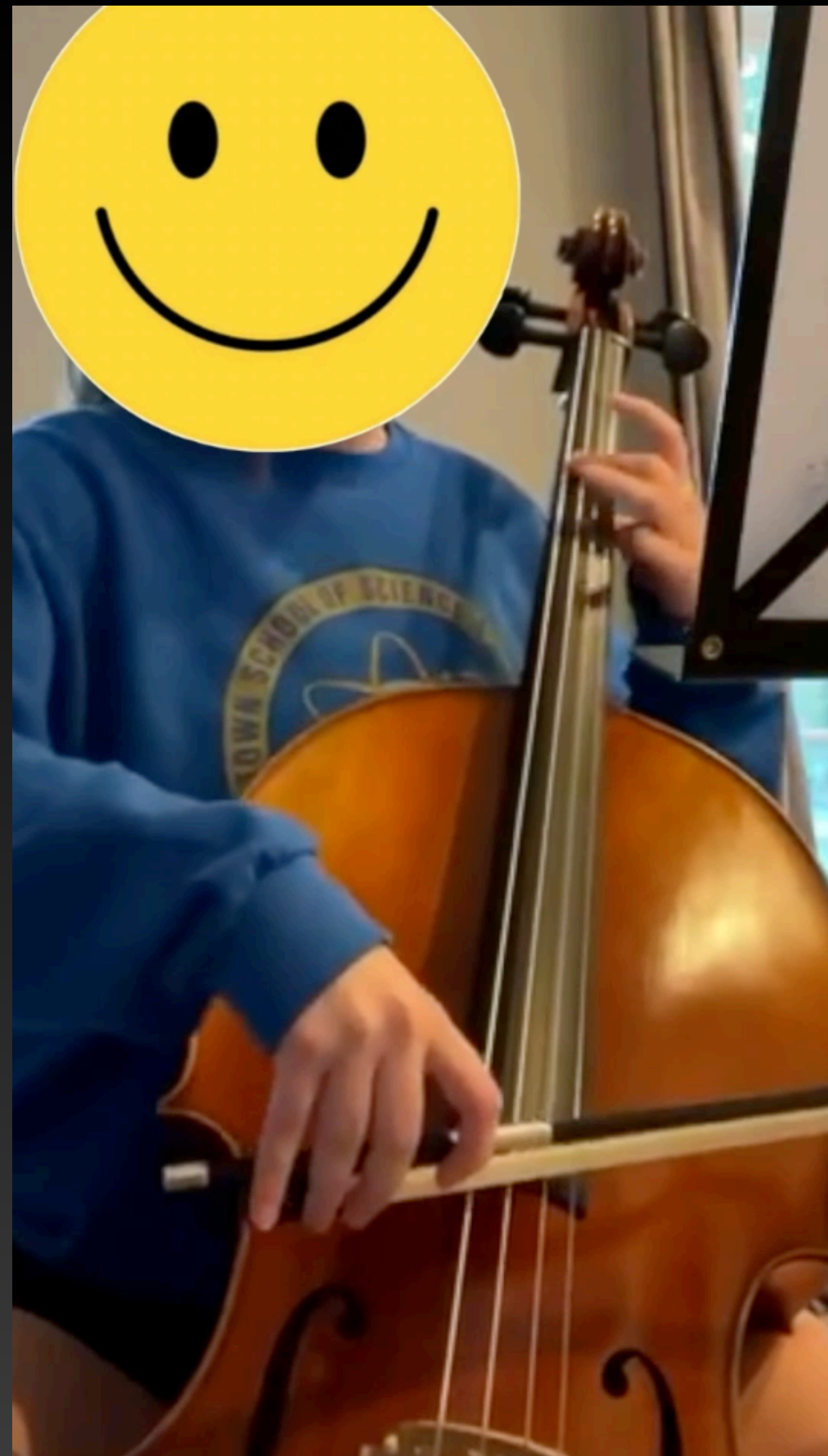
# Strategies: Chair too low & sitting back

- Have students sit on “front half” of chair
- “Standing sitting posture”
- If possible find appropriate height chair
  - Wenger makes different heights!
- Have students sit on stools (with no back)
- Put something uncomfortable on the back of the chair
- Remove instrument and revisit body posture strategies





**Problem: Cello is too far away from head/neck. Not properly aligned.**



# Strategies: Cello neck too far away

- C peg should brush ear lobe
- Take cello away and teacher guides it to student's body
- Cello bear hugs (LOVE your cello!)
- Ensure proper cello endpin height
- Ensure proper cello contact points - sternum and inside of knees
- Cello angled slightly to student's right

# Double Bass Sitting Position

- Rule #1: Every bass player has their own philosophy
- I prefer to have basses sit in stools
- Stools should be adjustable and fit to each student
- Name the stools or assign numbers based on height
- Right foot flat on the floor, left foot on stool's step ring

# Double Bass Stools

(I prefer to have basses sit while playing)



- Stools should be adjustable
  - Optimum height - the bottom of the pants pocket
  - Purchase enough stools to have a variety of heights.
  - Number them and assign that stool number to the student for consistency
- Right foot flat on the floor
- Left foot on stool's ring
- Bass is cradled between legs at an angle.

# Double Bass Stool Selection & Height



# Set-up assessments

- Position Evaluation
  - Check your teacher's manual for rubrics!
  - Have student's create the checklist
- "Selfie" Self-Assessment
  - Have students take photos of each other, then complete a self-assessment rubric
- "Beauty pageant"

POSITION EVALUATION	
Name _____	
SKILL 	CHECK LIST 
+ Indicates skill is demonstrated                      - Indicates skill needs to be improved	
<b>Instrument Hold/Posture</b> _____ Sitting/standing properly _____ Instrument at correct angle _____ Instrument properly supported	
<b>Bow Hand</b> _____ Thumb placement _____ Thumb bent _____ All fingers placed correctly _____ Fingers over frog _____ Pinky curved	
<b>Left Hand Position</b> _____ Fingers properly curved _____ Thumb placement _____ No squeezing the neck _____ Arm/elbow at correct angle _____ Wrist properly aligned	
<b>Comments:</b>          	
Parent's Signature _____	

# Cello sitting posture checkpoints

- Feet should be flat on the floor and slightly wider than shoulder-width apart.
- Back should be straight, and the shoulders relaxed.
- Top of legs should be parallel to the ground or at a slight rising angle to the hips. If knees are higher than hips, choose a different chair or use something to boost the chair height.
- The neck should be level with the spine, and the head held upright



# Left Hand Set-Up

- Goals/Purpose:
  - pitch and rhythmic accuracy, facility when changing notes, shifting, Injury prevention
- Wrist should be straight, as to avoid injury and allow fingers to move freely
- *Demonstrate crooked wrist and finger action vs. straight wrist*

# Long Fingernails! Eww!

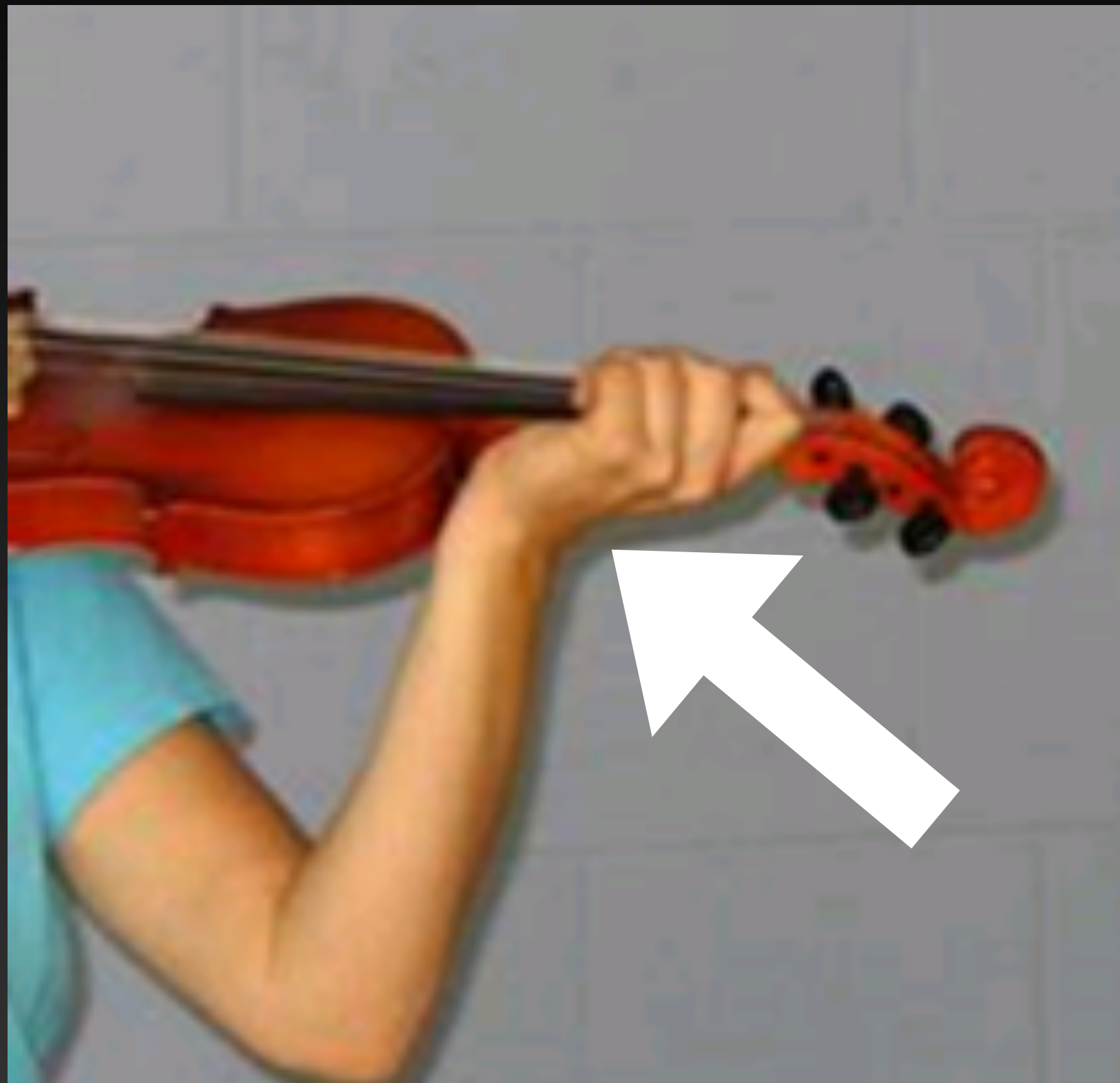
- Long fingernails do not allow finger tip to touch string
- Besides a “community nail clipper” (**GROSS!**), what are some of your solutions?
  - Compare to athletics
- ***How do you deal with the long fingernail issue?***



# Violin/Viola: Left Hand Set-Up Checkpoints

- First finger square (“Don’t spill the spaghetti”)
- All fingers are curved
- Fingertips hover over strings and fingernails align with fingerboard
- Palm faces shoulder, not the face
- Wrist straight and relaxed
- Elbow “swings” to change strings

# Problem: Collapsed wrist or “pancake hand”



What causes this?

**Problem: Wrist out too far**



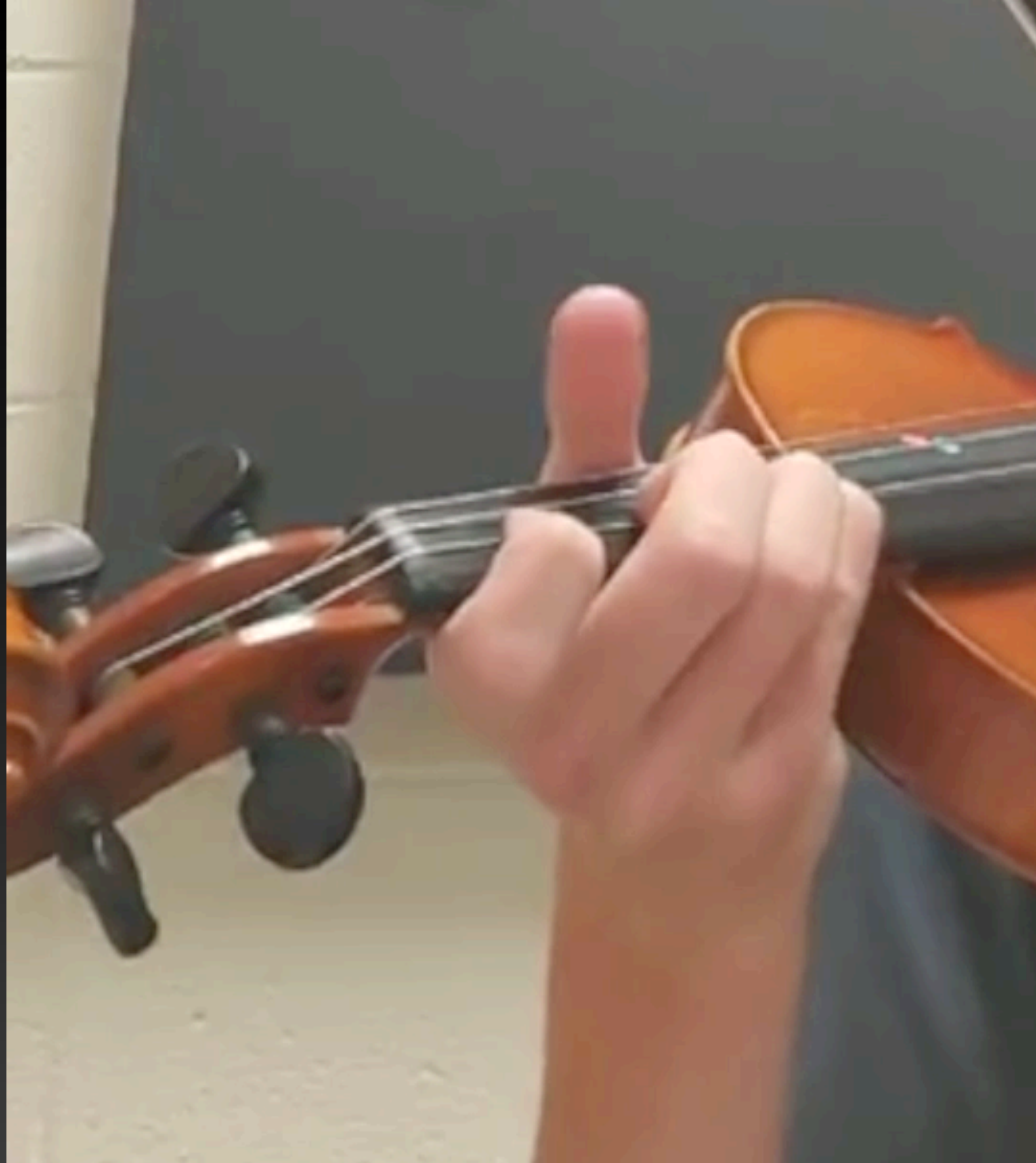
# Strategies: Violin/Viola Left Hand

- Remove instrument and hold arms up as if playing
- Students use right hand to check left wrist
- Hold a straight object up to the students wrist
- Keywords “Oven”, etc.
- Pedagogical aids on instrument
- Double check shoulder rest/position so student is not supporting instrument with left hand

# Problem: Hand grips the neck



# Problem: Death Grip





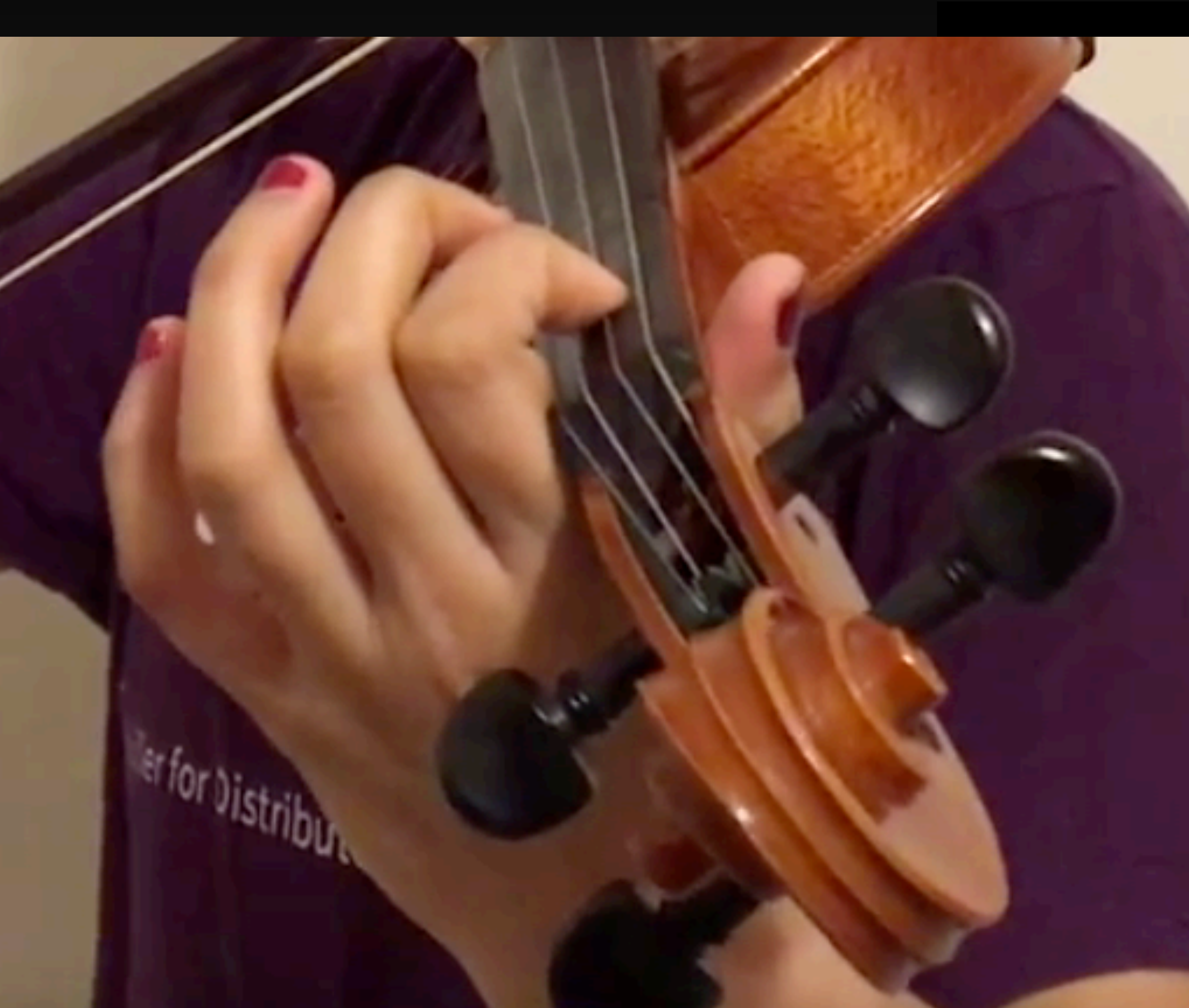
**Problem: First finger and thumb too high**



# Strategies: Hand grips the neck

- Have students tap thumb. (Students can't squeeze while tapping thumb). Ask students to do this often!
- Check thumb height. Only the top of the thumb should touch.
- Check for opening below thumb
- Double check that instrument is correctly on shoulder and weight of instrument is not in the left hand

# Problem: Fingers not aligned with fingerboard



# Strategy: Fingers not aligned with fingerboard

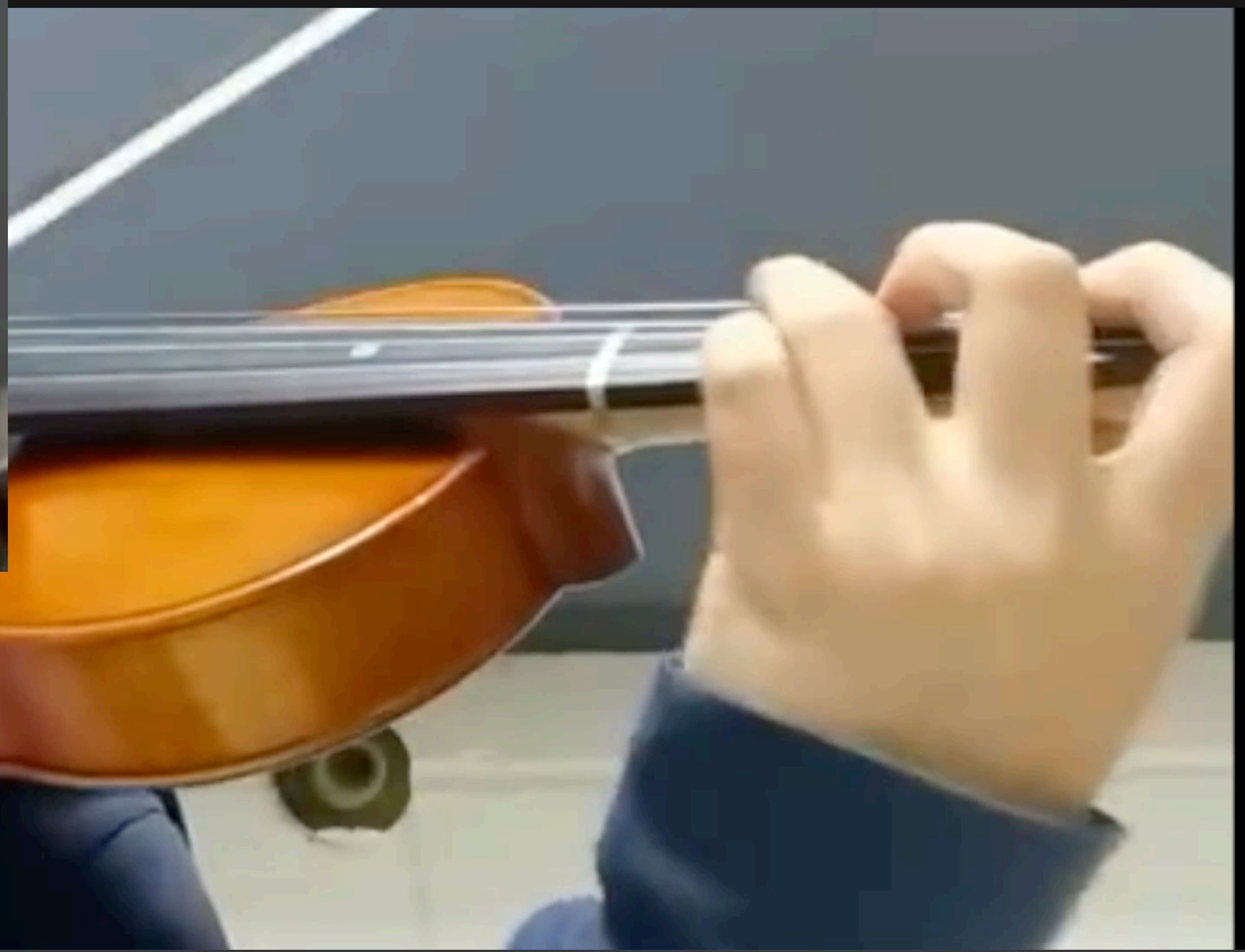
- Goal: Fingernails must align with and hover over the strings!
- Without instrument, pretend to screw in a lightbulb into the ceiling
  - First finger gets pulled “back” slightly
- Be sure that the palm faces the student’s **shoulder** and not the head/face

# Problem: Left elbow does not move when crossing strings

**Left hand changes shape for each string!**

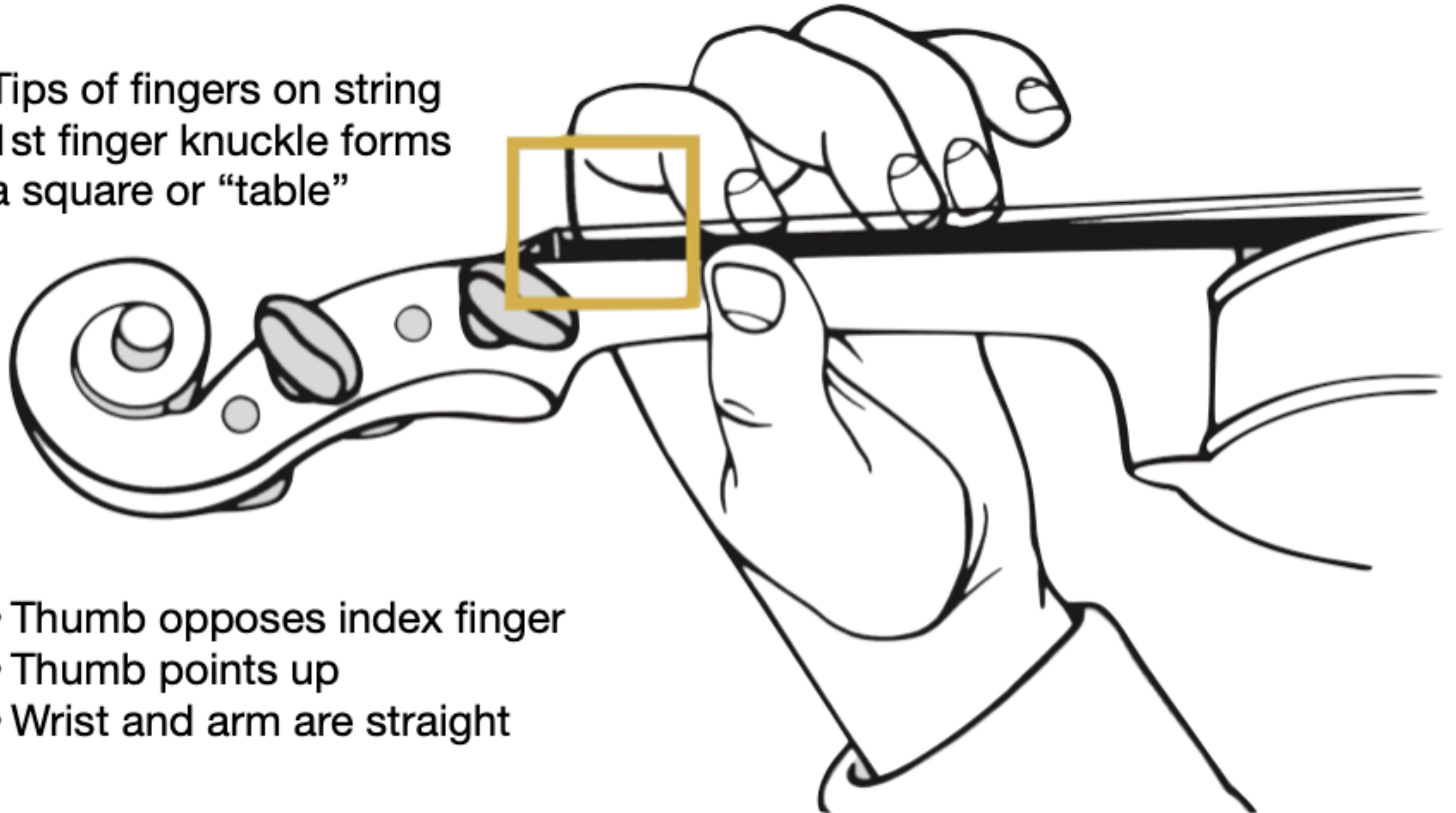
- Practice swinging elbow to change strings
- Pretend there is a person sitting on the elbow and swing them back and forth.
- “Elbow toward your tummy”
- Be sure wrist does not flex or twist. Wrist shape remains “constant” across strings

# Violin/Viola: First finger not compressed



# Violin/Viola Left Hand Position

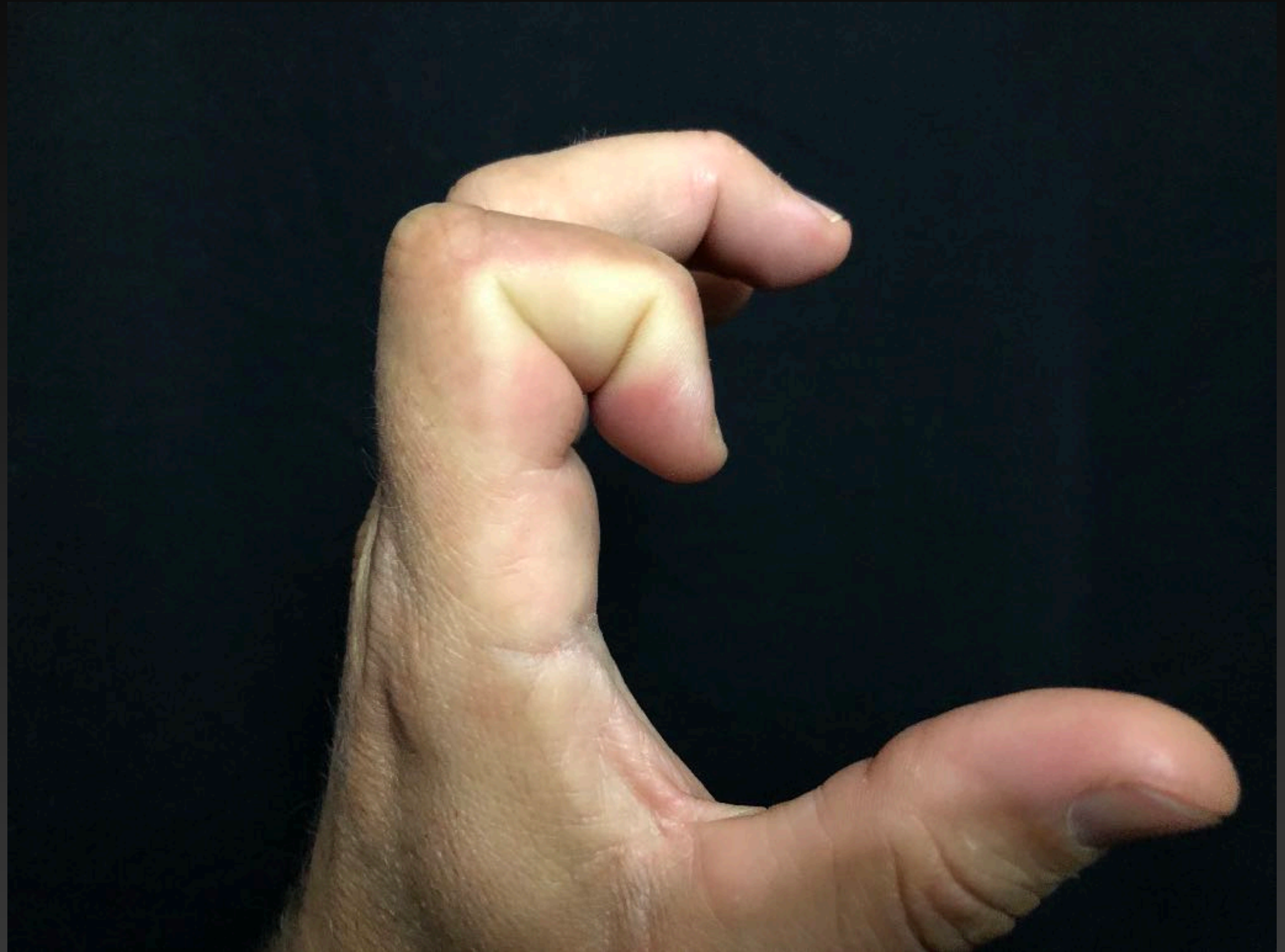
- Tips of fingers on string
- 1st finger knuckle forms a square or “table”



- Thumb opposes index finger
- Thumb points up
- Wrist and arm are straight

# Violin/Viola: First finger “square” or “table”

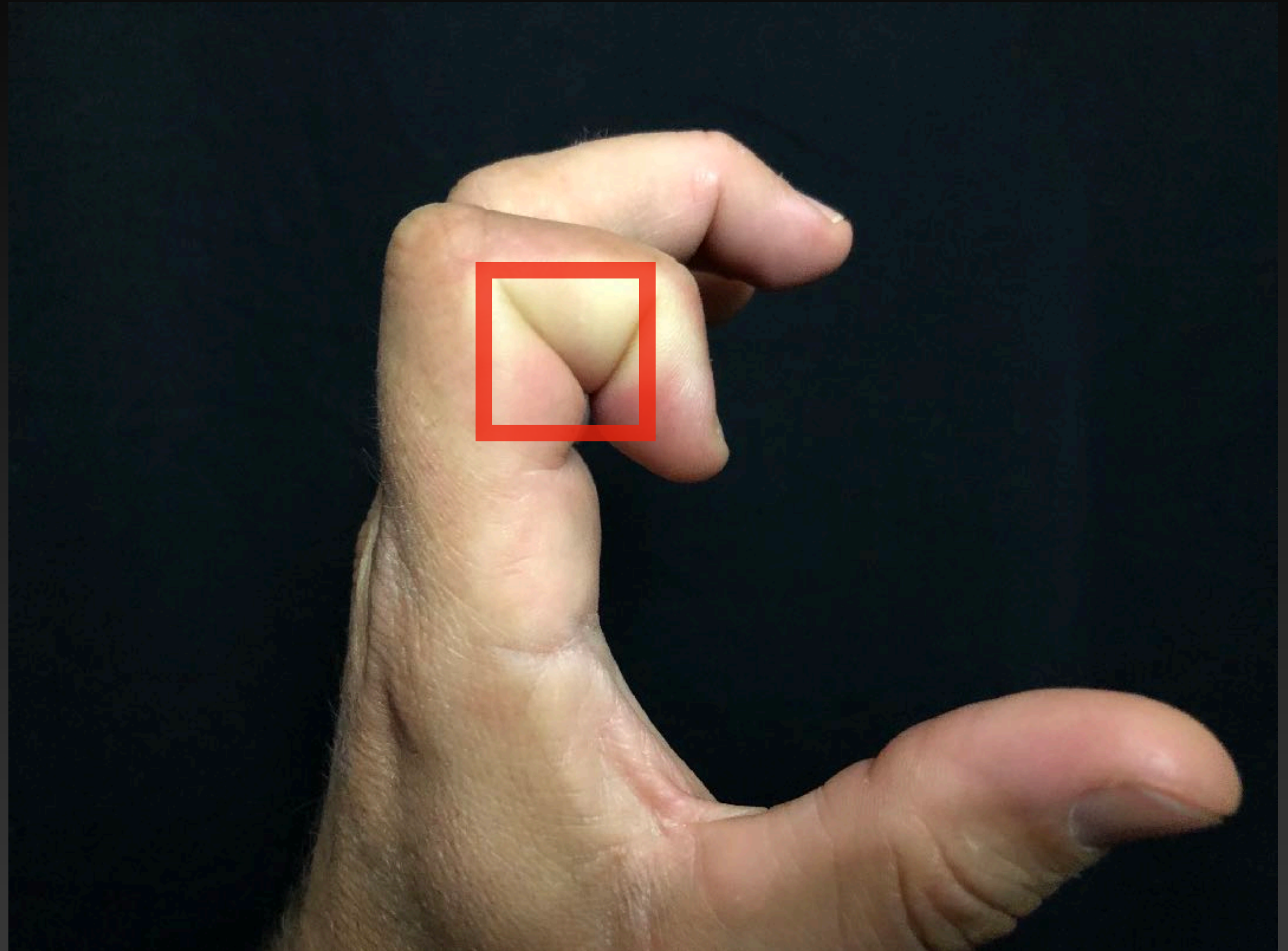
When setting up the left hand on the violin and viola, one of the most important steps is the compression of the first finger.





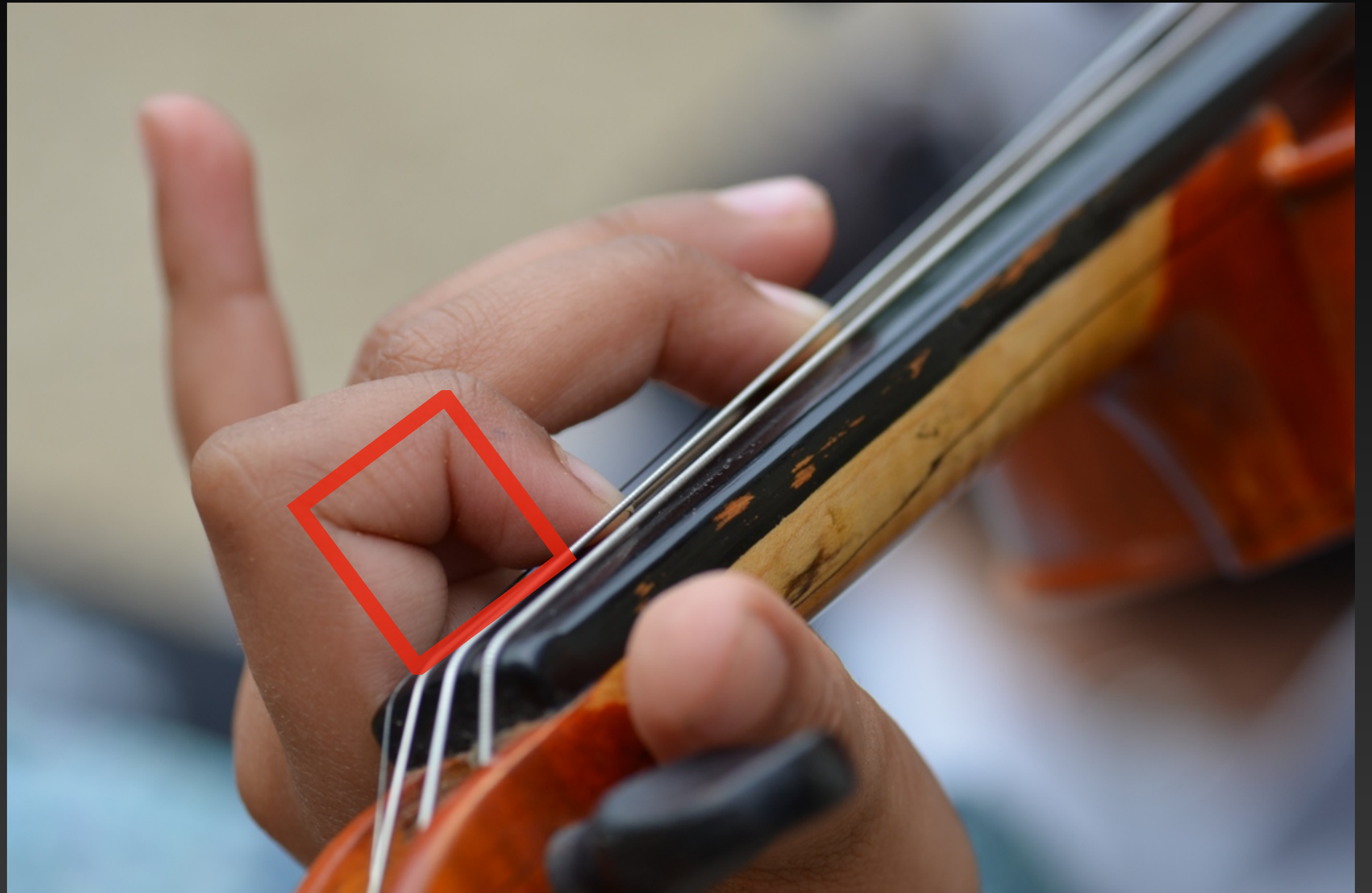
# Violin/Viola: First finger “square” or “table”

The first finger should form a square shape. Failure to keep a first finger square is one of the downfalls toward poor left hand position many players.



# Violin/Viola: First finger “square” or “table”

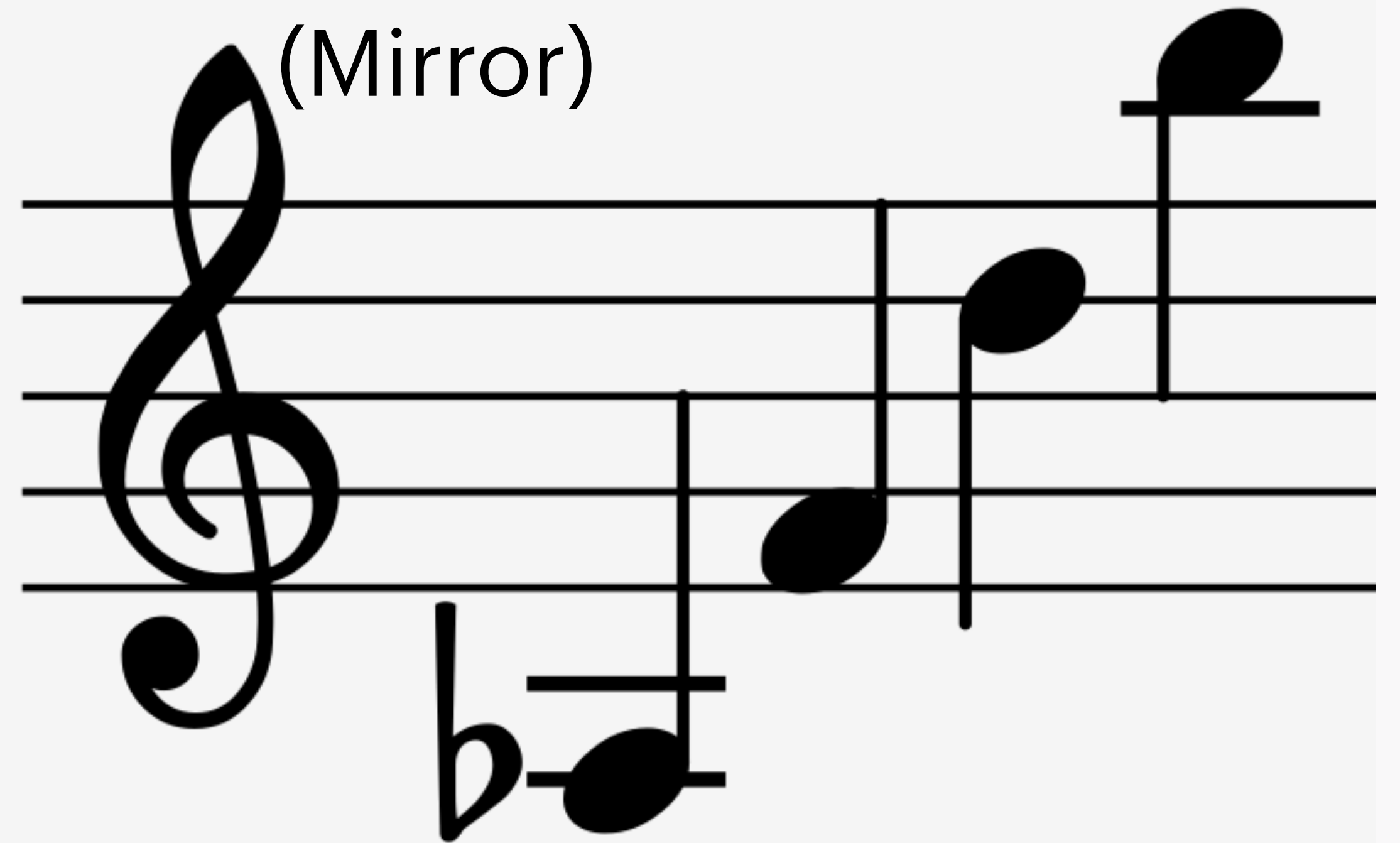
The entire square should be visible over the top of the fingerboard. This will help you have better finger agility and will help you keep a straight wrist.



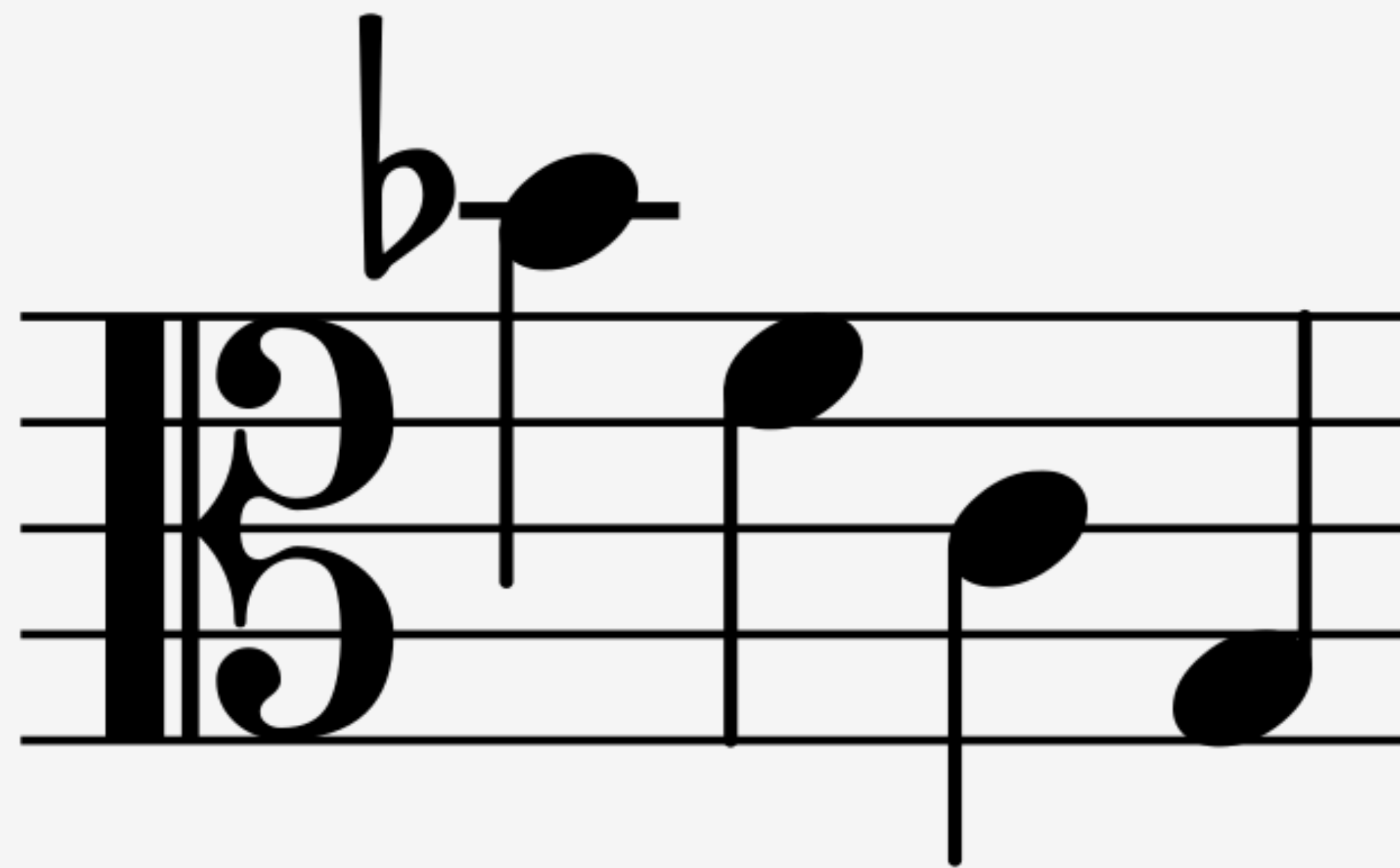
# Violin/Viola Left Hand Set-Up Strategy

- Start without instrument
- Hold LH up as if you are playing
- Thumb out
- Make 1st finger square
- Twist wrist, align fingernails

# Setting Up the Geminani Chord (Violin)



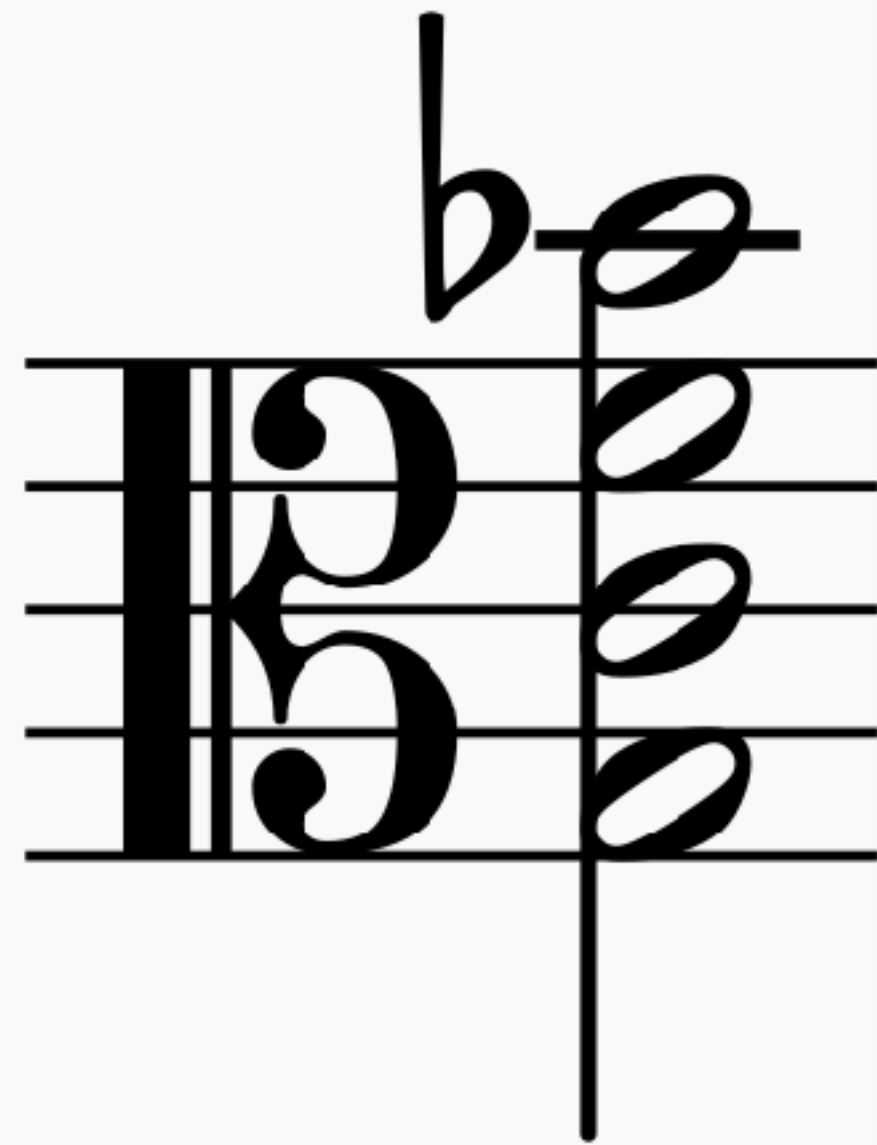
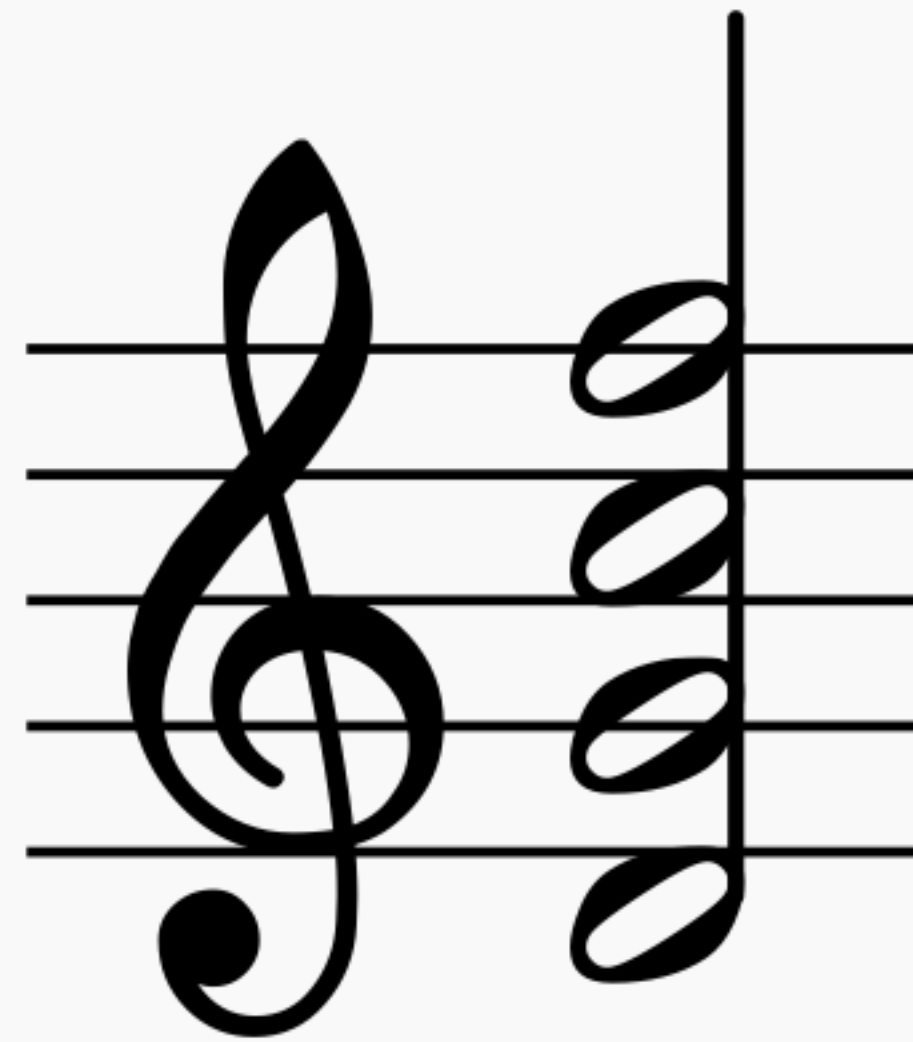
# Setting Up the Geminani Chord (Viola)



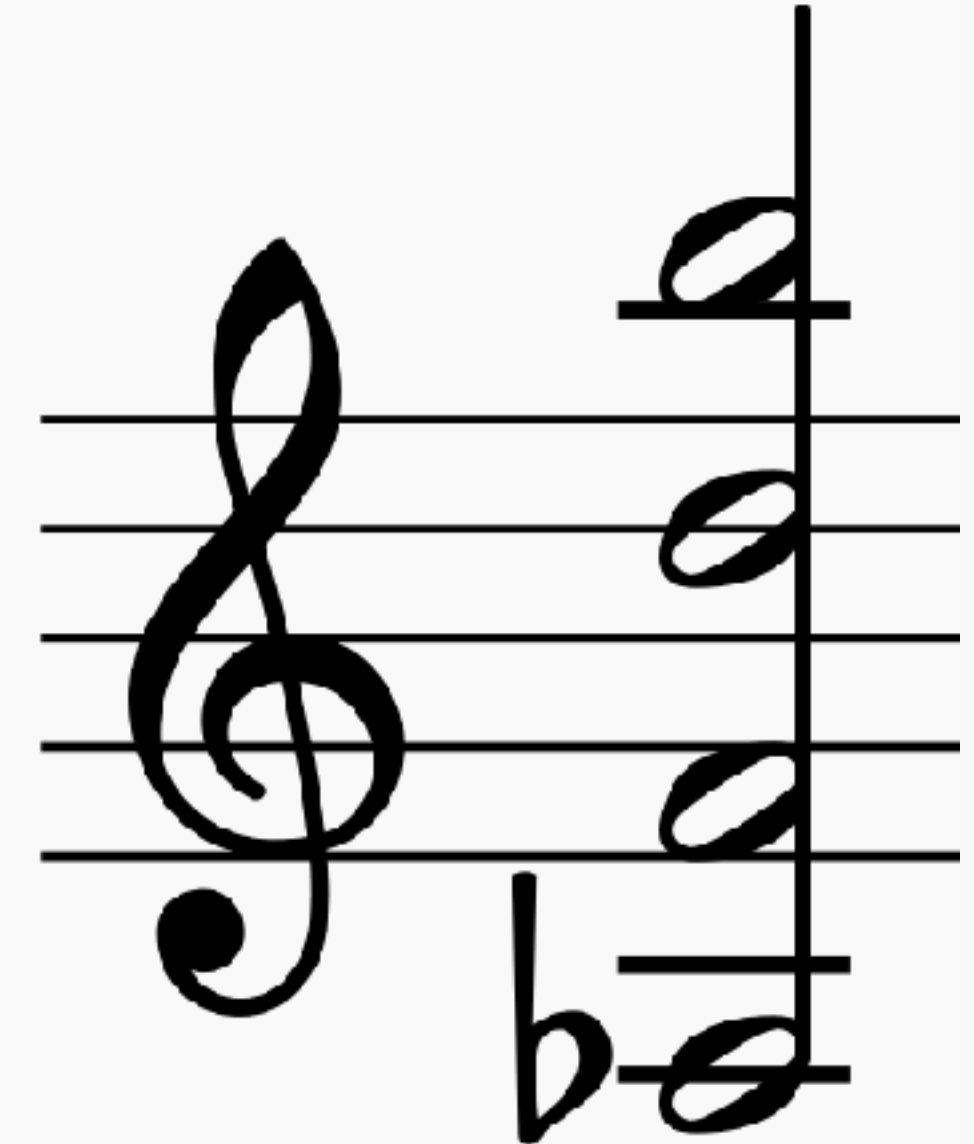
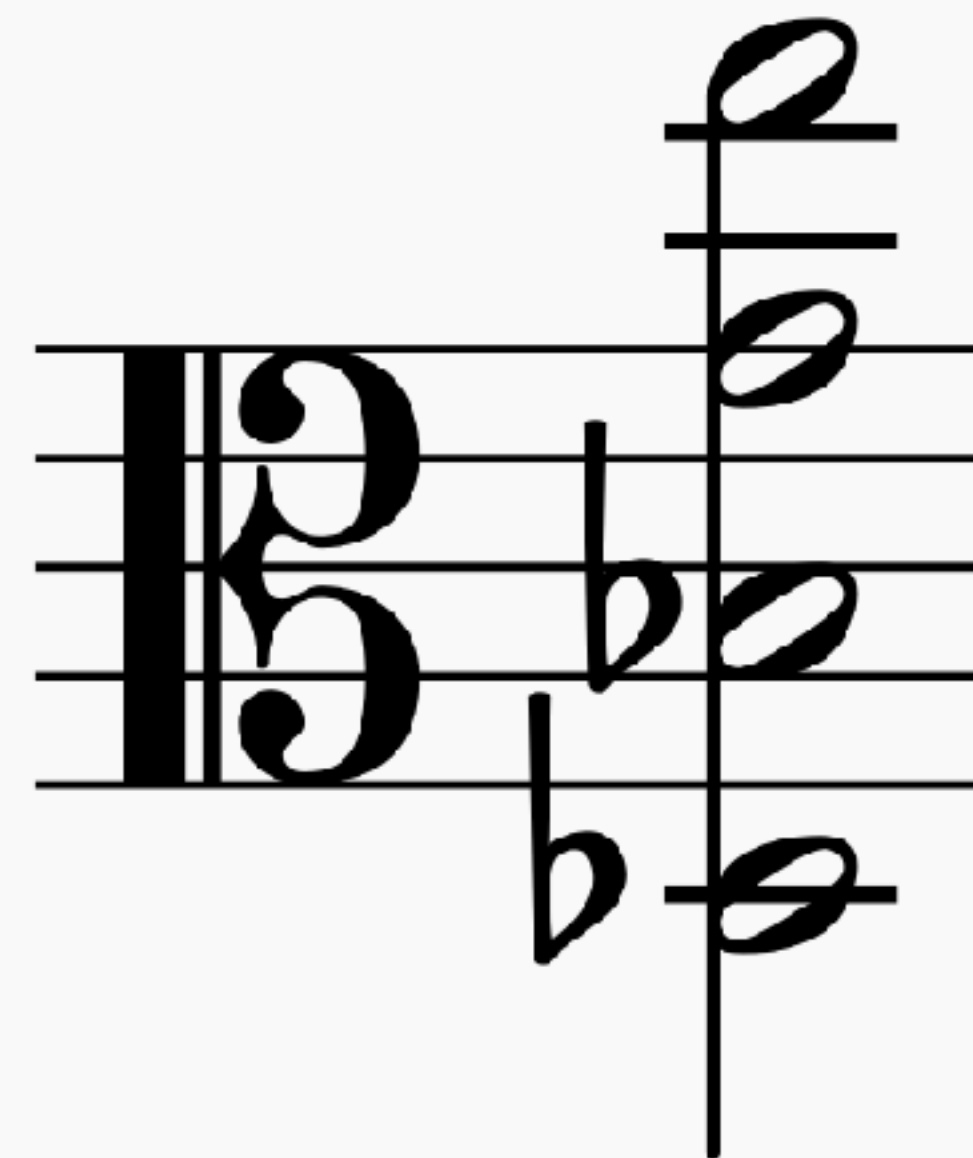
(Mirror)



# The Geminani Chord



(Mirror)



# Cello Left Hand Position

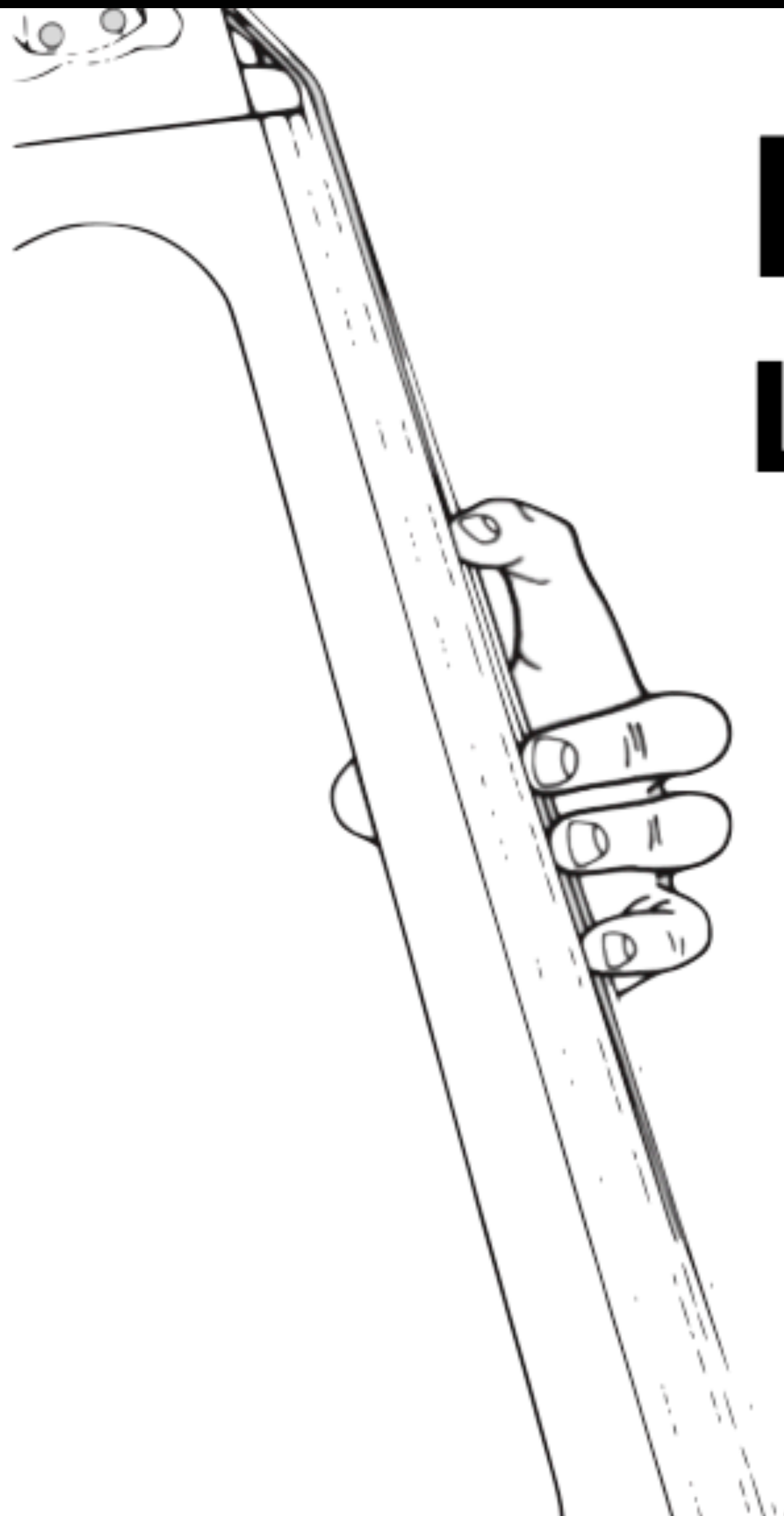


- Fingers naturally curved
- Fingers equally spaced
- 1st finger angled back
- Thumb behind 2nd finger
- Thumb slightly bent
- Wrist and arm aligned

# Strategy: Cello Left Hand Position

- Students move to 4th position, interlace RH fingers into left hand, then slide back.
- Reach out for a giant drink
- "C" shape





# Double Bass

## Left Hand Position

- Fingers naturally curved
- 1st finger almost straight and pulled back
- “1+2 = 2+4” spacing
- Half steps between 1-2 and 2-4
- Thumb behind 2nd finger
- Thumb slightly bent
- Wrist and arm aligned

**Problem:  
Collapsed bass left  
hand**



# Problem: Cello/bass elbow too low

- Knuckle Knocks
- Bridge Taps
- Phyllis Young Exercises
  - Tap Head, then bring to instrument
  - Ski Slopes

# Strengthening the left hand

- Left hand pizzicato
  - Pulse, Rhythms, etc.
- Finger independence exercises (helps both hands)

# Setting up your students' **EARS**

- Aural skill training is just as important and physical set up
- Aural training from the very first day
- Listening, pitch matching, singing should be a part of your routine

# Echoes

- Start each day with melodic and/or rhythmic echoes
  - Be sequential. We want students to feel successful!
- Have students sing, then pluck, or play
- Can be as simple as D, D, D, D (echo) A, A, A, A (echo)

# Interval Ear Training

- Start with half and whole steps
- Focus on a few intervals per week
- Use lots of echos and find tunes/songs/riffs that match the intervals
- When you come across different intervals in literature, be sure to point them out and have students identify

# Open string tuning

- 1. Listen
- 2. Internalize - Hum or sing the pitch
- 3. Tune



# Right Hand Skills

- Bow arm, elbow, wrist, fingers
- Goals/Purpose: Tone Production, Rhythm, RH/LH coordination

# Items often overlooked...

- Bow hair tension
- Bow hair condition
- Bow hair quantity
- Appropriate amount of rosin

# The “bow hold”

- Not a “grip”
- “Bow Balance” rather than bow “hold” or “grip” (Butz, 2015)
- Never fixed or rigid!
- The bow hold is under continuous change as it is moved from frog to tip and back.

# Two bow holds??

- The “frog bow hold”
- The “tip bow hold”

# Bow Hand shape strategies

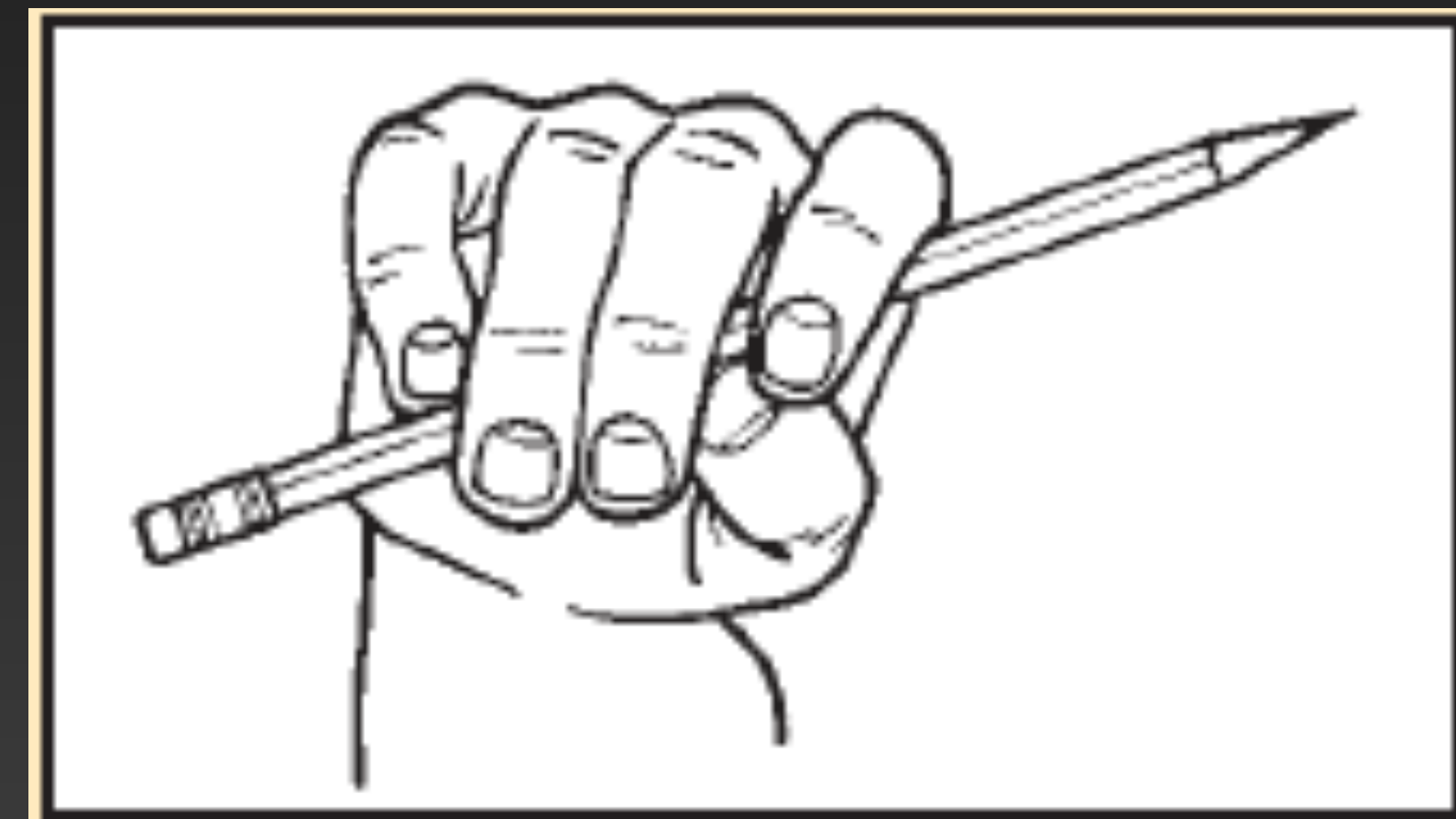
- The flop hand
- The bunny
- The llama
- The “Chop & Flop”
- The snake
- “Baby’s hand”
- “Each finger goes here...”



- What are your favorites??

# Pre-Bow Hold

- Hand shapers (from large to small)
  - 1/2 inch PVC tube
    - Shapes fingers by exaggerating the curve
  - Pencil
    - convenient, closer to bow size
  - Drinking straw (cheap, thin ones!)
    - helps prevent squeezing
- Mini Bows (don't ever throw away a broken bow!)



# Have students memorize the checkpoints

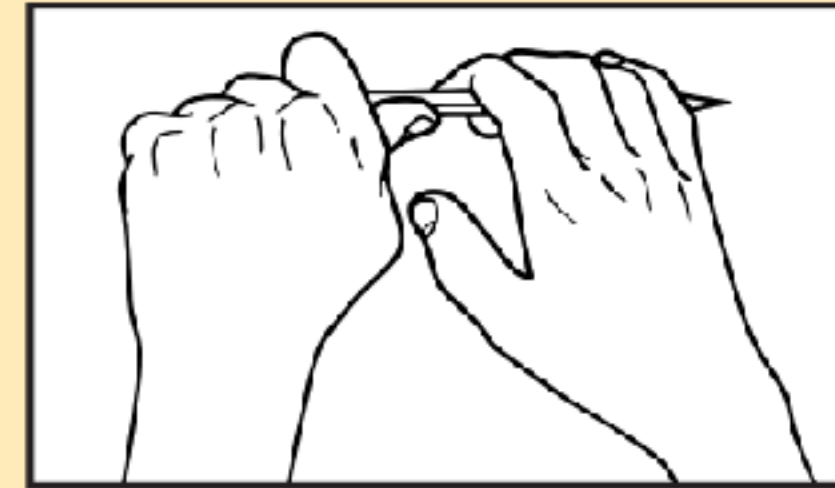
- All fingers are curved and naturally spaced
- All fingers are relaxed
- The thumb is bumpy
- The pinky is on top (violin/viola)
- The ring finger covers the eye

## SHAPING THE RIGHT HAND

### BOW BUILDER ONE

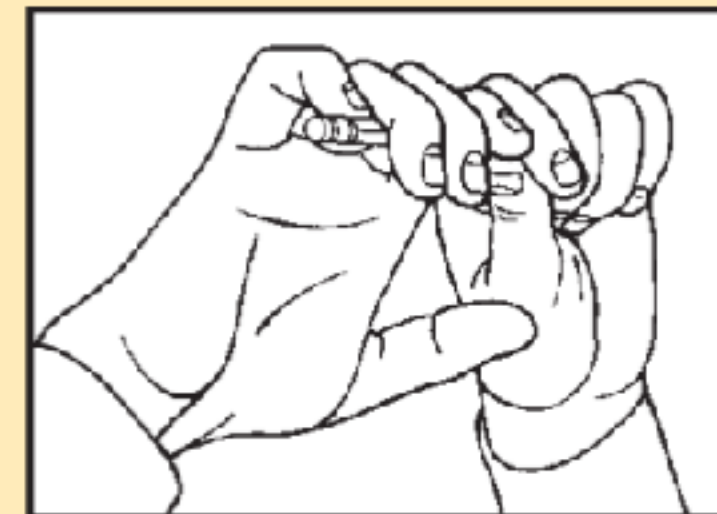
#### Pencil Hold

**Step 1** Hold a pencil in your left hand at eye level.

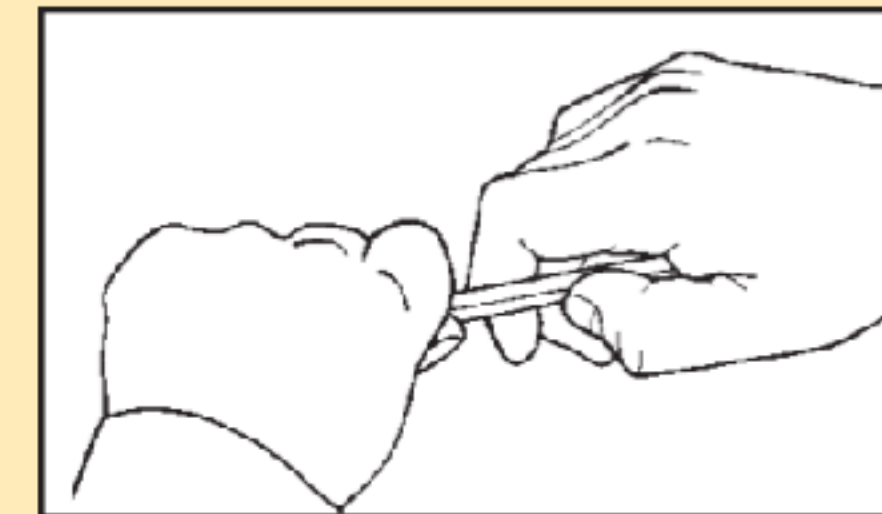


**Step 2** Hang your right fingers over the top of the pencil, as shown.

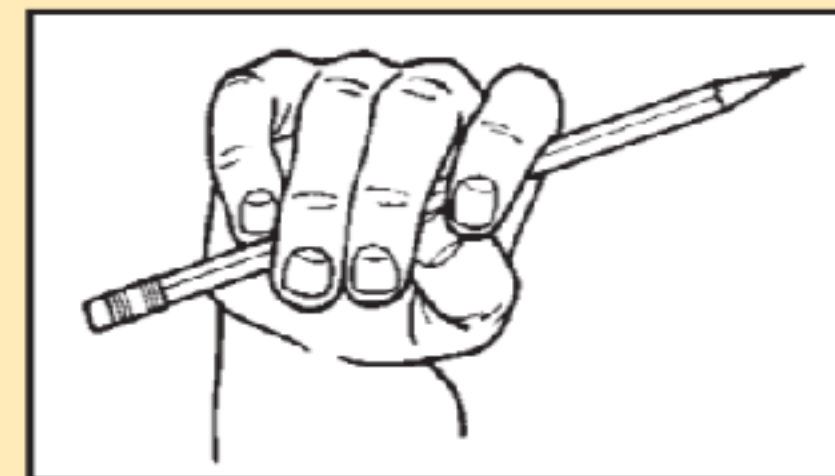
**Step 3** Place your right 4th finger on top of the pencil.



**Step 4** Touch the tip of your right thumb to the pencil just opposite your 2nd finger. The curve of your thumb will form an oval with the finger.



**Step 5** Lean your right hand so the first finger rests on top of the pencil between the 1st and 2nd joints. Keep your fingers relaxed. Remove your left hand from the pencil. Practice shaping your hand on the pencil until it feels natural to you.



Practice BOW BUILDER ONE daily.



# A Note about Pronation

- **Pronation** is the slant of the fingers on the bow
- Prominent in violin/viola bow hold
- When setting up the violin/viola bow, always angle the tool/bow at a 45 degree angle to automatically build in the pronation.
- Traditional methods of setting up bow hold only reinforce supination (the wrong kind of slant)



# #BowHoldThumbProblems

- If the thumb is not bent, the rest of the fingers will usually not bend!
- Bumpy thumbs
- “A-shape” thumb
- Texting thumbs



\* *“No Banana Thumbs”*

\* *“No Hitchhiker thumbs - illegal in every state!”*

# Essential Elements for Strings, Book 1

## BOW BUILDER TWO

### Pencil Hold Exercises

#### I'm Outta Here

Wave good-bye while keeping your wrist relaxed.

#### Thumb Flexers

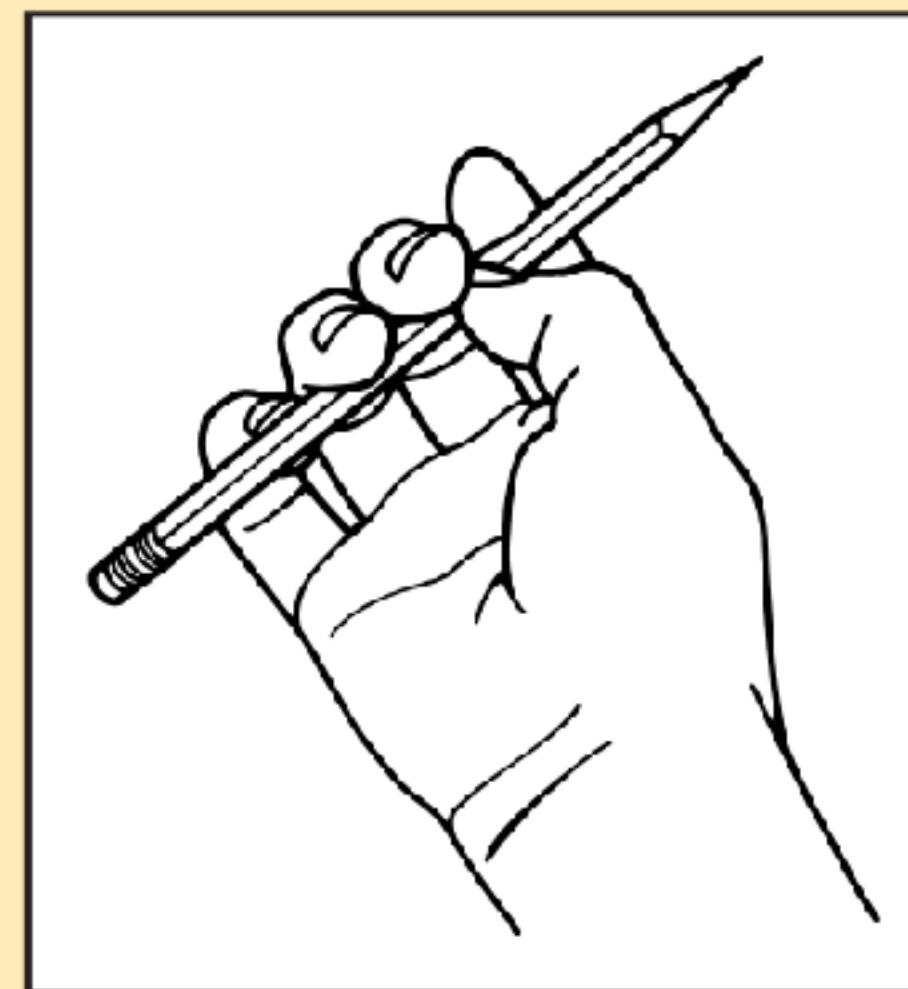
Flex your thumb in and out.

#### Finger Taps

Tap your first finger. Then tap your fourth finger.

#### Knuckle Turnovers

Turn your hand over and be sure your thumb knuckle is bent, as shown.



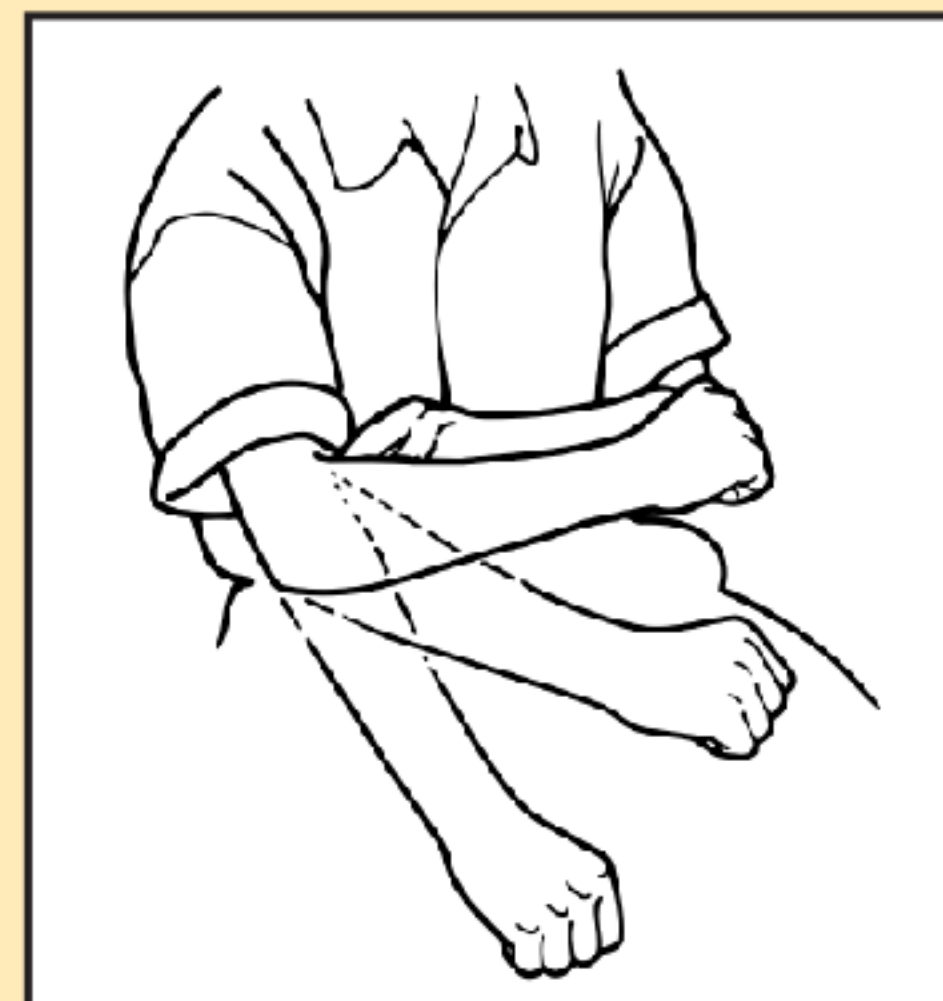
*Knuckle Turnovers*

## BOW BUILDER THREE

### Bowing Motions

#### Swingin' Out

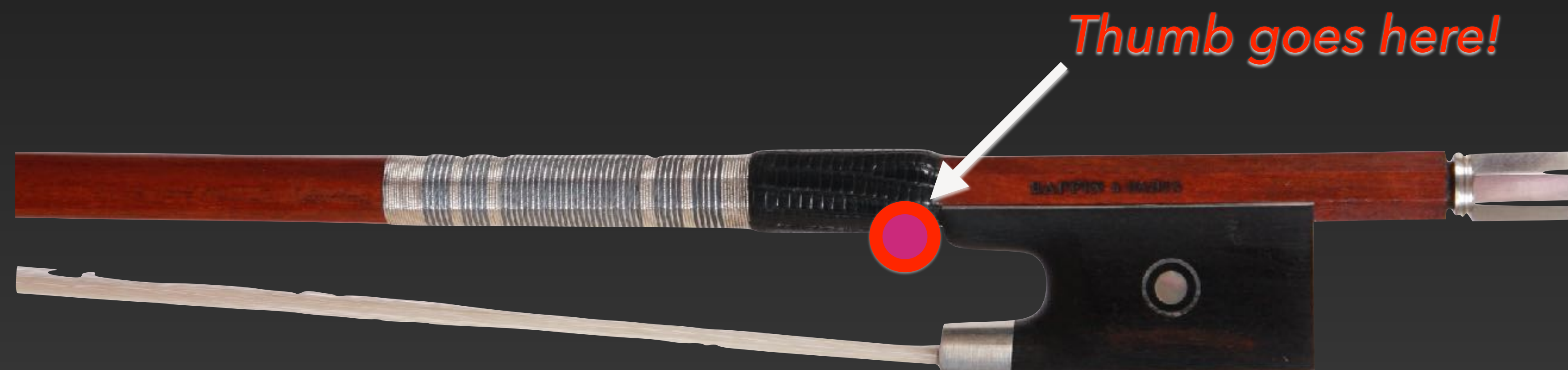
Put one finger inside your right elbow and swing your arm, as shown.



*Swingin' Out*

# Where does the thumb belong?

- Important that you continuously remind students
- NOT in the frog's mouth!!
- The tip of the thumb belongs on the stick **just in front** of the frog's "mouth"



# Bow Hold Exercises/Warm-Ups

Search "The Orchestra Teacher" on YouTube



# In closing..

- A string player's set-up impacts tone production, intonation, expression, and the ability to play without pain.
- It is essential that we address this, not only at the beginning stages, but all through a student's education.

**Instruments provided by**



**EASTMAN**

**Please visit their booth!**

# “The Orchestra Teacher” Podcast





# Special Thanks...



# Contact me!



Charles@OrchestraTeacher.net



Slides and more available at:

[www.OrchestraTeacher.net](http://www.OrchestraTeacher.net)



# Print Resources

- Bob Gillespie & Don Hamann - *Strategies for Teaching Strings*
- Michael Hopkins - *The Art of String Teaching*
- Rebecca McLeod - *Teaching Strings in Today's Classroom*
- Christopher Selby - *Habits of a Successful Orchestra Director*
- Sandy Goldie & more - *Rehearsing the Middle School Orchestra*
- Sandy Goldie & more - *Rehearsing the High School Orchestra*
- Karel Butz - *Achieving Musical Success in the String Classroom*
- Ann Marie Patterson - *Basic String Technique: A Practical Guide to String Instruction*