

Claire Stefani: On Chinrests, Shoulder Rests, and How the Right Setup Can Facilitate More Effortless, Tension-free Playing

Description

I can't remember where it started. Maybe it was a flareup of the "violin hickey" on my chin. Or maybe it was a response to seeing one of my violin idols play without a shoulder pad, which always seemed like the coolest thing ever. Or maybe I was just wishfully hoping there was some quick fix that would enhance my playing.

But I remember going through a pretty long phase – from sometime in high school, through grad school – where I was constantly tinkering and experimenting with different setups.¹

I'd go to the violin shop and try out different shoulder rests. I'd go to the drug store and buy various makeup sponges. I'd peruse the automotive section of the hardware store and get various cloths and fabrics and leather.

And when I read that biomechanically speaking, it makes more sense to add height to the chinrest than to the shoulder area, I went through boxes of chinrests, with varying heights, depth, shapes, and locations relative to the tailpiece.

Eventually, I did come up with a setup that felt decent to me. Which, for what it's worth, involved a rubber band, some string, a red rubber sponge, a relatively flat "guaneri-style" chinrest, and a small square of cloth cut from a favorite old black t-shirt (which, now that I think of it, hasn't been washed in a couple decades, ewww...).

But how important is the "right" setup anyhow? And how can we figure out what setup is truly best for our individual shoulders, arms, necks, and chins?

Meet Claire Stefani

I met Claire Stefani this summer, where she was working with students at Philadelphia Orchestra concertmaster David Kim's annual [Orchestral Institute](#). Over the last 8 years, Claire has worked with professional and amateur musicians of all ages and levels across North America and Europe, helping them to optimize their chinrest and shoulder rest setup so they can play more freely and effortlessly, while minimizing tension and the risk of injury.

In this 43-min chat, we'll explore:

- Claire's surprise at the physicality of playing the violin/viola (as compared with the more overt physicality she experienced as a field hockey player on the French national team), and the risks and

- dangers of underestimating how physical a task playing an instrument can be. (3:43)
- Why the head plays such an important role in minimizing tension everywhere else in the body (7:48)
- How effortless playing is perhaps less about relaxing all the muscles in your body and more about finding an optimal balance between engaging and disengaging the right muscles at the right time (9:32)
- A try-this-at-home activity (10:05)
- Another try-this-at-home activity (13:05)
- What it really means when people tell you to “play from the back” (15:58)
- Why keeping things moving is key to preventing tension (19:30)
- Why your setup is such a critical part of injury prevention. In that you can go to the physical therapist all you want, but if you continue to engagement in a movement pattern that goes against the anatomical design of your shoulder, you’re only going to undo the work that you’re doing in PT/rehab/etc. (25:50)
- Specific advice for different body types (30:47)
- I ask Claire to distill our talk into specific action steps, in terms of what exactly one can do to try to find their optimal setup (35:23)
- A final reminder that pain is your body’s way of telling you that something you’re doing isn’t working (42:40)

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Noa: I don’t remember where or why I stumbled across this book, but I found this book on the physiology or the biomechanics of violin playing when I was maybe in high school or so. I think this is where I read this idea that we should be filling the gap between our shoulder and our chin not with a higher shoulder pad, but with a higher chin rest perhaps. It was kind of an eye-opener for me. I had never thought about that, and it made sense when I read about it.

Noa: Even though I hadn’t experienced pain, per se, to that point, I did feel like I was not comfortable with my setup. I felt like I couldn’t shift consistently or play in tune accurately, and I wanted to blame it on my setup, because it just didn’t feel right to me. So I went to store. I just had this box of chin rests and shoulder pads and tried all sorts of things. Eventually, over maybe a few years, it led to me finding a setup that I felt was okay. Maybe not ideal, but I was like, “Okay, I can deal with this,” and I felt better about it.

Noa: But I didn’t really have any guiding principles as to am I headed in the right direction, am I going in the wrong direction? I didn’t really know. I just sort of had to go by feel. So a couple things I wanted to ask you to start, is this true that we should be adding height to our chin rests instead of our shoulder pad, and if so, why? But even before we get there, I thought maybe a good place to start would be to just ask you to share a little bit about your background and how you came to do what it is that you do now. We can go from there.

Claire: Yeah. Well, I got injured. I’m going to start with this, because I had played competitively field hockey for 25 years in my native France. I played for the national team and I was training intensively, so I was familiar with my body, feeling when something may go wrong and stopping so that you avoid injuries.

When I was too old to play field hockey I switched to playing music because I had studied the violin and viola for as long as I had played field hockey.

Claire: I felt playing the viola or the violin is just moving your hands around, so here I was grabbing my instrument when I could do it and playing for two hours, sometimes going to those music camp and playing for 10 hours, not feeling particularly good but not applying at all what I would do before a field hockey game. Not stretching, not really listening to my body very much. Really without questioning feeling playing the viola is just moving your hands.

Claire: So I got injured and that got me to really question how could I get injured by just moving my hands around a piece of wood. I looked at myself in the mirror, and I was all crooked because I have a long neck, and I didn't look very comfortable, but again I had played viola for a good 20 years again without being injured, so I felt it was just not very comfortable but had not questioned at all the ergonomics of the instrument based on my body type.

Claire: That got me really diving into this, because I felt that my first reaction was I have a long neck and need a better chin rest. So I went to the local store that I knew well, because I have been professionally involved with musical accessories for a good 25 years. Worked for them, then I worked for D'Addario, then I worked partly for musical accessory distributors. So it has been in my world for a long, long time. The store said, "I hate chin rests. I never have the right one. I can't help you."

Claire: I remembered somebody that had seen those music shows where a lot of manufacturers come with their products and show what they invented and tell you that it's the best product ever existed. That man was always having a booth which was kind of messy, with a lot of bits and pieces on its table, and his name was Gary Frisch, and he had become almost crazily involved. When I say crazily it's that I'm not so sure there's a business to have there, because it can be extremely cost demanding to really carry all kind of plates, all kind of shims, and this and that. But anyway, he had fantastic choices of chin rests and ways to mount them on an elevated platform.

Claire: I contacted him and he fitted me and from that point on I had a chin rest that allowed me to really get my head in the right balance. Why did it matter to restart with the head? Well, that question really got answered when I met Jennifer Johnson. She wrote a book called "What Every Violinist Needs to Know about the Body," and that was my introduction to body mapping. Body mapping is very close to Alexander Technique, but Alexander Technique always got me stuck because it is all about the head balance. I say how can you have head balance for upper string player when the first thing that you do is you hold your instrument with it? I mean, it's just how do you get that free head when you're in upper string player? I just couldn't get there. It was losing me right at the beginning.

Claire: Body mapping has a lot to do with the body map, which is the representation that you have in your brain of your body. When I say your body, it's all your joints and how you move. The main importance of really balancing the head or keeping it in a neutral balance on the top of the spine has really to do with it is so heavy that if you don't balance it, your arms are not going to be free to move around the instrument. That's to answer your question, yes, it is critical to be able to move your head in a place where it stands neutrally on top of the spine.

Noa: I think actually even until now I've not thought about the head being such a central piece of everything, but a couple thoughts popped into my head. One, I remember in this particular martial art, the instructor said that in terms of getting people to fall in the direction that you want, you know where the head goes the rest of the body is going to follow. Even when I was playing and messing around with setups, I don't know that I ever thought about freedom of the head, although I think taking this baroque orchestra class for a semester and studying baroque violin where there was no chin rest, I think is part of what helped me find the right set up in that I didn't have my neck or chin planted on the instrument. Could you say a little bit more about why head freedom maybe biomechanically is so important in terms of where the violin or the viola ends up being placed and the bow and all those sorts of, in terms of even the accuracy of our play, which is what I think I was mostly interested in, more than pain even though I think they both obviously are important.

Claire: Yeah. So, if it is so heavy you carry it. When I say the freedom to me, I would say more how can it sit neutrally on the top of the spine, because it's never going to let go. We're never going to have those muscles completely let go. Even when you fall asleep it never really completely let go. If you carry it, there's a muscle tension and muscles are involved in holding a static position when those muscles, the majority of them, should be available for movement. If they hold a static position they're going to tire much faster.

Claire: If you make a fist and you try to take a big breath, and then you release your fist and you take a breath again, your breathing is going to be very impacted by any tension that you have in your body, whether it is your neck muscle, whether it is your fist making a fist, whether it is your toes grabbing the ground. The tension is going to be there in your body and therefore your muscles are going to tire much faster. If they tire and they keep on really moving, then you're running into the wall because they're going to injure ultimately.

Claire: Not just the head, but starting with the head because it's so heavy, allows you to really start releasing unwanted tension, and specifically for the head muscle, the head being so heavy that the head muscle is very big. It starts at the base of your skull and goes to the middle of your back. When you're going to want to move your arms, your sensation of how you move your arms from the back is going to be very, very diminished if your head muscle is being active carrying your head. I often say that having the right chin rest is opening the door to how to move your arms freely, because that's the way to really feel what there is in your back, because all your arm movers are muscles situated in your back.

Claire: That's where it opens up the possible exploration that people can do by themselves or with some guidance, but suddenly realizing that it is not about moving the fingers. It is about moving the arms so that

the hand and the hand muscle can be busy vibrating and moving the hand and the fingers, not doing the commute.

Noa: Maybe it's sometimes difficult because sometimes we realize that something's not quite right, it doesn't feel right, but we don't know what it's supposed to feel like. Could you describe what some people have described as the before and after feeling, like how it felt before and then how it felt after, when the neck has been freed up or the arms have been freed up?

Claire: For that I'm going to go back to body mapping, because I see a lot of people and it varies a lot how those people are connected to their body or not. I spend a lot of time making sure and doing some exercise to really grow this awareness of what is it, how should you feel when the head is in balance or not. First, feel the weight of it. To answer your question, very often when I correct people and say, "Your head in balance means this," and they feel it's strange, but it feels less work. So the strange has to become the new normal, in other words, but the normal is often sometimes that is non-balanced, based on the skull on the top of the spine. And we're often, we don't really know where is the top of the spine.

Claire: I'm going to give a fun example of very often when I explain body mapping, what I try to show is a typical mis-mapping. For upper string player we see our left hand really face towards us, right? We could look at that first joint on any finger and our first fold is going to be our first joint. Then we look at the second fold and it's going to be second joint. We could really without questioning assume that the third fold is corresponding to the third joint, and if you look at your third fold there's no joint there. But if you don't question this, your pinky is really not going to be very, very efficient. It's going to try to work from that third nonexistent joint instead of using what we have not really as a fall, which is really in the middle of your palm, which is really your third joint, and this one is super efficient. This is a typical mis-mapping for string players.

Claire: I think a lot of pain we have is often making the body work based on imaginary joints that we have because we have no question, and that's where for me body mapping was really a very pragmatic and practical way to make sure that I was going back to the body. The body was telling me, "You hurt me," so going back and seeing, okay, what is the movement that works because it feels easy, and feeling easy means you don't need more muscle than the one that I dedicated for this movement to do it.

Noa: Is that maybe one of the guiding principles then that we should have in mind? Because I remember when I tried on different things sometimes I wasn't sure is this better. I think it's better but I don't know if it's better.

Claire: Yeah. Although, I mean, when you've done something for 20, 40 years, sometimes the normal is you figure it out, and sometimes even if it is not based on how the body's built, it's going to be difficult to really question whether this is easier than a new strange. But I would say that's why at least remapping the upper joints and really making sure that we feel those joints moving on a given movement, and that's what I spent quite a bit of time depending on each person to making sure that those joints are properly mapped and that there is work immediately after the session, at least for two or three weeks. So that through everyday life, which usually we do the movement pretty well during everyday life, we become more aware of those movements that we do very well, and how come that we do it very well in everyday

life and how come that we change that logic when we play.

Claire: That leads me to speak about yoga. I read a book at one point where they say basically your real estate, your emotional and movement real estate, is situated between your head and your pelvis. Your legs are your connection with the ground and your arms are your connection with the world. They're just your connection. They have no intention. They're just antennas. Your arms are just antennae. Your sound you're going to make from your torso out, and we learn the instrument enormous attention on the fingers, so we're trying to reattach the finger to the torso instead of being able to make the sound from the torso out into the fingers.

Claire: That logic to me together with body mapping, it has to be connected with the center, with the middle of your body. Whatever it is, the middle top to bottom, the middle left to right, the middle front to back, it has to be connected to this. Otherwise it's really artificial movement. There's no movement when you do yoga, there's no movement that is only one limb. The ideal is that basically you're connected from the center out. Typically when you wash your hair, you don't think about your fingers. You move your arms and you get to your hair, and the fingers are going to do what they need to do, but you don't even think about it. You don't move your hands, you move your arm, even if your head is very close. But you're going to move your whole arm because your fingers are going to need to put that shampoo there.

Noa: That makes me think of a couple things. One, I think I've heard people talk about playing from the back, which has always seemed very abstract an idea. What you're talking about in that context makes sense, but how would you explain that further to somebody other than saying, "Play from your back," and then somebody trying to figure out what that even means or feels like?

Claire: I'll go back to the head. If your head is off balance, not only are you going to not understand playing from your back but you're not going to feel it. If you were pretending hugging a big tree, put your arms really far away from you and feel how easy it is to extend your arms, and then if you do the same thing with your head down, you're going to feel how much restriction you have in moving your arms. Not only restriction, but from that point on the head muscle is going to take the predominance of what you feel. How can you really engage muscle you don't feel? Once you feel those muscles, suddenly you feel, "Oh, yeah, if I play that big horn and instead of really pushing on my fingers I engage my muscles that now I have felt," that makes a huge difference and that gets me to the sound.

Claire: My point is not just to protect the body. It's that if you remove some tensions, because again if you're not engaging your back you're going to engage some muscle in your arms, which are not dedicated to really support your arms, that's going to be muscle tension, and that muscle tension is not going to do well for the quality of sound.

Noa: So basically, when we're using a number of different muscles to support our body in a position that really isn't aligned and balanced, or these are muscles that are doing more than they really should or doing things that they shouldn't be doing that they don't need to do, and so we end up compensating by using other muscles that then aren't maybe ideal for the job.

Claire: Yeah. Or tensing, multitasking with those muscles. To go back to your example, why first you

balance the head and why is it still uncomfortable to shift? Well, if your shoulder is holding, even if it doesn't look like it is higher than the other shoulder, if it is holding, this arm is not going to be free to move. It can't be free to move. I would say the second rule after balancing the head, and that's why the setup to me is so important to [inaudible 00:17:45] people to do any kind of body awareness work, whether it is physical therapy, Alexander Technique, body mapping, yoga, anything, is really to really make sure that the instrument primarily touches the collarbone.

Claire: Because if it is mostly supported by your shoulder, even if it doesn't look that your shoulder is really higher or carrying, it is basically holding, and if it holds you disengage the joints that we call the shoulder, which again would be a whole discussion in itself, to the arm. The arm is lift by itself to do torsion, so it's maybe okay in first position, but you can imagine in third and moving forward and vibrating, the shoulder can't hold and at the same time vibrate. That's why the shoulder rest don't hold and this movement is impossible. It's holding and going at the same time. The shoulder can't do that.

Noa: That makes me think of this video that I'll link to later that you made with Carol, Carol Rodland at Juilliard, which surprised me because I don't actually remember at this point what I did anymore, but it was very clear in this video that the shoulder pad or the shoulder rest or the sponge or whatever isn't really... Some of these things seem to be misnamed. The chin rest it seems is not so much the chin rest but the head rest. The shoulder rest isn't so much the shoulder rest but the collarbone rest. That was the thing that was interesting to me, that every time you demonstrated where the shoulder pad, the shoulder rest should be, it wasn't actually on the shoulder but it was on the collarbone/the inner part. Like the front part of the shoulder, not on top of it.

Noa: So I want to speak to what you were talking about with your shoulder not being able to both support the violin and also then allow freedom of movement from the limb. I'm sure that feels uncomfortable though to people who are accustomed to having it on the shoulder at first. How does that process work of shifting it to a different place?

Claire: This is the I would say the most work that I spend with a musician coming to see me, is that I was telling you about the mis-mapping of the hand before. The second mis-mapping is definitely where the hand meets the top of the spine. The third mis-mapping is really understanding what the shoulder is. That joint is really very often mis-mapped, mostly on how it attaches, how your arm structure attaches to your body. The most mis-mapping is that because maybe of education when we learn the violin, keep your shoulder down, keep your shoulder back and everything, so we absolutely don't understand the role of the shoulder blade. We don't question it enough and we don't realize that if it is called a shoulder blade it is meant to move. The world is in front of us, so unlike our legs that are meant to really carry weight so they have balls that fit in a socket that's extremely strong, the arm is meant not only to go straight in front of your body but also to have that extra extension that allows you to go beyond where you are.

Claire: The shoulder blade is like a big bone surrounded by rubber bands. We are trying to let the shoulder blade behind and allow the arm to go forward, and that's the best way to dislocate your arm, because basically the arm ball, the humerus ball, is not very big, and the socket is barely a socket. It's a surface no bigger than my thumb, and very, very shallow. Otherwise we couldn't do this. We couldn't really extend beyond straightening out our arm. We couldn't really allow the elasticity of that whole joint.

It's great for big movements, but when it comes to playing the violin or the viola, you need to allow that shoulder to follow the movement of the elbow out, and then in this case you can shift all you want. Not only you can shift but also you can protect all your forearm muscles, so that they just follow. They've been brought wherever you bring your hand, wherever you want to go, by moving your elbow, not doing all this with your hand and multitasking with your forearm muscle.

Claire: Once you feel this, of course then it conditions what you put under your setup, and that's where everybody's different. The sloping of your shoulder, the shape of your collarbone, how much you're free to really move to initiate your shifting with your elbow instead of doing it with your hands, with people having long hands have learned how to really do all this with their hands. But ultimately even if you can do it, then that's where I go back to the problem of if it feels comfortable, rarely people have really finger issues. But the problem is disengaging the possibility to do the distance with the finger, and instead almost artificially moving it from the elbow feels a little strange.

Noa: So there were times probably it sounds like where I was instead of actually having my whole shoulder and arm in the right position, and then from there using my fingers, I was maybe not having my elbow or shoulder in the right position and compensating for that by twisting my arm a little bit more and stretching my fingers, which I'm assuming is also aside from being less efficient biomechanically or physiologically, is maybe partly where there were some inconsistencies in terms of intonation and stuff too, because it's slightly different probably every single time.

Claire: Yeah, you have all those little joints that can't really adjust last minute and everything, whereas if you get used to really moving it from the elbow, this is really a different story. So the idea of the setup is to really allow that movement to happen. Again, you can't make it happen if the shoulder holds against the head. That's where to me the setup is really a critical part of also whenever there is injuries. You can go to the physical therapist all you want. If you continue doing that movement against the anatomical design of your shoulder, you're only going to undo the work that you're trying to fix when you don't play.

Claire: That's why I'm really passionate about making sure that if you plan to study three to six hours a day that you have a good look at your setup. And to your question, what is the wrong setup, the wrong setup is the setup that doesn't allow the head to be in balance or engage the shoulder as a holder when the shoulder should just neutrally follow the movement of the elbow. For people who don't have time for doing physical exercise of any kind, even walking, just giving a time to really feel the body, I do recommend quite a bit trying to at least do yoga and having that sense of ultimately your sound will come from the torso. So create that connection, become more aware of where your torso, where your back, where's that base, that [inaudible 00:24:40] state that will produce your sound.

Claire: It's also related to me to stage fright. If you can't really ground yourself from the center out, at least you know where to sit. It's almost a place to start. I'm not good at performing, but the couple of times where I've been more successful is just feeling, "Okay, I'm sitting on that chair," or I feel the ground into my feet. Just having a sense of not being in thin air with my fingers going somewhere, and the more you question the more you have no base to start from. To me there is that going back to the middle and being able to start from the middle out instead of fixing things that are in your fingers. I don't think we can go reliably far if it is just fixing extremities.

Noa: Even though that's probably the first place that we think to go, which reminds me of tennis. I mean, I was never good at tennis, but the one bad habit that I had that I was really consistent about, which is a big part of why I was never very good, is that I have really lazy feet. I would not get into a good position so I would make all these adjustments with my upper body and my arm, so basically I wouldn't have power or accuracy because I was stretching my arm out too far or I was backwards. I was just too lazy to move my feet to get into position. It sounds exactly the same. If we can get our body in the right position and free up the bigger muscles and the bigger joints, it puts our hand in the right place so that we can then make the little tiny adjustments.

Noa: Sort of like again in tennis, the coach would say, "Take big steps at first to get ready to go, and then at the very end when get close to the ball make little tiny steps to get into the right position." Which I never did, and probably didn't do with music either. I mean, I'm guessing I was much the same. I just would make all these adjustments with the smaller muscles at the end of my arm instead of bigger, more effective adjustments.

Claire: That's where I like body mapping because I feel like it's a physical activity and that's what they miss. Again, I was coming from the sports world and I felt music is just about moving your fingers. I think really attaching it to the body and thinking that kind of pragmatic logic that, yeah, big muscle for big movements, small muscles for small movements, and also weight has to be borne by something. If you don't want your muscle to really carry your weight, just put it on the bone. That bone alignment of being able to really carry the weight down, so that then after that it is secured there and then you will have muscle that will keep it there, but being able to have a better alignment so that you don't work as hard.

Claire: I often say to people be lazy smart. Don't work that hard if you can make it less labor intensive. I mean, I was just working on my speed and I feel like once you're aligned how difficult is it to really move your finger fast. It's difficult if there's tension all around your hand, but if there's no tension, this is going to really move much easier. That logic of being pragmatic about the body allows I think a lot of people after that to be more efficient with their teacher, more efficient with their physical therapist, more efficient in their physical practice so that they can be more a partner with the body than going against it.

Noa: So I had all these questions that are probably very geeky, violin questions or string player questions about chin rests. I experimented with chin rests that were just on the side, then chin rests that were smack over the middle, and then I had the chin rest I think I ended up with that was on the side but then had the piece that went over the middle. I know there's names for these. I forget. Flesch and whatever style. But are maybe those the wrong questions, or are there some questions along those lines that are worth

considering?

Claire: Yeah, there is stuff that work and don't work. I would say don't even go and buy another one if all what we discussed here is new to you. I would say start really looking at yourself and start making sure that you feel where those joints are, at least for the shoulder and the head. Then the logic that we talked about before is really making sure that your headrest that you have instead of talking about the chin rest, the headrest allows your head to be neutral balanced on the top of your spine, which this can be big question, but basically that's the role. It shouldn't really work harder.

Claire: I will say being balanced is not just having your head straightforward. There's a little work to really have it through it with Alexander Technique or body mapping to make sure that you sense where it is. It's not the whole space. It is a place where the head can really rest. That has to do with once you have a sense of where it is, we call it the headrest because the shape of the jaw is different for each of us. Some people have very pointy chin. Some people are very square jaws. Some people have learned the instrument a lot by controlling really the position of the instrument with the corner of their jaw instead of the chin. Some people like to move their head a lot. Some people like to have their instrument very centered to them so that they can see exactly what they play. So that is completely personal, and has to be taken into account because you don't want to change angles and everything.

Claire: One thing, though, that is worth remembering is the position of the instrument. If you push your instrument up your shoulder, you get to the tip more easily on the high string. So if you have a short arm, it does make sense to push the instrument up, and if you play the viola sometimes also because the instrument being bigger, playing it slightly higher on the shoulder so that you get more easily at the tip is a good idea. You should always verify how comfortable it is by going to the very frog on the lower string, because if you pass your head it's not very comfortable. It feels very cramped there. So feeling up or down what is the best position is really worth it.

Claire: Taking a center chin rest just because it's higher, I see a lot of tall people have a center chin rest for that reason, it doesn't make sense, because the lower string at the front is going to be too far past your head. I always really address this, which is really the positioning of their instrument aside from the habit that you have. And of course it will change a little bit, the angle, if you need to really adjust to this, but really for the length of the arms it's worth considering up or down. Then the scroll being very far out versus in, I would say that you should never have a setup that locks it in one position. The head needs to be free to move. The instrument should be free to move based on you have a high solo on the higher strings, or playing loosely. It should be something that could change, for the same reason as when you fall asleep one night you don't wake up in the same position the next morning.

Claire: Ultimately, muscle, to really be relaxed, needs to really change position all the time. So that surface that you have under your head should allow movement, should be matching your jawline, and should really allow movement of the instrument, a little bit like baroque players. It's amazing how often that instrument can move up and down but the scroll is free to really navigate here and there, a little bit like when people play guitar. That neck is not only in one position. If the left arm is moving when you shift, the scroll should be moving with it. It shouldn't be locked in one position. Otherwise you're holding it, and if you're holding it you use muscle, and that's the thing that we discussed before.

Noa: Right. And by up the shoulder and down the shoulder, that's more like is the violin moving back behind your head or is it moving more in front of your head. That makes sense.

Claire: Yeah, towards your sternum versus upon your shoulder.

Noa: I mean, at least for me growing up it would have been really handy to have had a "you" around to say, "Okay, you know what? Let me take a look at you and this is what I recommend, and these are the things maybe you want to try. This is what to look for in terms of how it feels." If people don't have access to a you, though, we talked about trying to understand alignment I'm assuming maybe through watching yourself in the mirror or taking video of yourself. But what are the practical steps in trying to navigate finding the right setup for you, if you had to put together a to-do list?

Claire: I would buy that book from Jennifer Johnson first. If you play violin or viola I think it's anatomy 101 for violinists and violists. I think it's a new setup is going to work well. It's not about the chin rest. If your body is working against its design, it's not going to feel comfortable. The chin rest, shoulder, I mean, baroque player proves it. I was listening to Amandine Beyer recently and she talked a lot about the body and the freedom, how you ground the weight and everything. The logic of really doing it towards the body design makes a lot of sense. This is a small investment. I highly recommend it. Used as a manual, it goes from head to toes, and it covers all the typical mis-mapping that we have, and give exercises on how to re-map your body. For me that's what framed what I do.

Claire: The second aspect is really, yeah, looking at yourself in the mirror and just checking if the instrument has contact with the collarbone, checking if you have a sense of where your head is balanced and you can go with taking Alexander Technique lessons, which have a lot to do with freeing your head and having a sense of what it should feel for your whole body to really have your head free. But again, I would say it's harder for upper strings because you engage your head. You have to engage your head to at least rest it on that support so that the instrument stays with you on your collarbone without holding too much. Those parts I would say is at least 50% of the work to really assess your setup.

Claire: The last part is really for the left arm to be free to move, and that depending on when you start looking at it and how much habit there is there, that may take a little bit more time, and I would say finding somebody who does body mapping in your region or Alexander Technique with body mapping I think will give you more sense of what is wrong in your representation of that joint. Very often we think the shoulder blade is attached to the spine, or mostly we have not questioned things. Questioning that joint will lead you to realize what you do against your anatomical design, which would change a lot the amount of space

there is between your instrument resting on your collarbone and what you put under.

Claire: But of course it's helpful to have somebody helping you with this. I tried to fit myself and I was the worst fitter for myself. I made the typical mistakes because I couldn't see from the side. So I would say, as I said before a lot of people come with bags of chin rests and shoulder rests and everything, but I would say sometimes really going to somebody who can see you from the outside and sometimes some teachers are more and more involved in trying to really help their student finding the right setup. I try to really give a frame of what matters, and really the instrument on the collarbone, the head in balance, and the arm, left arm structure, being free to move from the elbow is really the three areas where you can really start finding where the problem is.

Noa: I have to admit that I'm always looking for the, I don't want to say that I was looking for the quick fix because that doesn't make me sound very good, but I think it's appealing certainly to find this is the perfect kind of workout that going to help with gaining strength, these are the top nine yoga poses that are going to help you do this, that, and the other thing. In one part of my head it's like, oh, it would be awesome if like, "Here are the three rules on how to find the perfect chin rest for you." Then it'll open up everything and then you'll be able to play the way that you want to and feel comfortable and avoid injuries and so forth.

Noa: But it sounds like the reality is as important as the right chin rest is, that has to be determined in context of the larger issues of how to make sure your body's in balance and you're playing with the right muscles, and that's just one element of not getting in your own way, and that the larger picture actually matters the most, and this is just a particular detail. The shoulder pad and the chin rest, you can't necessarily recommend, "Okay, this is the best chin rest to get for everybody or this is the best shoulder pad." For better or for worse it's more complicated than that.

Claire: The beauty, though, of this process is I want to say all systemically people staying with me an hour, I have systematically made them feel and hear some difference between an unwanted tension, then to secure the instrument on them and the way to do the same thing with that tension, or removing one tension. You remove every tension, muscle tension, you release, it will translate into a better sound.

Claire: I see actually much more male violinists. When I started this activity I felt I'm going to see much more women violists because it requires strength and it's a bigger instrument, and actually male violinists often feel that with the force they'll be able to get there. From the sound it's fantastically intense, but it's not dense. When you do that exercise of really being more aware physically, it's a strange adjustment because you don't want to lose that kind of intensity, but instead you want to really get depth of sound. That same intensity but with density. I feel like the beauty with music is that if you do it well, the sound is immediately going to gain that density. That's a nice reward.

Noa: Yeah. I mean, even for me, knowing what I do know, I don't know if I came up with the ideal setup, but it was definitely much more rewarding to practice when I didn't feel like I was having to fight against this combination of ingredients on my shoulder and under my chin that felt like it was holding me back, and even better if it feels like it's translating into playing.

Claire: You know, yourself, you work on the stage fright and things like this. When you're having the impression your instrument is going to fall, it's really, really not helping, and having a sense that actually an instrument is much lighter than a head. If your head is resting the instrument on the bone and by its weight it's going to keep the instrument on the bone, then the only thing that can fall is just the scroll can fall down, but not the instrument by itself. Once you realize that no, the shoulder rest is not going to really slide or something, once this risk of losing the instrument is gone, because that definitely with the proper setup, you should feel that you don't need to engage force to keep the instrument with you, that's a big muscle tension that can really suddenly be dedicated to something else.

Noa: Are there any questions I should have asked that I didn't think to, or last thoughts that might be helpful for people to know as they move forward?

Claire: Yeah, I would say that when you have pain it's your body saying, "I don't like what you do to me." I would really, really beg either parents or students themselves or adults that when there is pain, I mean, I know for certain people there has been so much pain and so much time on the table with various therapies and approaches and everything, but the pain is really the body saying, "You do something to me that is not working for me." If you have pain, reduce the amount of playing and try to do more maybe, more body awareness work, which will only contribute to the sound ultimately, but not going against the pain when you can really address it early enough to really avoid the injury.

Claire: Because if it is at the time of the injury, because it's very, very small movements, you have damaged the environment, not just one muscle. Like in sports when you have suddenly a big injury, it's one muscle that has given up. But when it is a micro-movement, you wear and tear all the ligaments and tendons that are around the joint, and when it starts breaking, that environment is very damaged. So no pain, no pain is not something that I would advocate for even when you had the possibility to.

Claire: The beauty of body mapping is that you can start working by yourself and get some advice if you get locked in something and you don't feel it, but we're not too keen about the huge financial investment, which is maybe not for everybody but some people like to figure out by themselves. It's a great tool aside from what you can find on the internet, and you can find a body mapping teacher that will help you out by Skype. And again, Alexander Technique also. I would say that all those approaches are fine and yoga can be great also for the same reason, but there's a lot of tools there, and I would say address the body and don't consider playing the violin and the viola as just moving your fingers.

Noa: Great. Well, thank you so much.

Claire: My pleasure.

Notes

[1] Claire mentioned Gary Frisch, whose chinrests and chinrest fitting kits are available at chinrests.com (6:03)

[2] Jennifer Johnson's book is available on [Amazon](#). But if it's out of stock there, [the publisher's online store](#) is another source. You can also reach out to Jennifer at her [website](#). (7:03)

[3] Cellist Bill Conable, and his wife Barbara, are the founders of body mapping, and continue to do workshops and trainings. Barbara founded [Andover Educators](#), which provides training to those who may be interested in becoming a licensed practitioner of body mapping. The site also has an [extensive reading list](#) that might be of interest. (7:22)

[4] And speaking of Alexander Technique, if you haven't already, you might enjoy [this previous podcast episode](#) with Juilliard AT teacher Lori Schiff.

Videos

As they say, a picture is worth a thousand words, so this video of Claire with Juilliard viola faculty member Carol Rodland and several students will give you a clearer visual idea of many of the concepts we talked about, with regards to the neck, spine, head, collarbone, shoulder, etc.:

[In the Viola Studio With Carol Rodland: Posture, Stance, and Set-Up](#)

And in this one, Claire shows a few specific chinrests and shoulder rests that look intriguing:

[Ergonomic Setup Tools](#)

How to reach Claire

Want to set up a fitting (a.k.a. "Pain In the Neck" session) with Claire? You can learn more about this service, or contact her via her [website](#). Just scroll all the way down to the bottom to send her a message or give her a call.

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