

Shifts and harmonics

Shifting to a harmonic

The procedure for shifting to a clear, ringing harmonic involves three crucial steps:

- 1 The finger must be on the harmonic before the bow moves to play it.
- 2 The bow should move very fast, to throw the harmonic out with power and brilliance.
- 3 During the harmonic, lift the finger from the string so that the harmonic rings.

1
Example

Violin Concerto in E minor, op. 64, Mendelssohn
Third movement

- 1 Having played the first four notes in tempo, pause on the third finger D#.
- 2 Lighten the finger and slide slowly into the harmonic A. ‘Ghost’ the slide: use the tiniest length of bow and the least bow pressure.

It is important to change the shape of the finger, during the shift, so that you play the harmonic more with the pad of the finger than the tip.

- 3 When you hear that the finger has arrived on the harmonic, move the bow fast.
 - 4 Lift the finger off the harmonic slightly before, or as, the bow leaves the string.
- Gradually speed up, reducing the pause until you can perform the same actions, in the same proportions to each other, without a pause.

2
Example

Symphonie espagnole, op. 21, Lalo
First movement

- (1) Shift up to the harmonic and hold it for a crotchet. Having used no more than 10 centimetres of bow, suddenly move the bow very fast. Lift the finger off the string as the bow leaves the string, or a little before.
- (2) Hold the harmonic for only a quaver, before ‘launching’ the harmonic with a fast bow speed.
- (3) Hold the harmonic for such a short time that the bow has only just begun to move before launching the harmonic.
- (4) Tie the different stages together, making sure that the finger is in place before moving fast with the bow.

Shifting from a harmonic

In many cases, you need to take the finger off the string *while* playing a natural harmonic, and continue the harmonic with the bow alone while the hand moves to another position. To sustain the harmonic without the finger on the string:

- 1 Accelerate the speed of bow slightly throughout the harmonic. The harmonic will immediately 'break' if the bow speed decreases.
- 2 Move slightly closer to the bridge throughout the harmonic. The harmonic will break if the bow moves even a fraction away from the bridge.

Polonaise de Concert, op. 4, Wieniawski

3
Example

- Practise the harmonic alone to get the exact feel of it:

- Then practise the harmonic in the context of the phrase. Pause on the harmonic as long as possible while placing the third finger C# on the string.
- Connect the harmonic to the C# smoothly, with no break in the sound.

Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso, op. 28, Saint-Saëns

4
Example

- Connect the harmonic to the C smoothly, with no break in the sound.

Next month's BASICS looks at what to listen for in the sound of a stringed instrument