
BASICS

Octaves

Being able to play octaves in tune with the fingering 4–1 is a necessary skill in violin playing, whether you play the two notes as a double stop or as single notes one after the other. Fingered octaves (3–1, 4–3) are something that most players can easily avoid, since they are used more rarely and usually only in the most virtuosic repertoire; and even then you can often play normal octaves instead. However, whether you need to perform fingered octaves or not, it is good to practise them anyway for the benefits they bring in helping to widen and release the hand.

4–1 octaves: instantaneous adjustment

The single most important thing about playing octaves is that the hand remains soft and free. So long as you listen well, and keep the fingers light, the fingers make instinctive, continuous, microscopic, instantaneous adjustments to the tuning, and these cannot occur if the hand is tight.

Flexibility or independence exercises are useful for encouraging the fingers to let go and respond more quickly. This example makes the fingers move up and down the string in contrary motion.

- Play an ordinary scale in octaves, just to see how it feels and sounds; then play the following sequence on each degree of the scale; then play the scale again. You may be amazed at how much better it then is.
- Keep the hand balanced on the upper finger, with the little finger upright and rounded (Fig.a). Do not base the hand on the first finger and stretch up with a straight fourth finger (Fig. b):

The image shows two staves of musical notation. The first staff contains a sequence of notes with fingerings 1, 1, 1, 1, 1 and 4, 4, 4, 4, 4. The second staff contains a similar sequence with fingerings 1, 1, 1, 1, 1 and 4, 4, 4, 4, 4, etc.

- Make sure the fingers are very light on the string. Feel the springiness of the string, rather than pressing it hard into the fingerboard.
- This exercise is good for fingered octaves too. Practise three different fingerings: 4–1, 3–1, 4–2:

The image shows three staves of musical notation. The first staff contains a sequence of notes with fingerings 1, 1, 1, 1, 1. The second staff contains a sequence of notes with fingerings 1, 1, 1, 1, 1. The third staff contains a sequence of notes with fingerings 2, 2, 2, 2, 2.

- Having first played as written, repeat using quarter tones instead of semitones.

Fingered octaves: flexibility

There are two issues that most players have to tackle in learning how to play fingered octaves: intonation and freedom of the hand. Intonation can be tricky because in fingered octaves you have to play two extensions at the same time, i.e. the third and fourth fingers both reach up one note above their normal positions. While the lower fingers try to pull these extended fingers down too flat, they in turn try to pull the lower fingers up too sharp.

Flexibility and softness of the hand is the most important thing. In many players' minds, a tense and rigid left hand is inevitable if you try to play fingered octaves. Yet the muscular actions that expand the hand are one thing, and the actions to contract it (i.e. tense) are another. Contracting the hand, while trying to expand

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it, is like trying to go forwards and backwards at the same time. You can do one without the other, and your hand can remain as free and soft when playing fingered octaves as they are when you play single notes.

- Simple, gentle exercises are the best way to increase the range and give of the hand. If you simply cannot stretch far enough for the wider distances, it doesn't matter. While you must never force, it is in the trying – not in the actual result – that the benefits come from in exercises like these.
- In each bar make try to keep the upper finger as upright as possible, i.e. vertical rather than leaning too much towards the scroll. At times the upper finger will lean towards the scroll whatever you do, and this will be entirely natural and correct; simply try to keep it as upright as possible.
- The factor that most determines the angle of the finger is the part of the fingertip that contacts the string.

Try to position the upper finger as much on the right side of the fingertip as possible, and the lower finger on the left side of the fingertip (Fig.c), rather than positioning both on the left side (Fig. d).

(1) Sul D

(2) Sul D A

(3) Sul D A

- Every few moments check that you are not over-pressing the strings. Keep the fingers as light as possible, so that a fraction less finger pressure would cause the sound to break.
- Also continually check that you are not contracting (tensing) the muscles of the hands and fingers, causing the them to feel tight and hard to the touch.

To gain the feeling of lightness and freedom, practise the exercises using the back of your hand instead of the violin, with your fingers one side and the thumb the other. Make sure you do not press the thumb or the fingers hard into your left hand. Aim for a 'tickle-light' touch. Afterwards, playing the exercises on the violin, recapture the same feeling of lightness and ease.

- Practise the same patterns on each string.