Fast passages

part **1**

Tempo

Practising very slowly

1

The legendary teacher Ivan Galamian was once asked which practice method, out of all the different ways of practising, would he consider to be the very best if he could choose only one. He replied: 'Playing through at half speed, because it gives you time to think.'[1]

[1] See also *Playing under tempo, exaggerating expression*, page 296; *Some other ways to use playing-through practice*, no. 5, page 305.

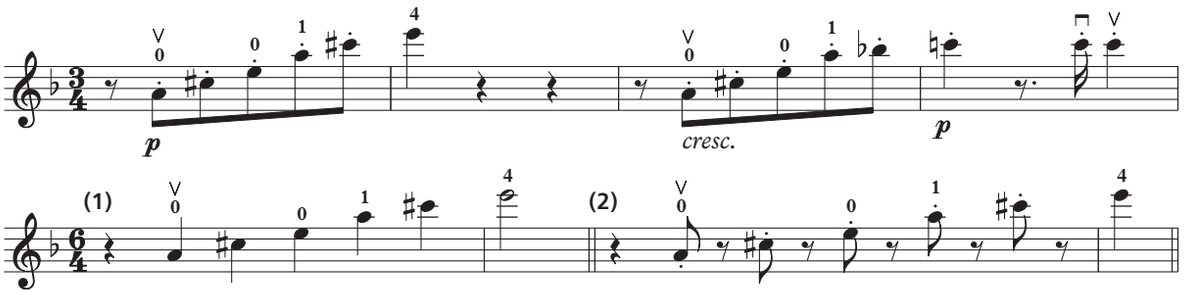
The benefit that comes from playing through under tempo, with the luxury of plenty of time to plan, measure and control the playing, is that when you speed up again there is still a feeling of having plenty of time.

Exactly how slowly depends on the type of piece or passage. If it is only moderately difficult, a little under tempo may be enough. If it is of great complexity and difficulty, a quarter the tempo or even slower may be appropriate. You do not have to keep to one tempo. Play some passages more slowly than others; play some notes more slowly than others within the same passage or phrase.

As well as phrases or passages, practise bigger sections under tempo as well – even whole movements at a time.

Example 1

Beethoven: Sonata in F, op. 24 ('Spring'), *mov. 3*, *b. 18*

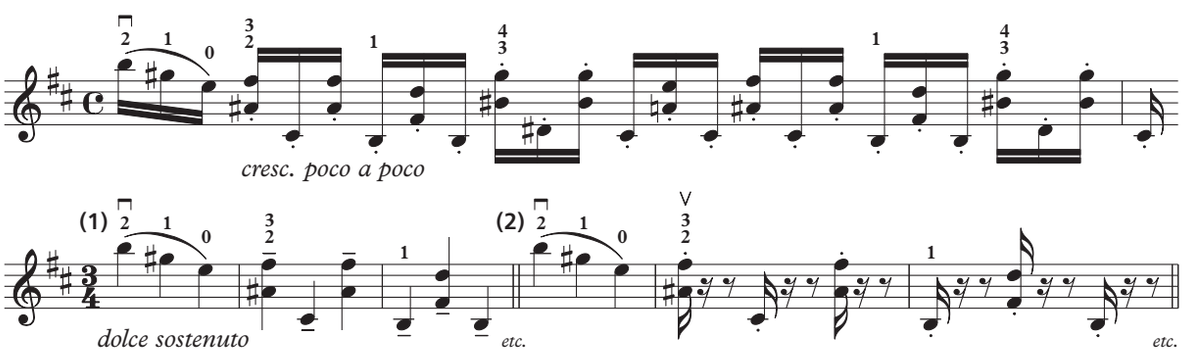


(1) Play very slowly, using a long stroke on the string.

(2) Play very slowly, using *spiccato*.

Example 2

Tchaikovsky: Concerto in D, op. 35, *mov. 1*, *b. 111*



- Practise as in Example 1.

2 Practising at performance tempo

Slow practice is a quick way to learn because it gives you time to think. Another way is to play a phrase or passage over and over again *at performance tempo*.

'You cannot run before you can walk' may be true, but practising a passage at the speed you want to end up at can be one of the fastest ways to learn it.

- Practise the phrase or passage at performance tempo, even if you are in the early stages of learning it, and even if it is a struggle to get through it.
- Listen and note what happens, and decide what to do differently next time, and then repeat.

3 Speeding up with the metronome

Gradually speeding up from a slow tempo to a fast one, using a metronome, is an easy and effective way to build individual phrases or complete passages. You can also use it for playing through entire movements.

- The four main factors of playing are **pitch**, **sound**, **rhythm** and **physical ease**. Practise at each speed until:
  1. Every finger falls easily in tune
  2. Every note is clean
  3. Every note is rhythmically exact
  4. The passage feels physically comfortable and easy to play
- Then increase the metronome to the next speed – practise it again until in tune, clean, in time, and feeling easy – increase the metronome to the next speed, and so on. The ideal is to continue speeding up until you can play a passage faster than you need to play it in performance.[1]

[1]As well as practising at the speed he wanted to play at, the Russian violinist Nathan Milstein always made a point of practising the fast movements of a concerto ten points on the metronome faster than he wished to play them, and the slow movements ten points slower. After all, suppose the conductor took the orchestra much faster or slower, in any particular passage, than Milstein had expected: Milstein wanted to make sure that he would be able to play well whatever happened.

Some different ways to speed up with the metronome:

1. Start at a slow, comfortable tempo, and speed up in such small steps that you do not notice the difference. The metronome speeds could be as follows:

   ♪ = 80, 84, 88, 92, 96, etc., then:

   ♩ = 60, 63, 66, 69, 72, etc., then:

   𝅗𝅥 = 60, 63, 66, 69, 72, etc.

2. 10 steps forward, 5 steps back: increase by 10, then decrease by 5, then increase by 10, etc.

   ♩ = 60, 70, 65, 75, 70, etc.

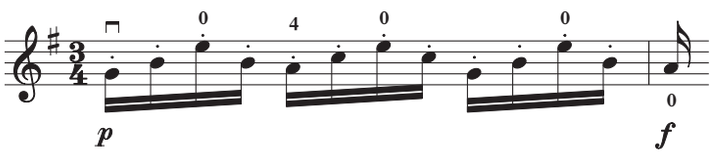
3. Start at a medium tempo. Then increase by, say, 5 if you play it very well; decrease by 5 if there is any improvement you could make in pitch–sound–rhythm–ease.

4. Alternate slow and fast while gradually increasing the tempo:

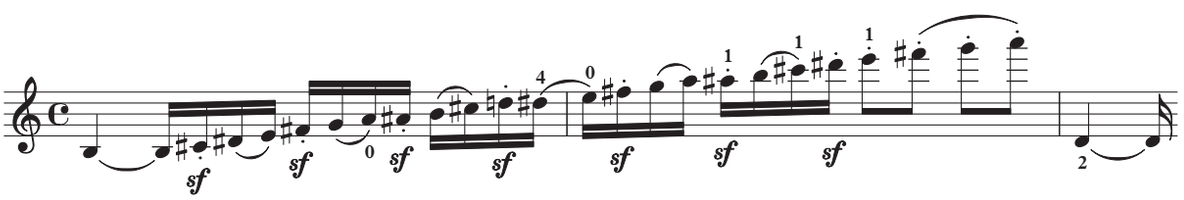
   ♪ = 80 ♩ = 80 ♪ = 84 ♩ = 84 ♪ = 88 ♩ = 88 ♪ = 92 ♩ = 92 ♪ = 96 ♩ = 96, etc.

Examples

Pugnani-Kreisler: Praeludium and Allegro, *Allegro*, *b. 5*

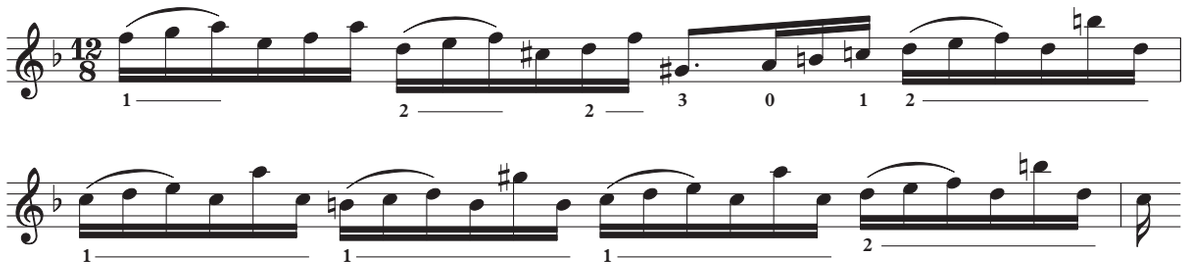


Vieuxtemps: Concerto no. 5 in A minor, op. 37, *mov. 1*, *b. 109*

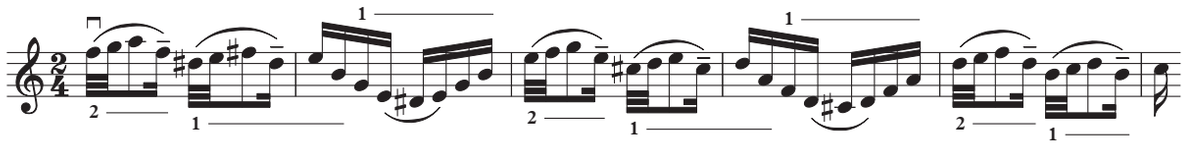


A suitable starting tempo for these examples might be ♪ = 80. If you cannot play the passage 'perfectly' at any particular tempo, it does not necessarily mean that you should not go on to the next tempo. It may be better to continue speeding up, so that when you return to a slower tempo it then feels much easier at that speed than it did originally, and you can now play it better anyway.

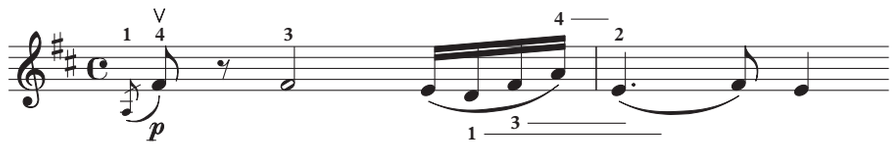
Example 4 J. S. Bach: Partita no. 2 in D minor, BWV1004, *Giga*, *b. 17*



Example 5 J. S. Bach: Concerto no. 1 in A minor, BWV1041, *mov. 3*, *b. 44*



Example 6 Tchaikovsky: Concerto in D, op. 35, *mov. 1*, *b. 28*



156

Square and extended finger shapes

One of the most important requirements for playing in tune is that the left hand and fingers remain free and flexible, the fingers changing shape from note to note. 'Square' and 'extended' refer to the shape of the finger when it is placed on the string (Fig. 14).[1]

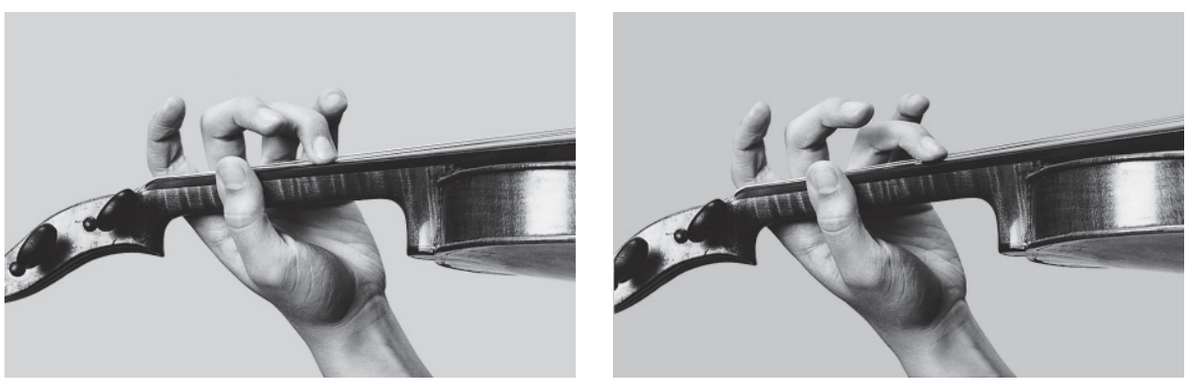
[1] The shape of each finger is always different depending on the build of the hand and the specific pattern of notes. When the finger is square the angle at the nail joint is closer to a right-angle than when the finger is 'extended'. It does not have to be a perfect right-angle but is simply more 'square' than the extended shape. In higher positions the difference between square and extended is much less than in 1st position.

Depending on the passage and the individual hand, the normal placements in 1st position (A string), are:

First-finger B♭ – square	**First-finger B** – extended	**First-finger B♯** – very extended
Second-finger C♭ – very square	**Second-finger C** – square	**Second-finger C♯** – extended
Third-finger D♭ – very square	**Third-finger D** – square	**Third-finger D♯** – extended
Fourth-finger E♭ – square	**Fourth-finger E** – extended	**Fourth-finger E♯** – very extended

If the fingers do not change shape enough, or quickly enough, the hand may make a partial 'shift' which can then throw all the following notes out of tune, e.g. the hand should not move up a half position when playing from third-finger C (on the G string) (Fig. 14a) to third-finger C♯ (Fig. 14b).

Fig. 14

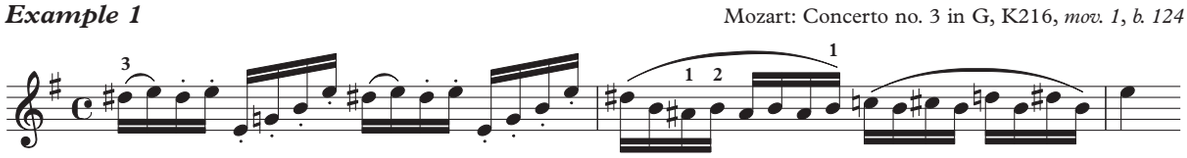


(a) Third-finger C, G string, square shape **(b) Third-finger C♯, extended shape**

- When building or polishing a passage, plan the shape of certain fingers consciously.

  = square ✧ = extended

Example 1 Mozart: Concerto no. 3 in G, K216, *mov. 1*, *b. 124*



166

Tuning scales: three stages

This method of tuning scales is the quickest way to get scales really in tune. It works by making the *structure* of the scale very clear. Then it becomes obvious exactly where every note is, within that structure, and every note becomes easy to find.

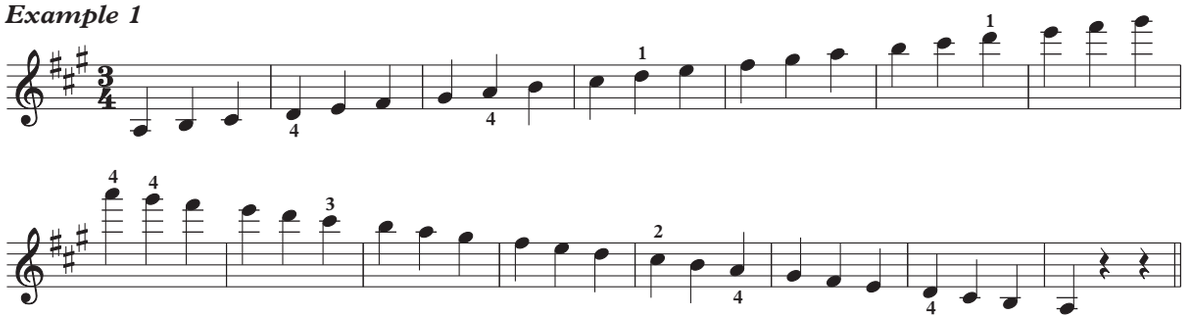
Before playing the complete scale, build the scale up in three separate stages:

1 First tune the notes of the perfect intervals – the 4th, 5th and 8th degrees of the scale – in relation to the tonic. They are the 'skeleton' of the scale.

2 Next add the 3rd and the 7th. Measure the 3rd from the 4th, and feel the 7th leaning up into the octave.

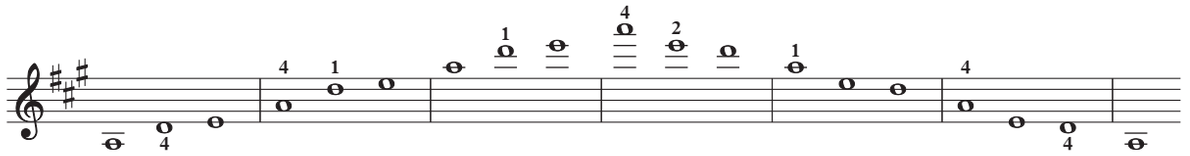
3 The final two notes to add are the 2nd and the 6th. Place these exactly in the middle between the 1st and the 3rd, and between the 5th and the 7th.

Example 1

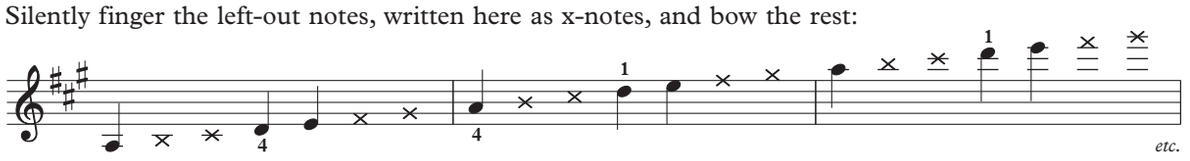


Stage 1

- Play the 1st, 4th, 5th and 8th degrees of the scale. In this key they are all tuned to the open strings.

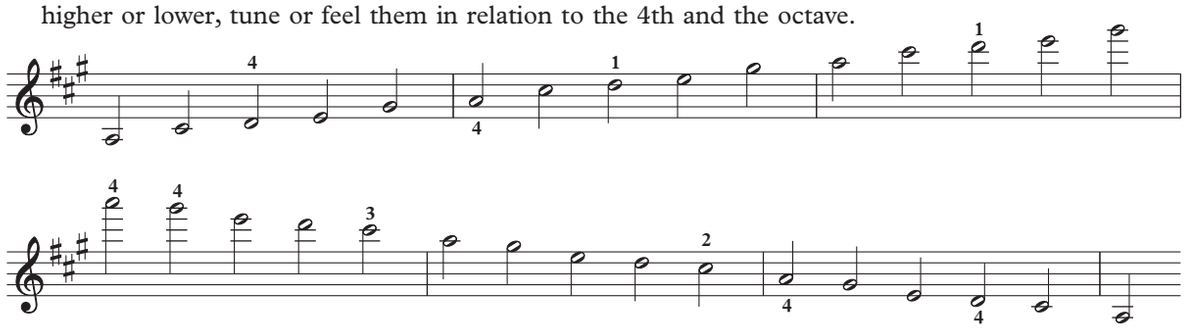


Another way to do this is to finger all the notes of the scale but to play only the 1st, 4th, 5th and 8th. Silently finger the left-out notes, written here as x-notes, and bow the rest:



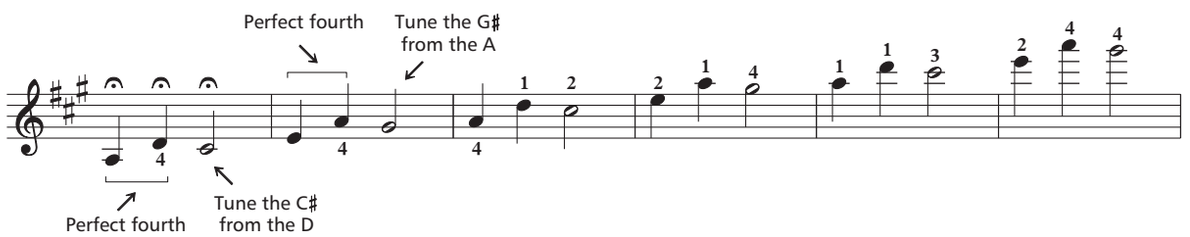
Stage 2

- Add the 3rd and the 7th. It is a matter of taste exactly how high the C♯ and G♯ are; but whether higher or lower, tune or feel them in relation to the 4th and the octave.



Alternative note order for Stage 2 (ascending)

- The fingering shown here reflects the fingering used in the scale. Use a normal fingering if you prefer.



Releasing the right hand

Bow-hold flexibility

Flexibility and give are an essential element of bowing technique. Galamian likened the right hand to a system of springs which, although sometimes looser and sometimes tighter, must never be locked and tight.

Sometimes the fingers, thumb and knuckles in the bow hand seem not to move at all. At other times the movements are visible and obvious. How much movement there should be depends on each stroke and the individual hand.[1]

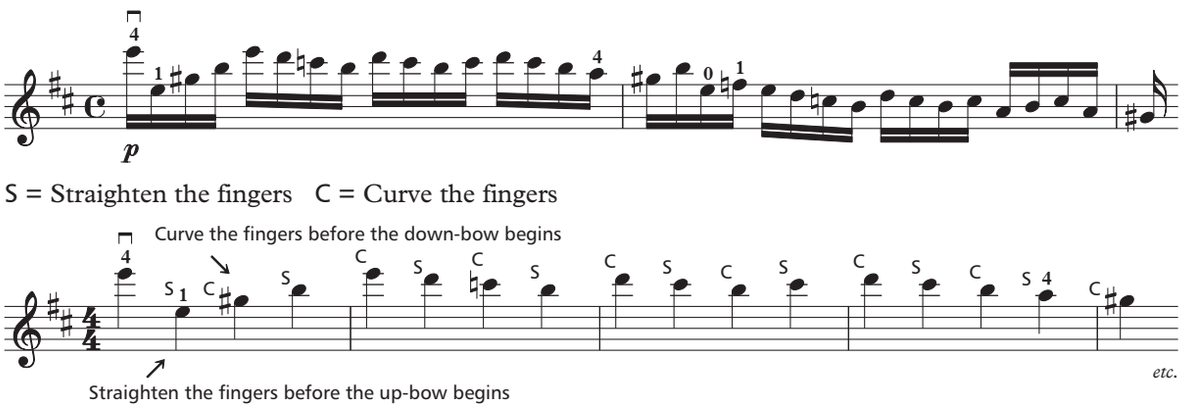
- To make sure that there is a give in every joint in the bow hand, with no resistance or tension anywhere, exaggerate the natural movements of the fingers and knuckles by making them conscious and larger-than-life.[2]
- Just before each up-bow, straighten the fingers and raise the knuckles (Fig. 25a).
- Just before each down-bow, curve the fingers and lower the knuckles (Fig. 25b).
- If necessary, play much more slowly than normal, using the time to feel the give in every joint.

(a) Straighten the fingers at the end of the down-bow

(b) Curve the fingers at the end of the up-bow

Example 1

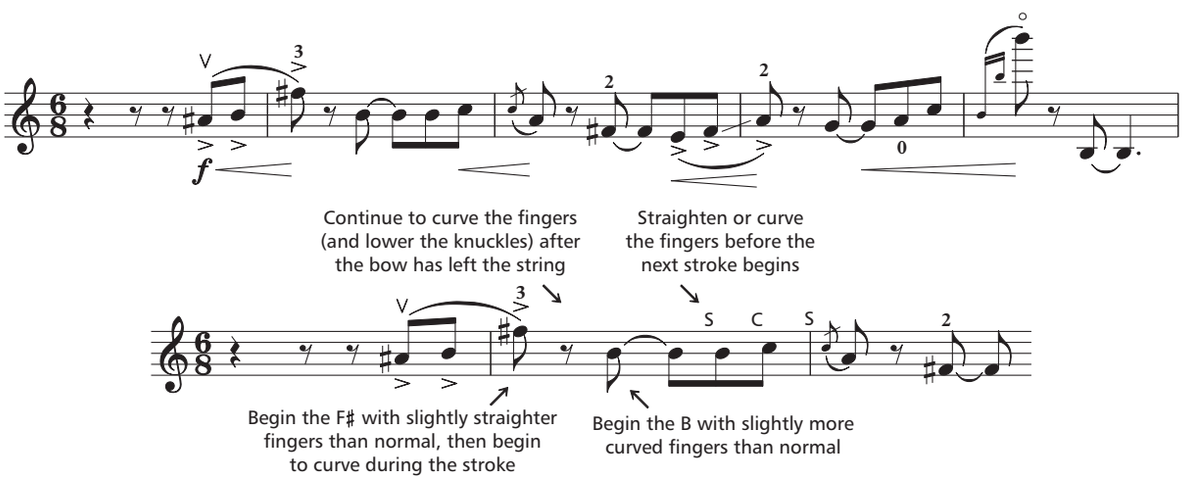
Beethoven: Concerto in D, op. 61, *mov. 1*, *b. 134*



Afterwards, playing without any visible movement in the fingers, find the same feeling of flexibility and smoothness in each stroke.

Example 2

Lalo: Symphonie espagnole, op. 21, *mov. 3*, *b. 81*



[1] In one player, no visible flexibility in a particular bowing action could mean stiffness, while in another player the same apparent lack of movement might be entirely natural and in fact contain plenty of invisible give.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle taught that every virtue lies on the Golden Mean between two vices. Accordingly, both a stiff bowing hand and one that is too floppy are 'vices'; a natural give in the hand is the virtue that lies in between.

Fig. 25

[2] 'I introduced the finger-stroke into violin pedagogics in my Urstudien (Basic Studies) in 1910. Intended as a purely helpful gymnastic exercise, I had not imagined what damage it would come to…at the hands of other theoreticians by making it the crucial point of bow technic [sic]. I had already warned…that this bowing was not to be used independently for practical playing. If assigning the change of bow to the fingers as their exclusive privilege, one will achieve exactly the opposite of an inaudible change. The finger stroke must only be used…in conjunction with the wrist movement and even then only in minimal doses, because – if the change of bow is seen, it will also be heard!'
Carl Flesch: *Problems of Tone Production in Violin Playing* (Baden-Baden, 1931), 14.