
BASICS

Thirds

Thinking in intervals and tone-semitone patterns

Example ①



There are three different tone-semitone patterns to think about with each third:

1 Is the third major or minor?

In Example 1 the first interval is a major third; the next a minor third. The important thing is to be aware that when playing a major third as a double stop, the fingers are a minor third apart in spacing; playing a minor third as a double stop, the fingers are a major third apart in spacing.

Therefore a major third is a *small* distance or a narrow third; a minor third is a *large* distance or a wide third.

While playing one third, always be thinking ahead to identify the next third. Shifting from 1–3 playing E–C to 1–3 playing G–E, the first finger shifts a major third while the first finger shifts a minor third, i.e. a shift from a large third to a small third.

One useful idea is to think only of the finger that moves the bigger distance, and to let the other finger ‘look after itself’.

2 Moving from one third to another, is the distance between the fingers the same or not?

In the first pair of thirds there is a semitone between the first finger and the second finger, but a tone between the third and fourth.

In the second group the intervals are the other way round: a tone from 1–2 and a semitone from 3–4. If the F were an F \sharp , the intervals would be equidistant, i.e. a tone from 1–2 and from 3–4.

3 What are the tone-semitone pattern of the four fingers together after playing 1–3, 2–4?

In the first pair of thirds, if the fingers were placed on the same string they would form the pattern semitone–tone–tone. The second pair of thirds would form the pattern tone–tone–semitone.

Reaching back from the upper fingers

The most essential thing about playing thirds is that the hand be balanced on the third or fourth fingers, with the first and second fingers reaching back to their notes, rather than being based on the lower finger and having to stretch up to the third or fourth finger.

- Place the third finger on its own, without the first finger. Balance the hand to favour the third finger, so that it is naturally curved, relaxed and comfortable.
- Without altering the balance of the hand, or the shape of the third finger, reach back with the first finger and play the major or minor third.
- Playing a third with 4–2, place the fourth finger on its own. Balance the hand to favour the fourth finger, so that it is curved, relaxed and comfortable. Then reach back with the second finger without affecting the balance of the hand or the shape of the fourth finger (or affecting it as little as possible).

Practising the elements separately

Carl Flesch suggested that a simple approach to building good scale-playing in thirds is to take each of the three elements of thirds separately, and practise them on their own for one month each.

BASICS

The three essential elements:

- 1 Ascending, playing 1–3 then 2–4 (vertical dropping), or descending 2–4 then 1–3 (lifting motion)
- 2 Shifting up on one string from 2–4 to 1–3 (or down from 1–3 to 2–4)
- 3 Shifting from one pair of strings to another.

However, rather than practising only one element for a whole month, apply the same principle of practising the three elements separately but practise them all within one individual practice session. For example:

- First practise all the finger drops and lift-offs:

Example ②

- Then practise all the shifts without string crossings:

Example ③

- Practise all the string-crossing shifts:

Example ④

Flow

When you are walking, there is a sense of flow and momentum which provides a good image for playing a scale in double stops. There is no feeling of ‘stop...stop...’ as you place each foot. Instead, as each foot touches the ground you continue on, with a feeling of smooth flow and momentum, contact the ground with the next foot and continue on in the same flow, and so on.

In the same way, during a scale of thirds there needs to be a sense of carrying on moving towards the next third *while* the fingers are on the third that you are currently playing, rather than a feeling of getting ‘stuck’ on each.

- Exaggerate the feeling of flowing into the next third by playing in a dotted rhythm. At the same time, release the string during the dotted note as though playing a harmonic (written as an x-note):

Example ⑤