

I've been playing 2♣ Puppet Stayman in response to our strong 1NT opening for almost 40 years, so I do know something about it. Locating a 5-card major in opener's hand is a very minor by-product.

The conceptual reason for playing Puppet Stayman is somewhat similar to the reason for playing transfers. It allows responder to describe his hand to opener, rather than responder having to make all the decisions himself. It is a fundamental principle of constructive bidding that the stronger hand is better placed to make decisions about which strain to play, since the stronger hand is looking at more high cards and has a better knowledge of how the hand will play if he can determine his partner's distribution.

Some of the advantages are:

Concealment. Consider a common hand type where responder has game-forcing values, a 4-card spade suit, and willingness to play in spades if there is a 4-4 fit, while opener has a 4-card heart suit. In a Standard structure responder bids 2♣, opener bids 2♥, and responder bids 3NT. The opponents now know responder has 4 spades and opener has 4 hearts, which makes their opening lead and subsequent defense a lot easier. Playing Puppet, they don't know that much. Responder bids 2♣, then 2♥, which shows 4 spades and denies 4 hearts. Now there is no reason for opener to show whether or not he has 4 hearts, so the opponents are in the dark about opener's hand.

Choice of strain. It is not always right to play in a 4-4 major-suit fit. Sometimes 3NT is better. Suppose responder has a balanced game-force with a 4-card major. Playing Standard, responder pretty much has to decide on his own whether to bid Stayman or just blast 3NT. Playing Puppet, opener can be included in the decision. The 4-4 fit can be located below 3NT, and either partner can then suggest 3NT in light of the 4-4 fit.

Showing distribution. The 2♣ puppet bid gives the partnership a lot more room for responder to describe his distribution. Using Puppet along with a couple of other gadgets allows us to have responder show his exact distribution on almost any game-forcing hand which doesn't contain a 5-card major. This is very helpful for avoiding a bad 3NT contract, since opener can determine if there is a soft spot and get to a good 4-3 major-suit fit or a 5 of a minor contract if these are better.

Stopping low. Playing puppet the partnership can stop in 2♦, which is unavailable with any other structure. Also it is possible to stop in 2♠ in a 4-4 or 4-3 fit when responder is only invitational and opener has a minimum.

There are two major costs to playing 2♣ puppet. One is the loss of garbage Stayman. This is a loss, but not nearly as great as one might think -- sometimes 1NT turns out to be the best contract after all. The other loss is the opponents have the opportunity to double (or not double) responder's 2M rebid (showing 4 of the other major) for a lead. This cost is always there with any artificial call.

It is very easy to graft Puppet Stayman onto an existing notrump structure. A very simple outline is, 2♣ followed by:

2♥ = 4 spades, < 4 hearts, inv +

2♠ = 4 hearts, < 4 spades, inv +

2NT = 4-4 major, invitational  
3NT = 4-4 majors, game-forcing.

All other sequences (Smolen, 2♣ then 3 of a minor showing GF with that minor, etc.) can remain exactly the same. This is exactly what we did initially. The bells and whistles came later.

Steve Robinson and I first played Puppet Stayman at a nationals after a 2-minute discussion! On the very first board, I had something like ♠xx ♥Axx ♦AQJxx ♣Axx. The bidding started 1NT-2♣;2♦-2♠. As Steve had shown 4 hearts and not 4 spades I was worried about the spade suit, so instead of bidding 2NT (the normal call on a minimum without 4-card support for partner's major) I tried 3♦. Steve had some 3-4-3-3 9-count. He recognized what I was doing and passed. The spades were wide open, notrump made nothing, and our +110 was worth 23 out of 25 matchpoints. Not a bad beginning for a new convention.

Extract from Bridge Winners aout 2014