

Hello Linda!

Good to hear from you and I hope to see you and your son in July.

Shoulder rests are a very complex and delicate subject. I do not hold a "never" use a shoulder rest policy and use one myself. The question is to understand the mechanics of the different philosophies of holding the violin that have been proposed throughout history and to make sure that the choice of shoulder rest truly is the right one and the best fit for the body type of the student.

Paul Rolland and Suzuki for instance basically favor a loose, heavy head that holds the violin very securely against the collar bone, freeing up the hand to never have to share the duties of holding the instrument. Others propose a violin balance approach where the chin and left hand both share the duties of holding the instrument, each relaxing as much as possible when not absolutely needed to hold (ex.- on shifts the chin holds more, when playing in one position the chin lets go more). Others, such as Ricci, hold the opinion that the left hand does most of the work and holds the violin mostly and the jaw is not as important, only used when absolutely necessary. This is the way they held the violin in the Baroque period and you see many pictures of violinists holding the instrument this way.

The other major consideration is whether the violin should be on the shoulder proper and more to the left, in which case a smaller sponge will suffice, or whether you are holding it more forward in front of the body, in which case a higher bar rest is needed to fill up the space.

I try to be flexible enough to try every solution for every student until I find the right combination of shoulder rest, jaw rest (that is another can of worms- and the shoulder rest solution cannot be considered separately from a proper jaw rest solution) and positioning of the violin more to the left or more toward the center.

I have come up with some guiding principles I try to follow based upon my years of teaching. They are:

1. I advocate, especially for beginners, holding the violin more with the jaw and head, freeing up the left hand from clutching the violin and caving in the wrist, a very common problem with beginners that I think can be avoided by holding firmly (but not tensely) with the head.
2. I advocate holding the violin more to the left and on the shoulder proper. This frees up the left arm to be in front of the body and work more freely to produce tone, and this also means that the head should not turn completely to the left. If the violin is at a 75 to 80 degree angle to the left of the front of the body, the head should only be turned 45-50 degrees, allowing for more flexibility and relaxation.
3. The collar bone is about the same height as the shoulder, so if the violin rests on the collar bone and is to the left on the shoulder then not much space to fill up is needed, hence my feeling that a sponge that molds itself to the space is both more comfortable and more acceptable in that most bar rests are entirely too high for this purpose. Most bar rests actually force you to move the violin forward so that the rest can sit on the chest rather than the shoulder. In some cases, according to the shape of the student, slope of the neck into the shoulder and width of the shoulder, etc, a bar rest MIGHT work for a younger student, but in the great majority of cases I have found that the small sponge is more comfortable, more flexible, more the right height and can be made to fit more comfortably in the beginning in most cases. SO... I always try the sponge and the violin out to the left on the shoulder first.
4. Holding the violin on the shoulder and out to the left creates a fulcrum with its point at the collar bone and neck so that more complex and finessed movements can be made with the violin. Sometimes a bar rest can lock the violin in so that you have to move the entire upper body to move the scroll of the violin.

I hope this helps somewhat. Let your son know that he is growing and changing and just like buying new clothes as we change size, we need to constantly re-evaluate the setting of the violin. Also there is no grown up shoulder rest that we graduate too, and a lot of concert artists (the most in fact) do not use a bar rest (for various practical and aesthetic reasons). We are not punishing him by not letting him have the shiny expensive "grown up" rest, we are finding through experimentation, the best solution for him based on a set of underlying principles.

Keep in touch and let me know how it goes,
my best,
terry