

Reaching back

There are many instances in string playing where great freedom and ease can be achieved by making only the smallest technical adjustment. Reaching back with the left hand fingers, rather than stretching forwards, is a prime example.

Basing the hand position on the upper finger

It is often natural to think of each position as being based on the first finger, especially in the earlier years of playing, so that for second position on the A string we think of first finger C, third position = first finger D, fourth position = first finger E, and so on. However, while this may help us to understand the positions and to navigate around the fingerboard, it can lead to problems if it means that the hand position itself is based too much on the first finger.

The ideal is to bring the fingers over the notes by widening at the base joints rather than stretching up from the first finger. Small hands need to be based more on the second finger, with the first finger reaching down a little to its notes, and the third and fourth fingers reaching up to theirs. Even large hands with long fingers may need to include an element of reaching back, e.g. to avoid the fourth finger having to straighten too much when playing from first finger B on the A string to fourth finger E.

- From time to time practise basing the hand on the upper fingers and reaching back to the lower notes. This may feel unnatural or uncomfortable at first, but afterwards there will be a feeling of openness and effortlessness when you return to normal playing.
- Regular work in this way can transform the left hand, making it possible to achieve real fluency in many different types of passage work or chord playing.

Example

Violin Concerto no. 3 in G, K216, Mozart
Second movement

Find the hand position for the phrase marked '+' by first balancing the hand on the fourth finger, and then reaching back with the other fingers one by one:

- 1 Place the fourth finger without playing it (written as a headless note below). Contact the string more on the right side of the fingertip. Then, leaving the fourth finger on the string, place the third underneath it without disturbing the fourth. Keeping the fingers down on the string, place the second finger, and then the first.
- 2 Then, playing the passage as written, find the same feeling of openness in the hand.

Etudes, op. 20, Kayser
No. 1

Example

During the pause on the third finger, reach back with the first finger without affecting the third finger

Reach back without affecting the second finger

Reach back

Reach back the first finger without affecting the held-down third finger

Position the hand to favour the third finger

Position the hand to favour the third finger

Keep the same hand position to continue the phrase

Sonata in A minor, op. 23, Beethoven
First movement

Example

The third finger F (marked '+') is often reached with an extension to avoid any sound of shifting (to save any 'expressive' shifting for the shift to the fourth finger A four bars later).

Position the hand to favour the third finger

Reach back without affecting the third finger

Open at the base joints as in (1)

(1) Play the F alone, positioning the hand to favour the third finger, and making sure the finger is curved, relaxed and comfortable.

Reach the first finger back to the C without affecting the shape of the third finger. Feel the space opening at the base joints between the first and second fingers.

(2) During the C remember the feeling of opening the hand. Then widen at the base joints as you reach the third finger up to the F.

42 Etudes ou caprices, Kreutzer
No. 26

Example

Practise in the same way as Example 3:

Position the hand to favour the fourth finger

Recapture the same open feeling as in (1)

Reach back with the first finger