

# BASICS

## Chromatic scales

### Slow and fast fingering

While there are many different ways of fingering the chromatic scale up and down the E string, in first position there are two main fingerings: the sliding fingering 1–1–2–2–3–4, and the shifting fingering 1–2–1–2–3–4.

While the sliding fingering is sometimes regarded as ‘old-fashioned’ and the shifting fingering ‘modern’, it may be more appropriate to think of them as the ‘slow’ fingering and ‘fast’ fingering. To play Example 1 with 1–1–2–2 may feel awkward, whereas even a passage as fast as the Tchaikovsky shown in Example 5 is slow enough to allow it. The argument is that 1–1–2–2 is more melodic and expressive, and 1–2–1–2 more mechanical and functional.

Example

A fine point of technique is that when playing 1–2–1–2 the thumb should not change its position on the neck of the violin. Playing the first finger G# the hand is in first position; playing second finger A the hand is now in half position; playing first finger B the hand is now in second position; playing second finger B the hand is now in first position again. Keep the thumb in one place so that it feels as though the hand stays in first position throughout. Otherwise the hand can lose its orientation and intonation suffers.

### Knowing what notes you are playing

The tendency to get lost as you play up the E string in the three-octave chromatic scale, so that you literally do not know when to stop and come back down again, is often easily cured by two simple factors: play in groups, and know the names of the notes in the high positions.

Rather than thinking of the scale as shown in Example 2a – i.e. a non-stop stream of semitones – divide them into groups of four (Example 2b), so that after three beats there is a feeling of arriving ‘home’ on the tonic. (N.B. Some players prefer to play in groups of three, arriving home on the tonic after four beats.)

Example

It is often a feature of musical talent, rather than the lack of it, when a player does not know the names of the notes in the high positions, and relies solely on the ear to know where they are in the scale. Nevertheless, it is extremely helpful to be able to use the name of the note as a ‘hook’ on which to ‘hang’ the sound of the note. Play slowly, saying out loud (or thinking) the names of the notes. State each note emphatically:

Example

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## Contraction of the hand

3–2–1 is a common fast fingering for the descending chromatic scale, as shown in Example 3:

24 Caprices, op. 1, Paganini  
No. 17

Example

The contraction of the hand (i.e. a major 2nd between the first and third fingers instead of a minor or major 3rd), may easily cramp the hand and disturb the shifts.

Clarify the feeling of the distance between the first and third fingers by missing out the second finger:

Another way to practise this is to play double stops:

Taking this a step further, practise sixths in scales and broken thirds, up and down the string, with the fingering 3–1. You can even do this with minor sixths, where the fingers are a semitone apart. Afterwards the 3–2–1 fingering in the scale feels surprisingly free and easy.

## Wide and narrow semitones

Sometimes intonation needs to be tempered, like keyboard intonation, which means that  $C^\sharp$  and  $D^\flat$  are the same. At other times intonation can be 'expressive', so that sharps are sharper ('leading up' to the natural above) and flats are flatter ('leading down' to the natural below).

In expressive intonation a semitone is *wider* when the letter names are the same, e.g.  $C-C^\sharp$ ,  $A-A^\flat$ . The semitone is *narrower* when the letter names are different, e.g.  $C-D^\flat$ ,  $A-G^\flat$ . Another way of saying the same thing is that if the heads of the two notes are on the same line or space, it is a wide semitone. If one head is on a line and the other on a space, it is a narrow semitone.

In the following example a bracket indicates a wide semitone, a V indicates a narrow semitone.

Violin Concerto in D, op. 35, Tchaikovsky  
First movement

Example