Left first finger

The principle of the double contact

When I was a child my violin teacher told me that there must always be a space between the neck of the violin and the side of the first finger. He explained that this was not a problem in higher positions, since the first finger has to come away from the neck, but that in lower positions you have to make an effort always to keep enough space for a pencil to fit between the neck of the violin and the side of the first finger.

I immediately decided that I did not like the feeling of a space at all, and quickly forgot all about it and carried on in the way that felt comfortable, i.e. not squeezing the neck but often touching it. Fortunately my teacher forgot about it too, or at any rate never mentioned it again. It was many years later that I discovered that luckily my instinct had been correct, and Ivan Galamian even had a name for the need of the hand to reference the neck with the first finger – 'the principle of the double contact'.

Countless violinists who had stricter teachers on this point than I did, do try to keep their first finger away from the neck at all times. This causes them a wide array of problems in the left hand, including tension and poor finger action, poor intonation and difficulty in shifting freely, as well as a feeling of restriction in the vibrato.

- You need to have at least two points of contact. The thumb is always one of them, and in the lower positions the side of the first finger, lightly brushing against the neck (never pressing, sometimes coming away for a moment, at other times directly touching the neck) is the other.
- However, once the finger is down on the string, there are then three points of contact – the thumb, the side of the first finger, and the finger on the string. At this point, the first finger can come away slightly from the neck (especially to free the vibrato), but in doing so still leaves any other finger two points of contact with which to orientate itself.

As an experiment to prove this, try to find a note starting from no contact point with the neck at all, and add the points of contact one by one:

- 'Hover' the left hand in playing position but with no finger on the string, the side of the first finger not touching the neck, and without the thumb touching the neck of the violin.

  Try to find first finger B on the A string. With no contact whatsoever with the neck, it is impossible to find the note accurately.

- Try to find the B again, now with the thumb in its usual place on the side of the neck – but still without any other part of the hand touching the violin.

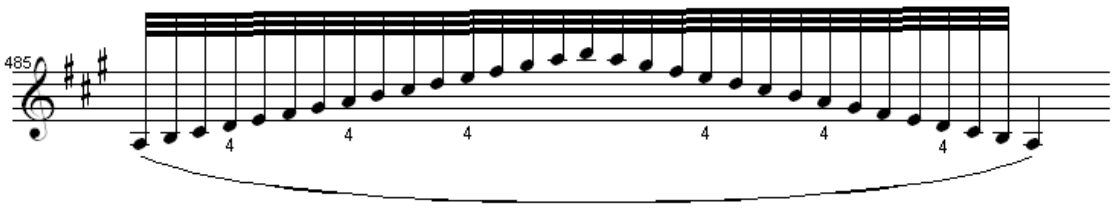
  With one point of contact, the thumb, it is naturally easier to aim the finger on to the string; but it is still difficult to measure where the note is precisely, and the hand feels tight and the finger action feels tense and restricted.

- Then find the B again, keeping the thumb on the neck of the violin, but also lightly contacting the other side of the neck with the side of the first finger.

  Now with two points of contact it is easy to find the B precisely, and the hand feels relaxed and comfortable.

In a fast passage, the side of the first finger continues to reference the neck throughout. Play the following fast scale twice, once with the first finger contacting the neck and then while keeping a space between the neck and the side of the first finger.

Notice the feeling of freedom and ease when you contact the neck, compared to the feeling of tension and awkwardness in the finger action when you keep a space:

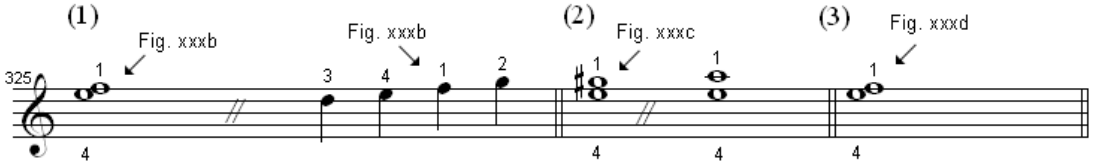


BASICS

Freeing the base joint of the first finger

Although in low positions there is a light, 'brushing' contact between the first finger and the side of the neck to orientate the hand, at the same time it is essential not to squeeze the base joint of the first finger *under* the neck (Fig. 0b).

Warm-up exercise



(1) When playing a double stop or sequence of notes such as these, many hands have a tendency to pull the base joint of the first finger in towards the neck of the violin (Fig. 0b).

(2) Keeping your fourth finger on E, on the A string, push your first finger up the E string to a G♯ or A.

Notice how the base joint of the first finger naturally takes an 'out' position, away from the violin neck (Fig. 0c).

(3) Starting in the position reached in (2), move the first finger back as far as you can go towards F on the E string.

While moving the finger back, use willpower to prevent the base knuckle joint from moving back in towards the neck (Fig. 0d).

(a) In low positions, the 'brushing' contact of the first finger with the neck orientates the hand

(b) Do not pull the base joint of the first finger in under the neck

(c) With the first and fourth fingers together, the base joint of the first finger naturally takes an 'out' position instead of pushing in

(d) As the tip of the first finger moves down to the F, keep the base joint away from the neck

This exercise is very extreme. The position to seek is a natural middle point between pushing in and pulling out. After doing the exercise it is far easier to find that natural point, and you will feel a new openness and ease in the working of the first finger.

Next month's BASICS looks at