
BASICS

Finger pressure

When working with a student on gaining greater freedom and ease in the left hand, or when working on intonation (which depends on complete freedom of the hand), one of the very first questions to ask is whether the student thinks that the left fingers should press the string down until the string makes a firm contact with the fingerboard.

Are they mistakenly thinking of it as a guitarist does, i.e. when playing pizzicato the harder you stop the strings the better, since then the instrument rings more?

Many answer yes, their mental picture is indeed one of pressing the string down until it touches the fingerboard (and often they have been actively encouraged to do this by their teachers), when actually the best approach is always to stop the string as little as possible. This is an area where the principle of 'as much as necessary but as little as possible' clearly applies.

Stopping the string more than is necessary is an obvious waste of energy, and makes the fingers feel heavy and slow.

One of the worst knock-on effects of excess pressing is that the thumb has to counterpress more to equal it, leading to a feeling of clamping the neck of the violin between finger and thumb. Lightening the finger pressure immediately leads to a lightening of the thumb on the neck of the violin.

5 levels of pressure

The first step is to find exactly how little finger weight is actually needed to stop the string cleanly. Think of five levels of finger pressure:

Level 5 'Harmonic' level, where the string is not pushed down at all.

Level 1 The string pushed down to touch the fingerboard.

Level 3 Midway between 5 and 1

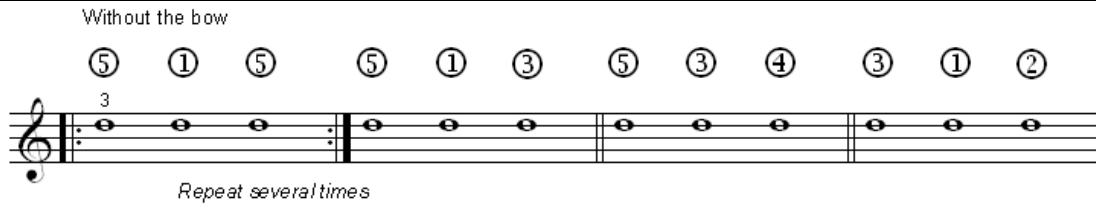
Level 4 Midway between 5 and 3

Level 2 Midway between 3 and 1

Sensitisation exercise

- Place the third finger on D, in 1st position on the A string, as lightly as if to play a harmonic (Level 5).
- Moving the finger down slowly and gently, push the string down until you can feel it contact the fingerboard (Level 1). Feel the elasticity or springiness of the string.
- Release the string back to Level 5. Repeat several times.
Feel, and control millimetre by millimetre, the resistance of the string as you slowly push down or let it back up again.
- Now find the middle point between Level 5 and Level 1: change between 5-1-3 several times, each time gauging the exact degree of weight for Level 3 that is precisely in the middle between the two extremes.
- Then find the middle point between Level 5 and Level 3: change between 5-3-4 several times, each time gauging the exact degree of weight for Level 4 that is in the middle between 5 and 3.
- Experiment in the same way to find Level 2, changing between 3-1-2 several times:

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As a default or general rule, the level to aim for is usually between Level 2 and Level 3.

Over-pressing the left fingers is also one of the first reasons for a 'dead' or 'metallic' tone. Playing with a softer finger changes the timbre of the note so that it becomes less focused and often sweeter or less strident. You can always stop the string further when you want a more concentrated or harder tone, or when playing pizzicato.

Many players use only Level 1 for everything they play, leading to never-ending problems of tension, slow fingers and general immobility.

- Silently finger a few notes on each string, in each area of the fingerboard (low, middle and high), with each finger in turn, experimenting with all five degrees of finger pressure.

Starting from nothing and gradually increasing

Rather than starting from the point of too much pressing and then trying to release, work up from the point of too little pressure.

Play a short group of notes, or longer phrase, or even a whole passage, with full weight in the bow but with varying amounts of finger pressure, from too little up to just enough:

- Begin with so little finger pressure (Level 5), but with a lot of weight in the string from the bow, that the sound is entirely impure.
- Repeat several times, each time gradually stopping the string a little more (Level 4, 3, 2).
- As you gradually increase the weight of the finger, while always keeping the bow heavy, the sound will gradually improve until it is entirely pure and sweet; but the left fingers still feel light and nowhere near any limit of stopping the string.

Replacing finger pressure with arm weight

Left arm weight is something that you can use only in the very smallest amounts, and it depends on how you hold the violin as to whether you can use it at all; but if you can find a way to use it a little, the extra feeling of effortlessness in the left fingers is noticeable.

Using arm weight is done by 'hanging' the arm from the neck of the violin: rest the scroll of the violin on a shelf or other kind of support, or hold the scroll with your right hand.

- Hang the arm from the left fingers, meanwhile keeping a feeling of continuing to support the violin with the thumb.
- 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 hangs loosely with a feeling of 'flop'.
- Feel how you can stop the string enough without 'pressing' the finger down at all, since the weight of the arm pulls the finger down into the string on its own.
- Notice how the thumb feels entirely light and effortless because there is no need for as much counterpressure as before.

You may notice yourself holding the violin a little more firmly with the chin than usual, but since this degree of hanging is an exaggeration, 'hanging' the arm in the normal course of playing does not lead to tension problems in holding the violin.