Collé Action:
An Alternative Perspective on Right-Hand Finger and Wrist Mobility

by Jacob M. Dakon & Selim Giray

Setting the Stage
We have all seen it—the dreaded claw-like bow-hand shape best characterized by straight and tense fingers. The image is unsettling because we, as string teachers, understand all too well that a lack of finger and wrist mobility will undoubtedly hinder the development of more advanced bow control. More simply stated, finger and wrist mobility are as fundamental to bow control as developing a proper bow-hand shape.¹

If finger and wrist mobility are so important to right-hand technique, then why do so many string students in our orchestra classes struggle to grasp the concept? At this point, we can only speculate; however, in speaking with string teachers informally, many agreed that teaching finger and wrist mobility was important, but found the skill difficult to teach. To make matters more challenging, the skill remains absent from many of our current method books. With exception to *Sound Innovations* and *All for Strings*,² few method books address the skill beyond initial bow-hand shape instruction, opting instead to spend more time on melodic, harmonic and rhythmical aspects of music literacy and string technique.

There also is the small matter of labeling finger and wrist mobility. Why are labels important? Labels enable us as teachers to communicate complex concepts in a concise and, often times, more accessible format. The field of string pedagogy has yet to agree upon a label for finger and wrist mobility. Ivan Galamian referred to finger and wrist mobility quite appropriately as part of a “system of springs.” But this term has yet to find its way into contemporary bowing lexicon.³ Simon Fischer and Henry Barrett refer to finger and wrist mobility as horizontal and vertical motion;⁴ however, these terms individually don’t address the holistic nature of the motion we are discussing. Hamann and Gillespie refer to finger and wrist mobility as smooth bow-direction changes,⁵ but this term doesn’t address a re-articulation of the bow stroke in the same direction (e.g., portato or up-bow spiccato). If finger and wrist mobility is to become more accessible to teachers, the field needs a more appropriate term for finger and wrist mobility that exemplifies its requisite motions and easily identifies with current bowing terminology. We suggest the term, collé action.

What is Collé Action?
Why collé action? In determining a label for finger and wrist motion, we looked for a term that 1) resonated with current right-hand terminology and 2) concisely described the entire reactive motion occurring in the fingers, hand and wrist. The collé stroke satisfied both requirements.

Collé is a relatively small collaborative motion involving the right wrist, hand and fingers. It is “produced by placing the bow
on the string with a ‘light pinch’ at the beginning of the stroke and immediately lifting it to prepare the next note. In action, the fingers and hand activate the stroke, while the wrist passively reacts. In the case of broader collé strokes, the forearm may also become active. Collé can be performed in upward or downward motions at various bow placements and using various lengths of the bow as necessitated by the musical material (for more information, see Galamian and Fischer).

From this description, we can see how collé addresses the motions of hand and finger quite well. Why, then, not label finger and wrist mobility as collé? There are two issues. First, collé requires active fingers, whereas the finger motions addressed here are passive. Second, collé is often identified in the literature as an off-string martelé, or a combination of spiccato and martelé. The motions being addressed in the present discussion result in a smooth motion on the string. Be that as it may, collé possesses enough motion similarity to finger and wrist mobility that we believe the term is a useful depiction of the motion as a whole.

To address the passive, reactionary motion of the fingers and wrist, we borrowed the word “action,” from Paul Rolland. Action describes the passive and active motions that occur throughout the body during performance. This includes the “fine, almost undetectable movement of the body which occurs when the player is well-balanced and relaxed.” For example, as the left hand shifts up the fingerboard, the shoulder and elbow should be allowed to swing naturally under the violin or viola. With regards to bowing, the performer may shift their body weight naturally either bilaterally or unilaterally to the movements of the bow. Given that finger and wrist mobility as discussed here is a passive, reactive motion to the active hand and forearm, adding “action” after our first term “collé” seemed appropriate.

This brings us to a definition. The “collé action” is the supple reactionary and preparatory motions of the right-hand fingers and wrist to the directionality of the hand and forearm that occurs before an articulation of the bow stroke. To perform the collé action, the individual extends and flexes the fingers in reaction to the active hand, which is actively anticipating the movement in the forearm. As the bow moves in an upward direction, the wrist—as led by the hand—raises slightly causing the fingers to extend. During the downward motion of the bow, the wrist and hand flatten out and the fingers flex to their formally curved position as the weight of the elbow is redistributed on the bow stick. If executed properly, the performer should be able to maintain a smooth connect sound throughout the upward and downward bow stroke with relative ease.

Developing the Collé Action

In discussing the developmental collé action strategies, it is important to note that this discussion only focuses on teaching collé action within violin and viola technique. Addressing all four bowed-string instruments would require a much more extensive discussion. While most strategies are universal, others may not translate directly to lower-string instruments.

The first order of business is to decide when to introduce collé action. Given that collé action requires the use of fine-motor skills in the right hand, we suggest that it be introduced after students can demonstrate a proper bow-hand shape consistently and begin to refine previously developed basic bow-control skills. Such sequences typically occur during the intermediate or developing stages of the string curriculum, either during the second or third year of instruction—depending on the frequency of class meetings. Regardless of when collé action is introduced, it is essential that no time limit be placed on the development of collé action. Student outcomes should rather dictate the pace of instruction. When in doubt, review.

Second, we need to understand what to expect from our students. The collé action is a reactionary motion in the fingers and wrist. The motions being described here are relatively small and, in some cases, may be barely noticeable. The outcomes, however, are anything but inconsequential. Proper implementation of the collé action allows the performer to cushion the naturally occurring accent during the articulation of the bow stroke. This, in turn, dramatically expands the level of control that a performer has over the type of sound drawn from the instrument. While collé action can be applied to many different skills throughout the right-hand curriculum, we have chosen to examine it here as it relates to controlling the bow-direction change at the frog. Once learned in this capacity, collé action is more easily transferable to other strokes, such as legato, spiccato and portato, among others.

The greatest challenge in performing the collé action during bow-direction changes is to maintain a relaxed, appropriate bow-hand shape while supporting the weight of the bow, an issue that frequently plagues young or inexperienced players. In some cases, the pinky finger of young violinists tends to afford insufficient counterbalance to the weight of the bow when playing at the frog, which often results in an incorrect version of the Russian bow hold (i.e., the right-hand fingers straighten and stiffen as a result of an excessively high wrist to forearm angle). The rigidity in the fingers prohibits the performer from implementing the collé action. To remedy this issue, we have broken down the

Figure 1. From left to right: (a) Forearm rotated counterclockwise to a 45-degree angle, (b) right hand with a restricted movement, (c) extension (opened) and (d) flexion (closed) of fingers
collé action into its divisible building blocks and discuss exercises that will address these blocks in an exaggerated manner within a context where tension is greatly reduced, i.e., away from a bow or bow-like apparatus.

First, isolate the finger motion. With your right arm raised to the chest level in front of you, rotate your forearm counterclockwise to a 45-degree angle (Figure 1a, previous page). With your left hand, hold the top of the right hand gently to prevent any obvious large motions of the wrist (Figure 1b, previous page). Extend (open) and flex (close) the fingers, including the thumb (Figures 1c and d). As the fingers extend, allow a slight flexion (downward) motion in the wrist, and vice versa. Repeat as needed. Do not allow the fingers to become tense in a fist or completely straight in a locked position.

Next, isolate the wrist motion. With your right arm raised to the chest level in front of you, rotate your forearm counterclockwise to a 45-degree angle. Hold an object in your right hand, such as a golf ball or plastic Easter egg, to immobilize the fingers (Figure 2a). Extend (move up) and flex (move down) the wrist (Figures 2b and c). Repeat as necessary.

Next, combine both the finger and wrist movements into a single collé action using a light object, such as a pencil or straw (Figures 3a and b). The motion can be practiced with or without pronating the right hand into the bow-like apparatus; however, ample exercise with pronation should precede introducing the bow.

Now, introduce the bow. Form the bow-hand shape at the balance point of the bow where the bow weight is neutral. Hold a 6-inch section of PVC pipe or a toilet-paper tube over the left shoulder to simulate the bow path across the strings. Insert the tip of the bow into the tube. Push the bow up until the bow hand is about 1-2 inches away from the end of tube to allow a bit of upward motion of the bow. Ensure that students drop their shoulder and elbow to a relaxed position. Repeat the previous finger and wrist exercises. Make sure the hands of all students are pronated into the bow stick; students also should maintain a curved pinky that rests on top of the bow. Once the desired motion of the fingers and wrist is obtained, move the bow hand down the bow stick about 1 inch and repeat the exercises until the motions are practiced with the bow-hand shape at the frog.

At this point in the sequence, introduce the violin or viola. We like Hamann and Gillespie’s concept of rubber-banding the 6-inch PVC pipe to the top of the strings, because it more easily facilitates the transfer of skills learned previously to the instrument. Again, review the previously discussed strategies through the tube. Once satisfied with students’ progress, take the tube off the instrument and attempt the collé action at the balance point of the bow on the strings. If students need more practice, Hamann and Gillespie suggest several other effective strategies that isolate the collé action on the bow: Statue of Liberty, Balancing and Rubbing, and Multiple Flexes.

Statue of Liberty: Have student extend their arm in the air, with the bow tip pointing straight up, and flex their fingers.

Balancing and Rubbing: Have students place their bows on the string at the balance point with their bow hand near the balance point. Instruct students to make short strokes at the balance point by flexing their right-hand fingers and wrist.

Multiple Flexes: Have students practice several finger and wrist flexes at either end of the bow while bowing.

If your students are ready to move on, place the balance point of the bow on the string and perform the exercise found below using only the fingers and wrist to produce a tone (no forearm motion is allowed). In this exercise, tone production is not the main concern, but the correct collé action is (Figure 4). To help isolate the finger and wrist motion, the student may restrict the forearm movement with the left hand under the violin.

Finally, we move onto the smooth collé motion and apply it to a simple two-octave scale, such as G major (Figure 5). Perform the eighth-note patterns below as smooth as possible using collé action in collaboration with the forearm. This exercise can be performed both with the tubes and on the string. In both cases,
make sure that the students remain at the absolute frog and the absolute tip, and do not drift into a “middle-ish” bow placement.

Figure 5. Collé action two-octave scale exercise

Collé Action and the Broader String Curriculum

While extremely effective at facilitating a smooth bow-direction change, collé action is by no means restricted to this role. Rather, its “umbrella” function is to allow the hand and fingers to react, cushion and prepare the articulation(s), a skill that is required of almost every bow stroke and in the performance of chords. Given this premise, we suggest that collé action be linked and reviewed frequently before many other right-hand skills, including, but not limited to, rapid string crossings, legato, brush strokes, spiccato, portato, and collé. We would even go so far as to suggest that string instructors designate time within the student warm-up routines to include the collé action. A few minutes each day may end up saving hours of rehearsal time later. Moreover, students will have the opportunity to develop their right-hand abilities at a more efficient rate.

Conclusion

It is beyond reproach that finger and wrist mobility are of the utmost importance when considering a smooth and consistent bow stroke; however, up until now, labeling these skills has been somewhat problematic. Per our discussion, we ask that the string field consider referring to finger and wrist mobility as the collé action. Given its motion similarity to the collé bow stroke, this term acts as a more holistic and associative descriptor of the requisite motions than previous labels. Also, we suggest that the collé action be linked judiciously to other bow strokes and woven strategically throughout the string curriculum, in order to help students further develop necessary right-hand skills.

This article contains only a few suggestions that can be used to teach the collé action. For more information, see the works of Galamian, Fischer, Flesch and Capet. Given that the present work focused exclusively on violin and viola technique, there remains a need for more clarification from a “low-string” perspective. We would encourage more work to be done in this area by our cello and bass colleagues. We would also encourage the string field to consider ways of weaving the collé action into the development sequences of other important bow strokes and right-hand techniques. Finally, we hope that this discussion aids string teachers and students alike in creating and enjoying the implementation of a more beautiful, connected sound on our beloved string instruments.

6 Berman and others, The ASTA Dictionary of Bowing and Pizzicato Terms, 16; see also Galamian, Principles of Violin Playing & Teaching, 73.
7 Galamian, Principles of Violin Playing & Teaching, 74.
8 Ibid., 73; Fischer, Basics, 62.
11 Szrags are an excellent resource, because they bend when the student’s bow-hand shape becomes tense.
12 Hamann and Gillespie, Strategies for Teaching Strings, 60; Rolland, The Teaching of Action in String Playing, 85.
13 Hamann and Gillespie, Strategies for Teaching Strings, 67.
14 Ibid., 73.

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