
BASICS

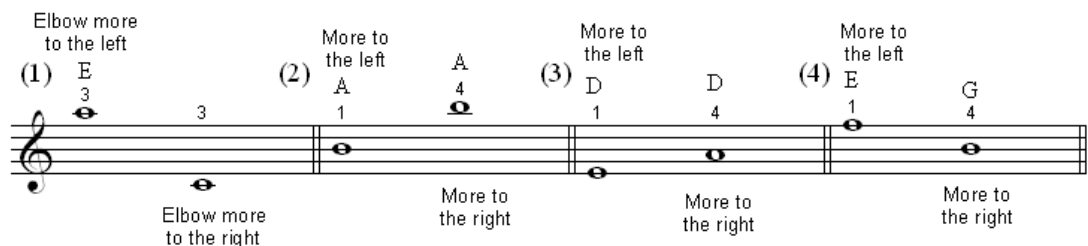
Left elbow

What is the correct position of the left elbow?

The left elbow is always mobile underneath the violin. A locked, immovable left upper arm is a common technical deficiency but one that is easy to improve with awareness. The correct position of the left elbow (i.e. upper arm), changes according to finger, string and position:

- (1) The elbow is more to the left when playing on the E string; more to the right when playing on the G string.
- (2) The elbow is more to the left when playing in lower positions; more to the right in higher positions.
- (3) To a certain extent, or at times, the elbow is slightly more to the left when playing on the first finger, and more to the right when playing on the fourth finger. (More often, however, it is desirable to have one hand position for all four fingers, the fourth finger hovering close to the string while you play the first finger.)

It follows from these three principles that the elbow would be most to the left when playing first finger F on the E string, and most to the right when playing a note high on the G string with the fourth finger (4):



Finding the position by 'hanging' the arm

Rest the scroll of the violin on a shelf or other kind of support, or hold the scroll with your right hand.

- Using, say, the third finger of your left hand, make the finger into a kind of 'hook', and 'hang' the arm from the fingerboard on it.

Make the finger quite stiff and strong, while the rest of the hand and arm hang loosely with a feeling of 'flop'.

- Notice how, if you hang the arm from the finger on the E string, the elbow naturally finds its correct, balanced position more to the left.

If you hang from the same finger on the G string, the elbow will automatically find a new position more to the right.

- Hang from each finger shown in numbers (1)–(4), above, and notice how the elbow hangs in a different position each time.

Whatever position the elbow naturally finds for itself, is usually the best position for playing that particularly finger, in that position, on that string. Then find the same position without hanging.

The position of the elbow that is best for one single note may not be exactly the same as the best position for a group of notes; but by 'hanging' in this way from a single finger, you will be close enough for it to be a good guide as to where the elbow should be for a phrase as well.

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Playing from a lower to a higher string

The problem of the elbow getting stuck in one place does not arise when playing down the strings in the direction E–A–D–G, but only playing up from the G string to the E string.

Suppose you are playing on the E string, with the elbow and hand in the E string position, and then you move to the G string.

There is no danger that you would try to move only the hand or fingers to the G string, while leaving the elbow in the E string position, because you cannot reach the G string like that. You have to move the elbow as well.



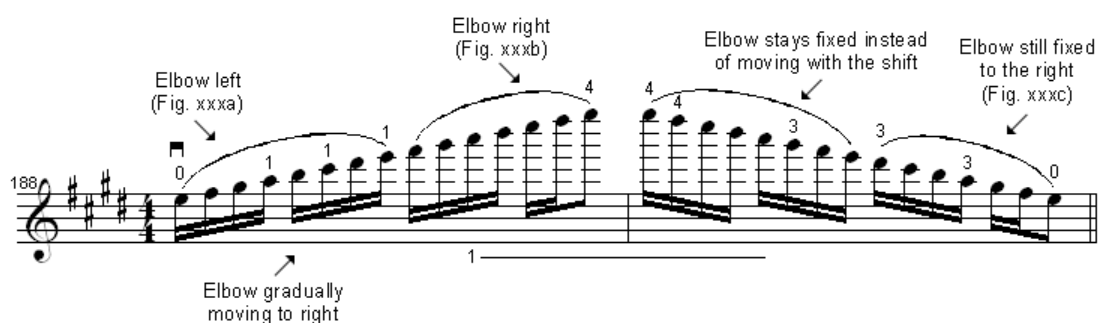
But suppose you are playing with the elbow and hand in the G string position, and then move to the E string. Be careful that you do not move only the hand to get to the E string, ending up with the elbow in the G string position and the hand in the E string position (see right). This causes great tension in the wrist and hand:



Practising by exaggeration, make a great point of moving the elbow to left and right under the instrument. Then when you are not thinking about it, the elbow will continue to move naturally on its own.

Getting stuck when shifting down

Many players start off in a low position with the elbow to the left; shift up into high positions with the elbow moving naturally to the right; but then keep the elbow fixed to the right as they shift back down again:



This is a very simple problem to correct. Use a two-octave glissando, keeping the finger as light on the string as if playing a harmonic:

Play the glissando in two ways:

- (1) Keeping the upper arm fixed.
- (2) Allowing mobility.

The point of the exercise is firstly to learn how to recognise the feeling of 'fixing' the upper arm in one place, so that you can stop it more immediately when it occurs; secondly to explore the feeling of freedom and mobility so that you can return to it all the more quickly in the course of playing.

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Counter-exercising the left arm

Pulling the left elbow in too far to the right, because of tension in the left upper arm, is a problem that afflicts many violinists and violists.

Without the violin, counter-exercise occasionally by putting the left arm into 'cello' position, where it is impossible to clench the upper arm as you can when it is in violin position. Finger a few notes on the back of your right hand.

Practise a vigorous vibrato in this position, and see if you can do it without any reaction whatsoever in the muscles of your left upper arm and shoulder. Then find the same feeling of openness with the arm in its normal playing position.