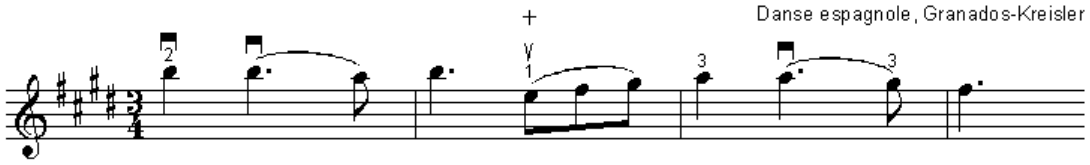
Checking tuning

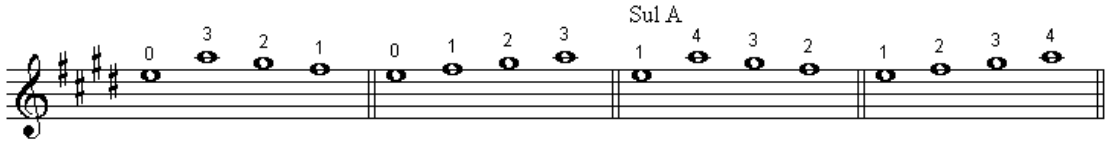
If we play something out of tune too many times we may get used to it sounding that way. Through repetition it begins to sound normal and we no longer notice. To maintain good intonation we need constantly to be checking, comparing and relating notes to each other, both aurally and physically.

One of the simplest things to do, as a routine part of ordinary practice, is to take a small phrase and play it in a different position. Because of the different feel in the hand and fingers, playing in a different position quickly shows up any difference between the pitches you may have got used to, and the pitches you now find yourself naturally playing in the new position.

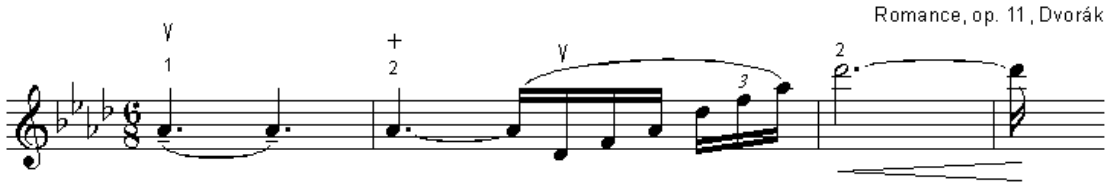
Example



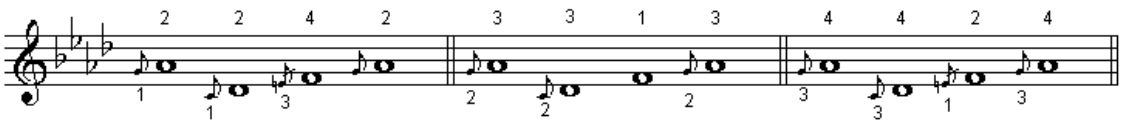
Check the tuning of particular groups of notes by playing in different positions with different fingerings.



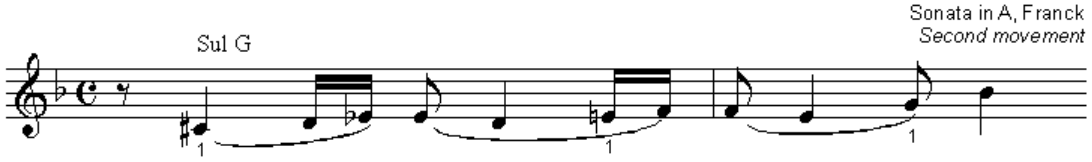
Example



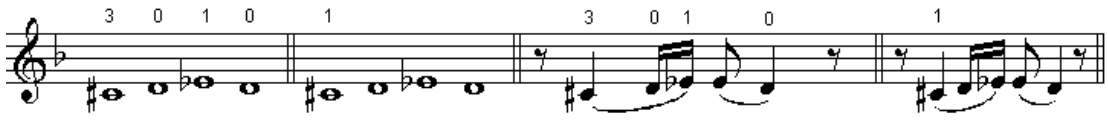
Use tester notes (shown as grace notes) to check the tuning of the actual notes. You do not need to play them, but feel their place on the string to help gauge the correct placement of the other fingers.

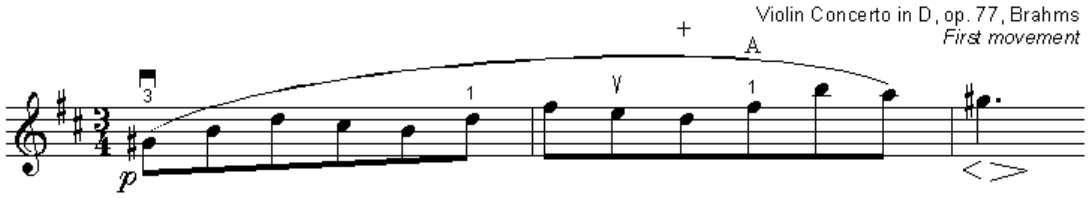


Example



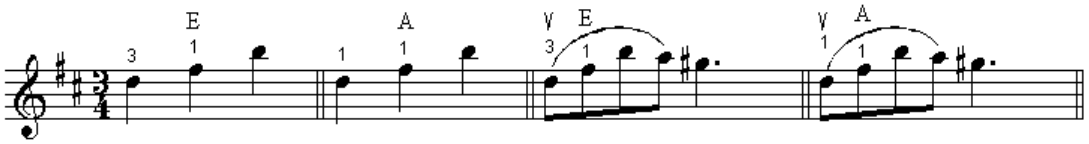
As well as testing notes slowly, one at a time, also consider them within the musical context, playing with expression:



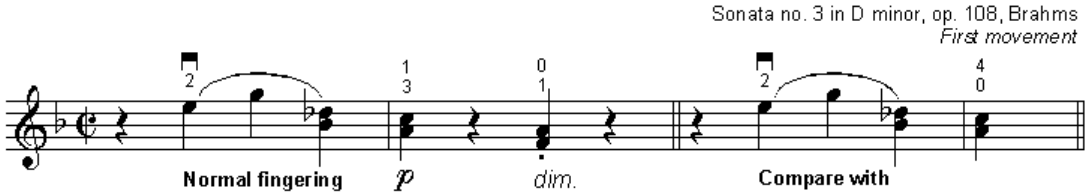


Example

By making the aiming-point so clear, this practice method can be very helpful in tuning a shift:



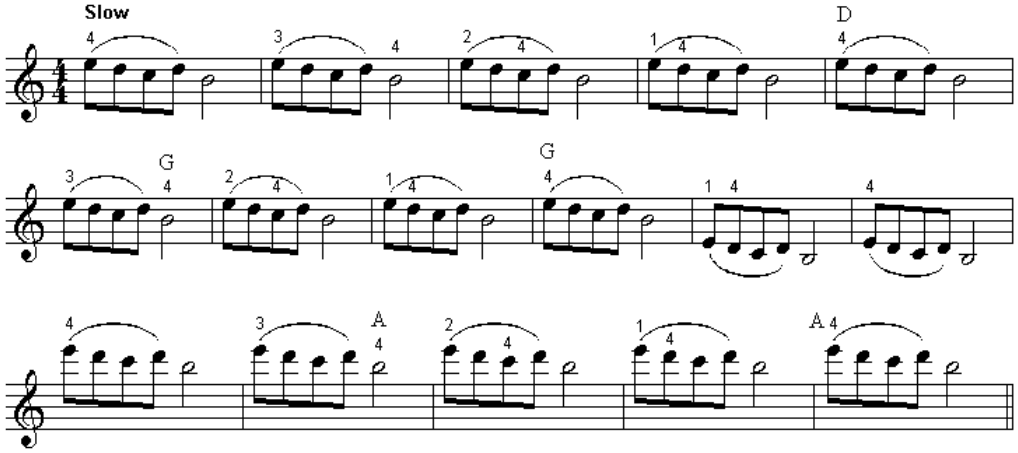
It is always helpful to be able to check double stops with a different fingering. Here, if you are used to finding the C by moving the first finger a semitone down from D♭ on the A string, playing it by dropping the fourth finger on the D string may turn out to be quite different – and probably flatter.



Example

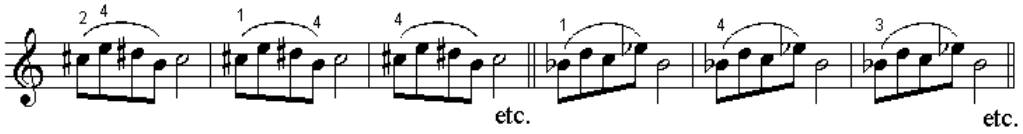
Intonation exercise

- Take a short group of notes – make up a little phrase – and play it in every possible place on the fingerboard using every possible fingering.
- Begin on the A string, and continually return to the first bar to check that the tuning is identical. Although you are changing position and fingering, it should sound as though you are playing exactly the same notes each time.



Example

You can use any group of notes, in any order:



Example

This is one of the single most effective intonation exercises there is. Try playing a three octave scale (say) a few times, just getting the feel of it. Then practise this exercise in the key of the scale for five minutes. Then play the scale again. You may be amazed at how much better it feels or sounds after such a short time.