

# Contents

Introduction	VI
Sources	VII
Acknowledgements	VII
How to use <i>Basics</i>	VIII

## Part A – Right Arm and Hand

<b>Bow hand</b>	<b>1</b>
Thumb counter-pressure	1
The thumb and second finger	2
Thumb flexibility	3
Balancing with the fourth finger	3
Holding the bow without gripping	4
Hand balance	5
The give of the hand into the bow	6
Vertical and horizontal finger movement	7
Changing bow	9
Bow angle	10
Hand movements	10
<b>Putting weight into the string</b>	<b>12</b>
Using weight from the arm	12
Using weight from the hand	14
Spreading weight through the hand	14
Pull and push	15
<b>Forearm and upper-arm movements</b>	<b>15</b>
Forearm rotation	15
Upper-arm movement	16
About raising the elbow	17
Leading string crossing	18
<b>Long, slow sustained bows</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Bowing parallel to the bridge</b>	<b>20</b>
About the angle of the violin to the body	20
Moving the hand along the bow	20
Dividing the bow into four parts	21
Dividing the bow into two parts	22
Bowing at an angle	22
Fast whole bows in the air	24
Fast, short strokes moving up the bow	24

<b>Pivoting and string crossing</b>	<b>25</b>
Seven levels of the bow	25
Pivoting	27
Curves on one string	31
Accented string crossing	32
Scale string crossing	33

## Part B – Tone Production

<b>General contact exercises</b>	<b>35</b>
About the tilt and the angle of the violin to the floor	35
Bow tensions	35
String tensions	36
Resonance	37
Bow tilt	38
True legato	39
Attacks	40
<b>Soundpoints</b>	<b>41</b>
Soundpoint exercise: whole bows	42
Soundpoint exercise: short bows	43
Soundpoint exercise: changing the length of bow	43
Changing soundpoint	44
Different soundpoints, same speed	45
Different soundpoints, same pressure	46
Rhythms on each soundpoint	46
<b>Bow speed</b>	<b>48</b>
Speed exercise	48
Speed exercise moving across soundpoints	49
Speed exercise using broken thirds	50
Uneven bow speeds	51
<b>Bow pressure</b>	<b>54</b>
Pressure exercise	54
Pressure exercise moving across soundpoints	56

Pressure exercise using scales	57
Pressure and length of string	57

## Part C – Key Strokes

<b>Detaché</b>	<b>59</b>
Even speed and pressure	59
Smooth connections	60
Simple <i>detaché</i> to <i>martelé</i>	61
Portato	61
<b>Collé</b>	<b>62</b>
Warm-up exercise	62
<b>Martelé</b>	<b>63</b>
Catching the string	63
Finger action	63
Bow hold	64
<b>Staccato</b>	<b>64</b>
Curves	65
Based on <i>martelé</i>	66
String crossings	66
Tremolo exercises	67
Scales	68
Kreutzer Etude no. 4	69
About <i>collé-spiccato</i>	69
<b>Spiccato</b>	<b>70</b>
Natural bounce	70
Proportions	70
String crossing	72
<b>Springing bowings</b>	<b>72</b>
About the movement of the bow within the hand	72
<i>Sautillé</i>	73
Ricochet	74
Springing arpeggios	76
<b>Key bowing patterns</b>	<b>78</b>
<b>Chords</b>	<b>86</b>
About timing finger placement in chords	86
Voicing	86
Smooth pivoting	87
Gradually increasing length	88

## Part D – Left Hand

<b>Reducing thumb counter-pressure</b>	<b>89</b>
Positioning the thumb	89
Warm-up exercise	90

Thumb independence	91
Rolling fingers into the string	91
Upward counter-pressure	92

## **Widening at the base joints 93**

About fingertip placement and base joints	93
Fingertip placement	94
Contrary motion	95
Sliding exercise	96
Extensions	97

## **Hand position 98**

Reaching back from the fourth finger	99
Positioning the hand for thirds	102

## **Finger pressure 103**

Finger independence	103
Minimum pressure	104
Releasing between notes	105
Finger pressure in double stops	106

## **Finger action 106**

About moving fingers from the base joint	106
Three warm-up exercises	107
Silent tapping	108

## **Square and extended 113**

## **Holding fingers down 116**

Overlapping	116
Holding down the first finger	118

## **Fast fingers 119**

About timing lifting and dropping	119
Lift-off	120
Gradually increasing speed	121
Slow tempo, fast fingers	122
Rhythms	124

## **Fourth finger 125**

## **Co-ordination 129**

Fingers 'leading'	129
Finger preparation	130

## **Trills 134**

Releasing the lower finger	134
Building trills note by note	136
Direction	137
Rhythm exercise	138

## **Blocks 139**

## **Extensions and contractions 140**

Extensions	140
Contractions	144

## Part E – Shifting

‘Ghosting’	145
<b>Arm movement</b>	<b>145</b>
<b>Leading the shift</b>	<b>146</b>
Thumb preparation	146
Fingers leading	147
About slow arrival speed	148
<b>One-finger exercises</b>	<b>149</b>
Slow arrival speed	149
Scales and arpeggios	151
Broken thirds, fourths, etc.	152
Semitones	153
Chromatic glissando	155
Metronome exercise	156
<b>Classical shifts</b>	<b>157</b>
<b>Romantic shifts</b>	<b>158</b>
<b>Combination shifts</b>	<b>160</b>
<b>Exchange shifts</b>	<b>162</b>
Using substitutions	162
Shifting below the note	163
Shifting with both fingers	164
Broken intervals	166
Metronome exercise	167
Scales	168
<b>Drop-outs</b>	<b>168</b>
<b>Substitutions</b>	<b>170</b>
<b>Octaves and tenths</b>	<b>173</b>
Octaves	173
Tenths	176
<b>All shifts in one complete sequence</b>	<b>178</b>
<b>Double stops</b>	<b>179</b>

## Part F – Intonation

<b>Sympathetic vibrations</b>	<b>185</b>
<b>The feel of the hand and fingers</b>	<b>186</b>
Memorising the hand position	186
Pitching spaces between fingers	186
Guide-notes	188
<b>Uniform intonation</b>	<b>191</b>
Finger patterns	193
Major and minor thirds	195
Tuning scales	197
Tuning accidentals from naturals	198
Wide and narrow semitones	200

About tuning double stops	201
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<b>Tone–semitone groups</b>	<b>202</b>
Single notes	202
Double stops	204
Thirds	206
<b>Sequences transposed up the string</b>	<b>207</b>
Chromatic sequence	207
Harmonic sequence	208
<b>Perfect fourths</b>	<b>210</b>

## Part G – Vibrato

<b>Flexibility</b>	<b>213</b>
First joint	213
Base joint	214
Circles	214
<b>Hand and arm movements</b>	<b>215</b>
Sliding exercises	215
Tapping	216
Wall exercise	217
Forearm rotation	217
<b>Relaxation exercises</b>	<b>218</b>
Releasing to a harmonic	218
‘Swinging’ the hand in arm vibrato	219
Vibrating harmonics	219
Keeping the scroll still	220
Upper arm	220
<b>Speed</b>	<b>221</b>
Vibrating at any speed	221
Vibrato accents	221
Changing speed without changing width	222
<b>Width</b>	<b>222</b>
Dividing semitones	222
Fingertip and pad	223
Changing width without changing speed	223
<b>Continuous vibrato</b>	<b>224</b>
Moving fingers in slow motion	224
Pulsing	224
Silent raising and dropping	225
<b>Equal vibrato on different fingers</b>	<b>226</b>
Comparing fingers	226
Even pitch	226

General index	228
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Index of music examples	231
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# Introduction



Basic technical exercises can be used by players of all levels because most of the technical issues remain the same – e.g., intonation, tone production, rhythm and articulation, co-ordination, relaxation, as well as the easiest possible working of arms, hands and fingers.

Violin playing is complex because to play even a simple phrase a large number of quite different techniques must be performed one after another, often at great speed. Each note in a succession of notes may need to be produced in a fundamentally different way from the others. For example, to play the first note the bow may have to be placed on the string and then ‘bite’ the beginning of the note; to play the second note the bow may have to pivot smoothly across to another string; to play the third note a finger may have to be lifted, to play the fourth note the hand may have to shift up or down, and so on.

On their own, most of the separate techniques are very simple. It is only when we try to perform several of them at the same time that they can appear to become more difficult. To a certain extent, an ‘easy’ piece is easy because very few actions have to be performed at the same time; a ‘difficult’ piece is difficult because ten or twenty actions may have to be performed at the same time or in close succession. (The easiest ‘piece’ of all must therefore be just one open string played pizzicato, because it consists of only one action.)

Many of the individual actions that make up technique can themselves be broken down into

several elements. This book deals with these elements, large or small, one at a time, which is the quickest way to build technique.

The exercises in *Basics* can be used in a number of different ways. First, they provide an easy and direct way to build, one at a time, the simple actions that together are called ‘technique’. Second, many of them double as useful warm-up exercises. Third, even a player with the finest technique has to continue to practise in order not to lose it, and *Basics* exercises are an effective and time-efficient way to work on specific areas.

Well-aimed exercises develop individual parts of technique. The next step is to combine the individual techniques in countless different ways by playing scales, studies and pieces. But many of the difficulties of everyday playing simply vanish if you regularly practise key individual techniques separately.

The most important thing is to have so much technique that you don’t have to think about it. If you are too conscious of the ‘how’, it can make playing almost impossible, just as any actions that normally happen automatically – walking, talking, eating, etc. – become stilted and awkward when we try to perform them consciously. Children learn quickly because the ‘how’ goes straight into the unconscious. It is through the adult knowing ever more clearly and consciously what to do, that finally technique becomes automatic and is then naturally forgotten. Then the player can really be free to make music.

## Sources

Many of the exercises in this collection have been used widely for decades, and in some cases for centuries. Their exact origin is difficult to trace because they have been so widely practised. Others have been used so much by certain teachers, though not necessarily invented by them, that the exercises have become associated with them: Galamian-type tone production exercises, Flesch Urstudien-type finger tapping (repeated by Yost and Dounis), Ševčík or Schradieck-type finger patterns, Dounis-type shifting or finger action exercises, etc.

Some of the exercises are adaptations of traditional methods, while others are my own. But in a field as old and widespread as violin playing, new ideas usually turn out to have been thought of before. As a student I ‘invented’ the exercise in which the player runs his or her hand up and down the stationary bow (Exercise 36). I showed it to a Bulgarian violinist who said she had been taught that same exercise in Sofia fifteen years earlier. Later I came across a similar exercise in *Six Lessons with Yehudi Menuhin* (Faber, London, 1971), and again in Tortelier’s *How I Play, How I Teach* (Chester Music, London, 1975).

Some of the exercises originally appeared in serialised form in *The Strad* magazine. The first of these was a tone production exercise that I learnt from Dorothy DeLay. Before sending the article to the magazine, I telephoned Miss DeLay in New York to ask her permission, explaining that I did not want to ‘steal’ her exercise. She laughed and said: ‘Don’t worry. I learnt it from Galamian, and he learnt it from Capet, so feel free – what is important is that these exercises become known!’

## Acknowledgements

My thanks to Dorothy DeLay, whose basic exercises were not only the inspiration but also the starting point for this book, as well as my gratitude for her support and encouragement for the project over the years.

I am indebted to the many friends and colleagues, notably Emanuel Hurwitz, who have looked through or used early drafts of the book, and whose suggestions have always been so helpful; and in particular to Kyra Humphreys and Veronika Weise whose painstaking work in trying out exercises and checking text was invaluable.

Thanks also to all the many students over the fifteen-year period during which the book has developed, who have acted as willing and enthusiastic ‘guinea pigs’, making it possible to refine and redesign each exercise countless times. Without them, few of the exercises could have evolved into their final form.

Finally, I am grateful to Jennifer King who modelled so patiently for the photographs.

# How to use *Basics*

Which exercise to practise?

How long to practise it for?

How often to practise it?

Everybody's needs are different, and an exercise that may be relevant for one player may be irrelevant for another. *Basics* can be used in any number of ways according to preference.

The exercises fall into several categories. Some are intended simply to illuminate a particular aspect of playing, e.g., nos. 1, 2, 6, 19, 54, 55. These can be returned to from time to time, but do not need to be practised regularly.

Some of the exercises are designed to give a different feel to the hands and arms in all the different aspects of playing, for example: the feel of each finger on the bow; of raising and dropping the fingers; of drawing a straight bow, and so on. Most of these are very short and simple, and do not require more than sixty or ninety seconds, e.g., nos. 3, 4, 5, 9, 56, 89, 98, 128. They do not need to be practised every day, although many players find that different exercises become 'favourites' to which they return again and again. They can be used daily for building technique; or, by returning to them regularly, used as a quick way to ensure that everything stays in good working order.

Other exercises are solid practice routines that constantly develop technique and, like playing scales, may become part of everyday practice. Some of the key exercises in this category are tone production, shifting, intonation and vibrato. Used again and again, these improve the player's technique on a continual basis.

Many *Basics* exercises can be used in daily practice to save time. Intonation exercises, for instance,

save time by 'tuning' the hand so that fewer intonation problems are likely to arise in subsequent practice. Fifteen minutes spent on an intonation exercise can mean that you spend one hour instead of two working on intonation in a piece. Many of the shifting exercises include all possibilities of shifting from one finger to another. Once you have practised them for an hour, or for ten minutes, the repertoire you play afterwards feels more secure because, in effect, you have already worked on all the shifts in one go.

Some players like to spend all the practice in a day just playing, for example, shifting exercises or tone production exercises. The improvement in the general level of playing that results from working like this can be felt for a long time to come.

Although *Basics* is not a book to play through from cover to cover, one approach is to practise something from each section every day. Some exercises will take thirty seconds, and some will take thirty minutes; what is practised depends entirely on the individual's needs and availability of time.

Keep a record of what you have practised. For example, in a row of alternative key signatures (such as on page 142), tick each key signature as you play it. Mark each exercise with a tick each time you do it. Practising a tone production exercise, make a note of 'A string, low position', 'D string, high position', and so on.

# Right Arm and Hand

*part*

## Bow hand

### Thumb counter-pressure

thumb's contact with the bow can be very light, even in the loudest playing. At the point, the thumb has to work hard against the downward pressure of the fingers into the bow. However much it is, counter-pressure should always be as little as possible.

Counter-pressure is automatic and unconscious, but conscious releasing can be helpful. The most common thumb tension problems do not come from counter-pressing, but from not letting the thumb release when less counter-pressure is needed.

Place the thumb at an angle of about  $45^\circ$  to the bow, so that the tip of the left side of the thumb (as seen from the player's viewpoint) is on the stick and the right side is against the nut. The thumb should always bend outwards.

This exercise shows how much counter-pressure the thumb has to give in every part of the bow.



Light and relaxed thumb despite the pressure into the string



At the point the thumb counter-presses more

**Fig. 1**

- 1 Place the bow on the string at the heel, just in front of the first finger, holding the bow with only the thumb and first finger (Fig. 1a).
- 2 Slowly push the wood of the bow down as far as possible. However hard you press into the string, the thumb can be light and relaxed.
- 3 Replace the bow on the string a centimetre higher up. Slowly press the wood of the bow down as far as possible. Feel how the thumb has to counter-press a fraction more.
- 4 Continuing to hold the bow with only the thumb and first finger, press the bow down into the string centimetre by centimetre up the whole length of the bow. Feel all the different degrees of counter-pressure the thumb has to give. Pressing at the point creates the most counter-pressure (Fig. 1b).
- 5 Using a normal bow hold, press down into the string in every part of the bow, feeling all the different degrees of thumb counter-pressure.



## The thumb and second finger

See also *About the movement of the bow within the hand*, page 72.

The thumb and second finger are the centre of the bow hold. The second finger needs to sit very slightly to the left of the thumb (as seen from the player's viewpoint; Fig. 2).

A bow hold with the thumb *between the second and third fingers* can cause tension in the base of the thumb. (Without the bow, hold the hand in bow-hold position. Move the thumb very slowly towards the fourth finger. The closer the thumb gets to the fourth finger the harder the muscle becomes in the base of the thumb.)

The thumb should not be placed *between the first and second fingers* because this gives an unbalanced distribution of the fingers, with three fingers one side of the thumb and one the other side. Another reason is that the first finger would be too near the thumb, causing it to have to work too hard. Any downward pressure from the first finger has a greater effect the further away from the thumb it is.

Fig. 2

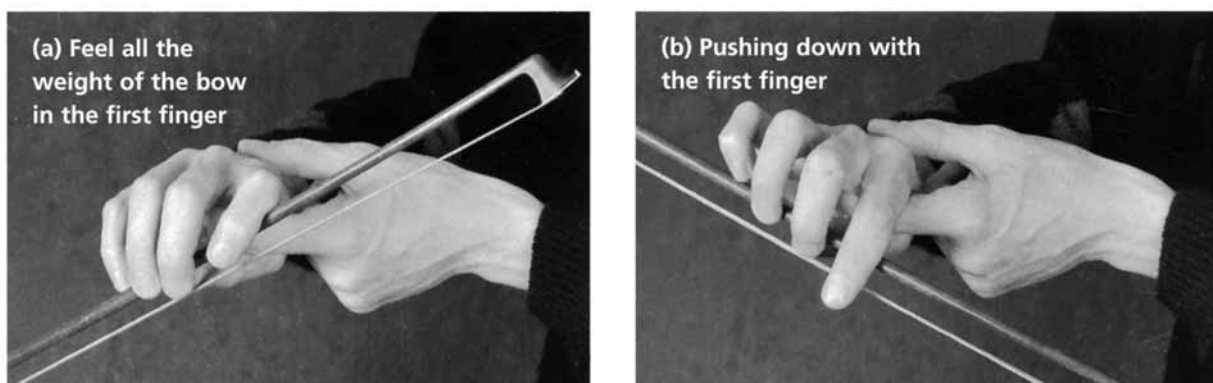


Thumb and second finger relationship

Use a normal bow hold throughout this exercise. Move the tip of the bow up and down using only the fingers, not the hand. To help isolate the finger movement so that the hand itself remains still, hold the right hand with the left hand. Place the thumb on the back of the hand, and the first finger in the palm of the hand.

- 1 Hold the bow in the upper half (Fig. 3a). Feel the first finger supporting all the weight of the bow.
- 2 Push down with the first finger, making the heel of the bow move up (Fig. 3b). Notice the fourth finger curving at the same time. Keep the forearm still and use only the finger to move the bow.
- 3 Release the first finger pressure, letting the heel of the bow move down. Feel the bow moving around the thumb and second finger, like the centre of a seesaw. Repeat the movement several times, in a continuous motion.
- 4 Repeat with the hand in the middle of the bow, where less weight is pushing into the first finger; at the point-of-balance, where the bow feels evenly balanced; and in the normal bow-hold position, where the fourth finger supports all the weight.

Fig. 3



Holding the right hand with the left hand while doing the exercise



## Thumb flexibility

Invisible, unconscious movements of the thumb are an essential part of almost all bowstrokes. A rigid thumb can badly affect the entire bow arm.

- 1 Playing lightly near the fingerboard, play whole bows on one note. Keep the hand and fingers loose and relaxed.
  - 2 Bend and straighten the thumb ten or more times during each bow (Figs. 4a and 4b). The fingers should curve and straighten at the same time.
  - 3 Repeat while playing between the bridge and the fingerboard, where the bow will be heavier and deeper in the string. Keep the fingers and thumb relaxed and free.
  - 4 Finally, make the movement while playing very heavily near the bridge. The thumb and fingers should remain free even though a lot of weight now has to go into the bow. Keep the right shoulder relaxed.
- Repeat on each string. Play double stops as well as single notes.



**Fig. 4**

## Balancing with the fourth finger

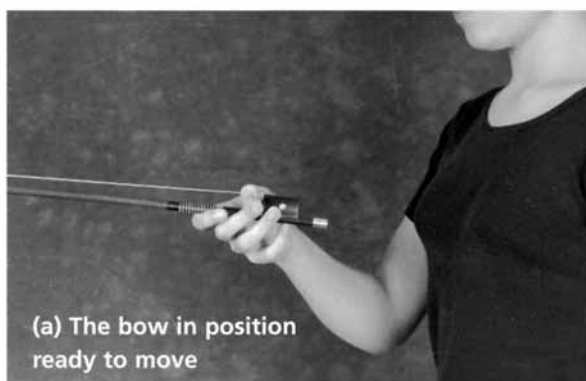
Playing in the lower half, the fourth finger sits on the bow as on a seesaw, controlling the pressure of the bow in the string. In the upper half the fourth finger balances the first finger, preventing the tone from becoming too pressed.<sup>1</sup> Balancing the bow with the fourth finger is also a major part of all lifted bowings.

### Exercise 1

Point the bow slightly more towards the left shoulder, as it does during normal playing. Keep the thumb curved and relaxed.

The usual position for the fourth finger is on the *upper, inside edge* of the bow, but in this exercise place it directly on top of the bow. Keep the fourth finger curved all the time.

- 1 Turn the hand clockwise so that the bow points to the right, and the hair is above the stick (Fig. 5a).
- 2 Make a fast, anticlockwise movement so that the bow is suddenly returned to its normal position. Make the movement so quickly that there is a 'swishing' noise as the air rushes through the hair. Feel all the weight of the bow going into the little finger (Fig. 5b). Relax the thumb.



**Fig. 5**

<sup>1</sup> Some schools say that the fourth finger should be taken off the bow in the upper half; certain players with short arms often cannot reach the point (with a straight bow) if they do not let the fourth finger come off the bow. If you take the fourth finger off, you have to be extra careful not to squash the sound by over-pressing with the first finger.

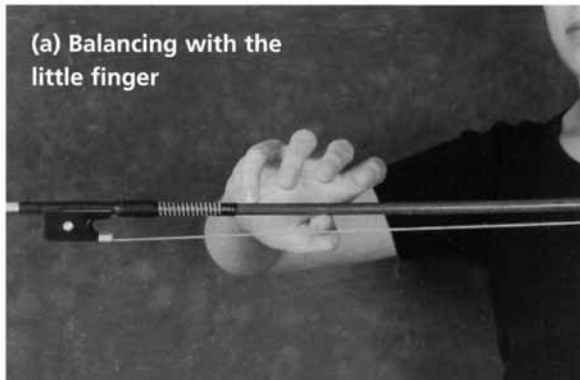
<sup>1</sup> The point-of-balance is below the middle of the bow because the heel end of the bow is heavier than the point end. Many spiccato or semi-lifted bowings feel particularly balanced and comfortable here.

### Exercise 2

Point the bow slightly more towards the left shoulder, as it does during normal playing. Keep the thumb curved and relaxed.

- 1 Hold the bow with only the thumb and fourth finger, just below the point-of-balance<sup>1</sup> (Fig. 6a). Place the fourth finger directly on top of the stick.
- 2 Move the point of the bow up, by pushing down with the little finger (Fig. 6b), and then let the point down again to the starting point (Fig. 6a). Keep the forearm still and use only the finger to move the bow. Repeat this a few times, in a continuous motion.
- 3 Place the hand a few centimetres closer to the frog and repeat. Continue, gradually getting closer to the frog, until the hand is in its usual position.

Fig. 6



### Holding the bow without gripping

The fingers must always be *alive* on the bow. Tiny adjustments to the bow hold have to be made all the time, because the conditions of playing are always changing. From note to note, the brain sends millions of subconscious messages to the fingers to change their contact with the bow. These often invisible changes are instinctive reactions to musical feeling and to the changing contacts of the bow with the string, rather than being something that can be taught or learnt. The bow has to be held without undue tension so that the spontaneous adjustments can occur without restriction.<sup>2</sup>

You also have to be able to make larger, deliberate alterations to the bow hand, for instance, when playing *pp* one moment and *martelé* the next.

### Exercise 1

The fingers hold the bow firmly in strong, forceful playing, even squeezing it at times (for instance, playing a stroke that begins with a sharp bite). Other strokes require more of a bow *balance* than a bow *hold* or bow *grip*.

There is nothing wrong with a strong bow hold when needed, as long as it is always followed by release when no longer needed. To avoid tension, the norm should be a bow balance with a stronger grip when required, rather than the other way round.

- 1 Tilt the bow over, as though playing on the outer edge of the hair. Place the fourth finger on the *upper, inside edge* of the bow. Take the second and third fingers off the bow (Fig. 7a).

Notice the weight of the bow resting on the pad of the first finger and balanced by the fourth finger and thumb. All three support the bow – if any were taken off, the bow would fall. In this position, the bow is balanced in the hand, and does not need to be ‘held’.

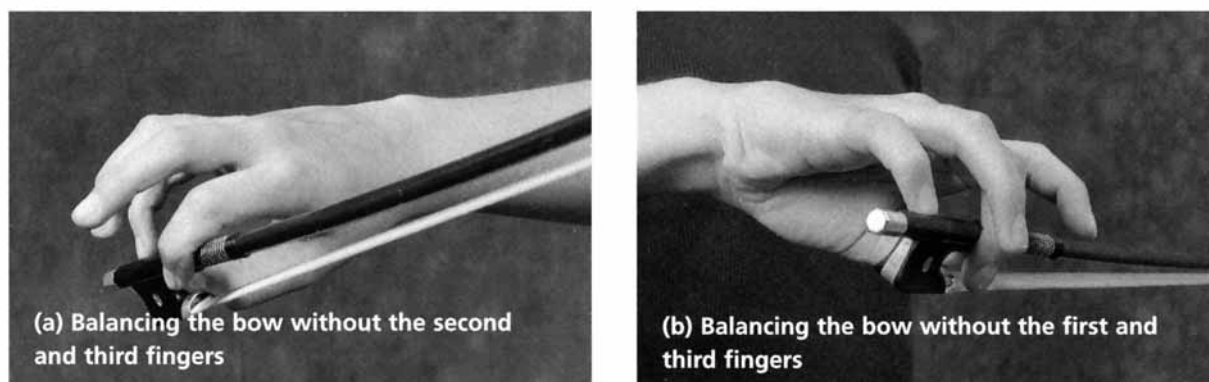
- 2 Put the second finger on the frog slightly more to the left of the thumb than usual. Take the first finger off.

Now the bow is balanced by the second and fourth fingers, and by the thumb (Fig. 7b). Feel the weight of the bow resting against the second finger.

- 3 Put the first and third fingers back on the bow and hold it normally with all the fingers. Find the same feeling of weight and balance in each finger, without gripping the bow with the fingers.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Our sensitivity diminishes in proportion to the total amount of stimulation. If there are two candles lit in a room, we easily notice the difference in brightness when a third candle is lit. But if there are fifty candles burning, we are unlikely to notice the difference made by a fifty-first. The harder we press on a violin string, the less we can feel it. The louder we play, the less we hear. The more relaxed and ready the muscles are, the more different ways they can move.’ Stephen Nachmanovitch: *Free Play – Improvisation in Life and Art* (Los Angeles, 1990), 63.

Fig. 7



## Exercise 2

However firmly the fingers hold the bow, they should be able to move freely and flexibly. In this exercise keep the hand quite still, with only the fingers moving. Feel the *pads* of the first and third fingers, the joint nearest the nail of the second finger, and the *tips* of the thumb and fourth finger, on the bow. However firmly they hold the bow, the fingers can move freely, and independently of the hand.

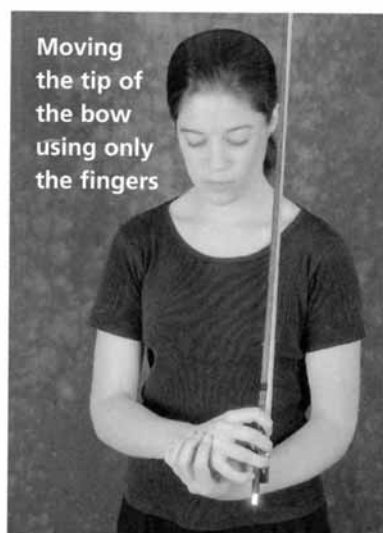


Fig. 8

- 1 Hold the bow pointing up vertically.
- 2 Move the tip of the bow in circles *using only the fingers* (Fig. 8). Hold the bow very firmly, and move the fingers as far as possible. It may be helpful to hold the right hand with the left, to make sure that only the fingers move.
- 3 Do the same with the bow in playing position.
- 4 Do the same with the bow pointing to the right, bow hair above the stick.

## Exercise 3

- Play several slow, whole bows, *ff*.
- Bowing up and down continuously, move the hand up to the middle of the bow and back again to the heel, using only the fingers to crawl up and down the stick.

It will not be possible to continue crawling up the bow beyond a certain point near the middle, but move up as far as possible. Still play the up-bows to the heel even when your hand is near the middle of the bow. The most difficult part is crawling back down the bow again to the frog.

## Hand balance

At the heel, the first finger contacts the bow closer to the nail joint (Fig. 9a), which makes the hand slightly more vertical on the bow. The fourth finger balances the weight of the bow.

At the point, the first finger contacts the bow closer to the middle joint (Fig. 9b), which makes the hand slightly tilted, i.e., turned away from the fourth finger towards the first finger.

The first finger has two jobs to perform:

- 1 The part of the first finger on top of the stick injects weight into the string.<sup>1</sup> Except when playing *f* it touches the stick lightly, and in the lower half sometimes comes a hair's breadth away from the stick.
- 2 The part of the first finger on the side of the stick helps to keep the bow straight.

Because the contact point on the side of the stick does not change, it feels as though the first finger stays fixed in one position – even though the contact point on top of the stick changes between the heel (nearer the nail joint) and the point (nearer the middle joint).

The fourth finger should stay on the stick in the upper half unless the hand is too small, keeping the hand balanced on the bow and helping to avoid too much first-finger pressure.

The change from more vertical at the heel (Fig. 9a) to more tilted at the point (Fig. 9b) must happen smoothly or the bow will shake somewhere around the middle of a whole down-bow stroke.

<sup>1</sup> The second finger also injects weight into the string. To do this it must be positioned slightly to the left of centre opposite the thumb. (See Fig. 2, page 2.) Sharing the weight between the first and second fingers produces a less pressed, more rounded tone than if use only the first finger.



Fig. 9



The first finger contacting the bow between the nail joint and the middle joint



Contacting the bow nearer to the middle joint

Play slow, even, *ff*, whole bows near the bridge.

- 1 Start playing at the heel without the first finger (Fig. 10a). After a few centimetres put the first finger down in its usual place on the stick.  
Continuing down-bow, take off the fourth finger, third finger and second finger in that order. Arrive at the point with only the first finger and thumb on the bow (Fig. 10b).
- 2 Up-bow: start with only the thumb and first finger; put the second, third and fourth back on the bow in that order; take off the first finger, and arrive at the heel with all the fingers on the bow except the first. Be careful to put the fingers back in their correct shape and position.
- 3 Do exactly the same, down and up, but without lifting the second finger.
- 4 The same, but do not lift the third finger either.
- 5 Start and finish without the first finger as before, but leave all the other fingers on the bow in their usual place.
- 6 Without lifting any finger, each remaining solidly on the bow, play *f* whole bows with a solid and even tone. Feel the same changes in weight distribution as you play from heel to point and back again.

Fig. 10



Starting position at the heel



At the end of the first down-bow

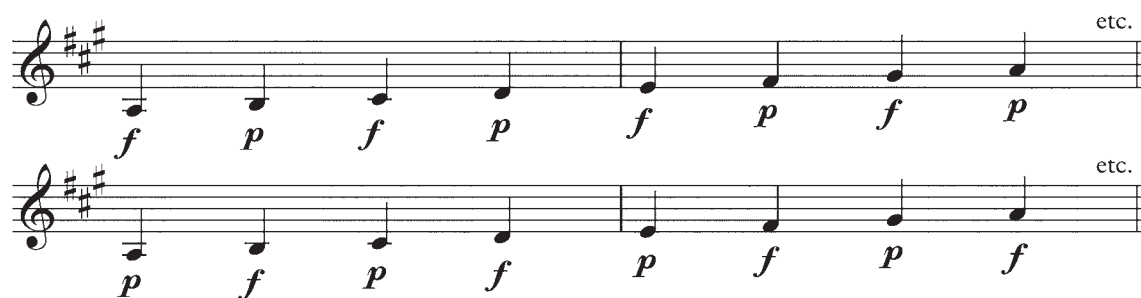
## 10

## The give of the hand into the bow

This exercise exaggerates lowering and raising the knuckles.

- For the purposes of the exercise, during the *f* hold the bow firmly and lower the knuckles (Fig. 11a). At the same time curve the thumb and fourth finger.
- During the *p*, release the fingers on the bow and raise the knuckles (Fig. 11b). At the same time let the thumb and fourth finger straighten slightly.
- Play the strokes with an even bow speed and pressure, connecting them to each other seamlessly. Play *subito f* and *subito p*, without any *crescendo* or *diminuendo*.
- Play quarter-length strokes at the heel, middle and point. Repeat using half bows in the lower half, middle, and upper half.





Play two-octave scales in one position across the strings, major or minor, in the following keys:

1 A (1st position)

2 E (5th position)

3 A (8th position)

Fig. 11



Lower knuckles ready to begin the down-bow



Higher knuckles ready to begin the up-bow

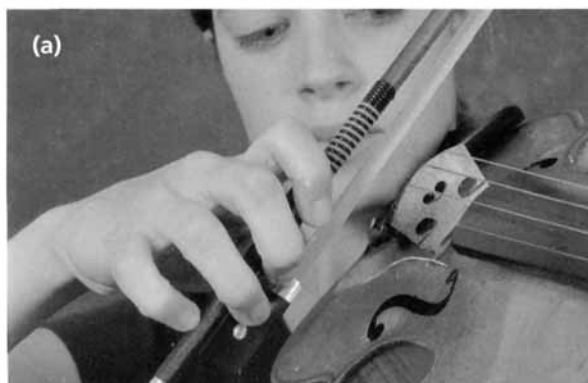
## Vertical and horizontal finger movement

### Exercise 1 – Vertical

- Hold the bow two centimetres above the string at the nut, with exaggeratedly rounded fingers and low knuckles (Fig. 12a).
- Place the bow on the string by straightening the fingers (Fig. 12b), and then lift off back to the starting point by curving the fingers again.
- Keep the arm and hand still, using only the fingers to lower or raise the bow. Repeat the movement up and down several times.

Make sure that the thumb moves freely with the fingers: when the fingers straighten the thumb straightens, and when the fingers curve the thumb curves.

Fig. 12



The fingers curved ready to place the bow on the string



Placing the bow on the string

## 12

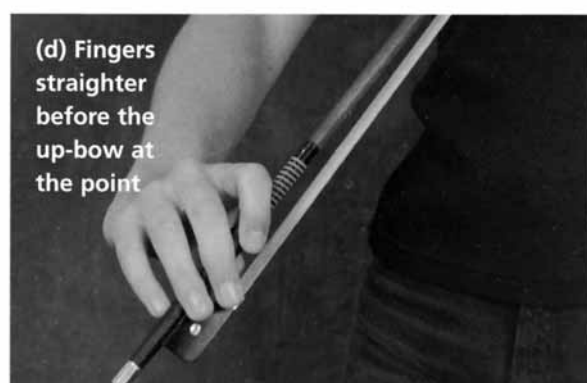
## Exercise 2 – Horizontal

There is really no such thing as a ‘horizontal’ finger movement. The fingers are hardly able to move sideways, but when they are placed on the bow so that they lean towards the first finger, rather than vertically, straightening and curving the fingers moves the bow horizontally along the string.

- Play *f*, but using only the fingers to move the bow. Keep the arm and hand as still as possible.
- Curve the fingers to move the bow up, straighten to move down. Figs. 13a and 13c show the fingers curved, ready to straighten for a down-bow. Figs. 13b and 13d show the fingers straighter, ready to curve for an up-bow.
- Use a mirror to see that the bow stays parallel to the bridge.
- Play at the heel, middle and point.



Fig. 13





### Making sure only the fingers move

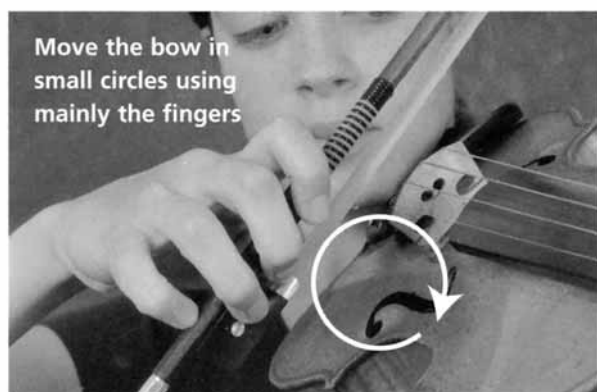
Play a few open strings at the heel, holding the right hand with the left hand (Fig. 13e). Place the thumb in the palm of the hand, and the first finger on the back of the hand. This helps to isolate the finger movement so that the hand itself remains still.

### Exercise 3 – Vertical and horizontal combined

Make small circles by combining the flexing movement of the fingers with a small amount of circular hand movement.

Use *as much* finger movement as possible, *as little* hand movement as possible, and no arm movement. Make a sound by touching the string at the bottom of the curve (Fig. 14).

- 1 Start by holding the bow with curved fingers two centimetres or so above the string. The back of the hand and the fingers should be in a straight line.
- 2 Lower the bow to the string in a circular movement, straightening the fingers slightly. Play the note, and lift off back to the starting point by curving the fingers.
- 3 Do this clockwise and anticlockwise, in a continuous motion, at the heel, middle and point.



<sup>1</sup> There is a difference between a give of the fingers and an active movement. In reality, movements at the bow change should be kept to a minimum, since a 'give' of the fingers at the heel causes the bow speed to increase. Smooth bow changes come more from (1) slowing the speed, and (2) lightening the bow, just before changing direction. An active finger movement at the heel is often associated with the Carl Flesch school of playing. But Flesch himself said that he introduced the finger into his teaching method only as a helpful exercise and had never intended to become a crucial point of bow technique. 'The finger stroke must only be used in minimal doses because the change of bow is heard; it will also be heard!' (Flesch: *Problems of Technique in Violin Playing* (Baden-Baden, 1931)).

Fig. 14

### Changing bow

A little give of the fingers helps the change of bow to be smooth. This exercise exaggerates the give by making it a large, conscious movement of the fingers.<sup>1</sup>

Play short (one eighth of a bow), smooth, sustained strokes at the heel, middle and point.

- Just at the end of each down-bow, while the bow is still moving, smoothly straighten the fingers and thumb. At the same time let the hand move slightly in the same direction as the fingers (i.e., down, producing more of an upward curve at the wrist).
- Just at the end of each up-bow, while the bow is still moving, smoothly curve the fingers and thumb (and lower the knuckles). Move the hand slightly with the fingers (i.e., up, producing less of a curve at the wrist).

Figs. 13a and 13c show the fingers just before the down-bow; 13b and 13d show them just before the up-bow. In reality these finger and hand movements can be so slight as to be invisible, since the tiniest give is enough to make the bow changes smooth.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Dounis recommends a larger, more visible movement, and calls it the 'brush stroke...based on a mental image of the right hand acting like a paint brush, the fingers being the hairs of the paint brush, and the hand the handle.' (Chris A. Costantakos: *Demetrios Constantakos Dounis: His Method of Teaching the Violin* (New York, 1988), 76.