BASICS

FAST FINGERS

The term 'fast fingers' is to do with the speed of the left hand finger movements, not the speed of the notes. Sometimes 'fast fingers' is also about the timing of shifting, but it is mainly a sort of *waiting* before moving a finger, and then a fast movement of that finger. Training fingers to move quickly is one of the 'master methods' of improving the left hand.

If you want to arrive somewhere at 09.00, and it is going to take you 60 minutes to walk there, you will have to leave at 08.00; but if you decide to take a taxi, you may be able to leave instead at 08.45. You can leave later because you will get there faster.

Developing fast fingers transforms your playing because it makes everything feel slower:

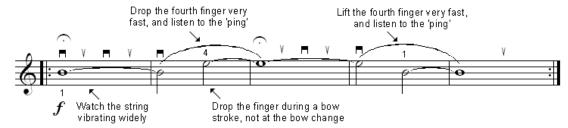
- The faster the fingers move, the *later* they can move and still arrive in time
- The later they move, the *longer* you can wait between each movement
- The longer you can wait between each movement, the *slower* the passage feels.
- The slower the passage feels, the more time you have to think, and the more in control you feel.

By speeding up all the movements, an extraordinary lightness, quickness and ease comes into the hand.

Making a 'ping' with fast fingers

There are also tonal benefits in fast fingers. Notes that are slurred together under one bow gain a new clarity and articulation as the finger drops on to the string or lifts from it.

- Sustain long bows, playing first finger B in 1st position on the A string. Play loudly, using fast bow strokes and experimenting with balances of speed–pressure–soundpoint until the string vibrates as widely as possible.
- Get ready to drop the fourth finger on to the string on the note E. Before dropping the finger, look at the place on the string where it is going to land. Note how widely the string is vibrating there. The finger must literally 'stop' the string.
 - When it does this very, very quickly, there is the sound of a 'phut' or 'ping' as the finger contacts the string and the new note begins. This is similar to the satisfying 'phut' as the tone hole on a flute is opened or closed. Make sure the finger drops during a stroke, not at the same time as changing bow.
- Having played the E, play a few more fast strokes to make the string vibrate widely, and then lift off again very, very fast. Notice the 'ping' as the finger leaves the string and the B sounds:



When musically appropriate, this crisp, articulated beginning to a note produces great brilliance and energy in the tone.

How to develop fast fingers

It is quite easy to build fast fingers into your technique. You can practise fast fingers directly into a piece; or instead of doing that, or as well as, you can practise fast-finger exercises.

• To practise fast fingers into a phrase or passage, simply play at a very slow overall tempo but move the fingers almost late and very fast. The feeling is one of moving at the last possible moment: if you were to move an instant later, you would not get there in time.

BASICS

• Before placing the finger on the string, or moving it across to another string, or whatever the movement of the finger, keep the finger still for as long as possible before moving; then go so fast that there is only a blur as the finger moves.

If you practise like this for only a short while, when you play normally again you will notice a striking difference. Even better, the gain in facility remains in everything else you play.

Metronome exercise for fast drop and lift-off

This exercise makes the fingers drop and lift with ever-faster speed and precision of timing.



- Set the metronome to click in quavers.
- Practise every possible pair of fingers: 01 02 03 04; 12 13 14; 23 24; 34.
- Practise on each string.

Heifetz exercise

Dorothy DeLay used to say that if you were sitting on a tram in San Francisco in the 1960's you might well find yourself sitting opposite somebody carrying a violin case; and if they had a violin case it would be quite likely that they would be sitting there making a curious forwards-and-backwards movement with the fingers of their left hand.

If so, you would know that they were on their way to their violin lesson with Jascha Heifetz, since this is an exercise he would have taught them, and that they were using every available moment to practise and to stay warmed up.

- Begin with the fingers in a neutral, middle position, neither forward or back (Fig. a).
- Then pull the fingers back very suddenly (Fig. b), pause with them in the pulled-back position, and then push them forwards again very suddenly (Fig. c). Pulling back uses all the lift-off muscles; pushing forward uses all the drop muscles.

One situation in which the Heifetz exercise becomes a life-saver, is when you have to perform in a venue which is very cold, such as an insufficiently-heated church in winter or in the open air. However cold your fingers are, thirty seconds of the Heifetz exercise can be enough to make you feel perfectly ready to play. Important points to watch out for:

- Keep the fingers together, more or less touching each other
- Keep them curved throughout.
- Keep the forearm and the back of the hand in a straight line. The hand should not move with the fingers.
- Keep the hand as relaxed as possible throughout. When the fingers are pulled back, the muscles doing the pulling contract. With the muscles in a state of contraction, the hand and fingers will never be able to feel 'relaxed' in the sense of 'floppy'. Neither will they be 'springy'. However, there is an obvious difference between the feeling of the muscles being active, and the feeling of them being tense.



(a) Begin with the fingers in a neutral, middle position, neither forward or back



(b) Pulling back uses all the liftoff muscles



(c) Pushing forwards uses all the drop muscles