Double stops

Light left hand

Suppose you weigh 150 pounds, and you stand on two weighing machines, one foot on each. What would each machine register? They would each indicate 75 pounds, not 150 pounds, because your weight is divided equally between them.

Therefore, if you want to play a double stop at the same volume as a single stop, you have to use double the bow weight because it is divided between two strings. If you play three strings at the same time, you need three times the amount of weight.[1]

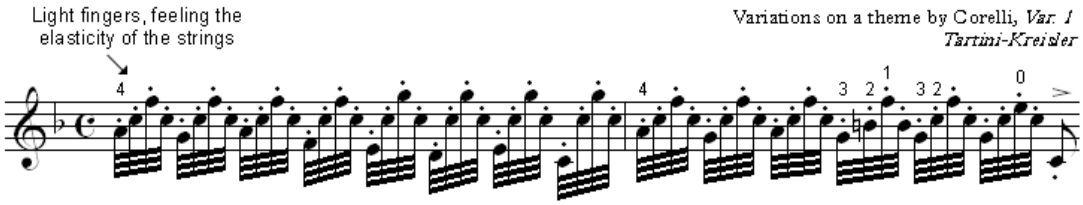
Of course, describing it like this is only to illustrate the principle: with the left fingers causing the strings all to be different lengths, and with the different qualities of the strings, the weight will rarely be divided 'equally' between them.

However, the amount of weight that the left fingers have to give, in order to stop the string sufficiently for a clean note, is the same whether you stop one note in the left hand or four notes.

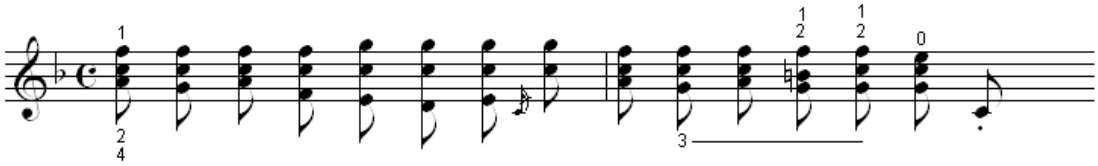
Excess pressure in stopping the strings, as an unconscious reaction to the extra weight in the bow, is one of the most common causes of left hand tension.

Excessive pressing in the left hand can be a reaction to holding down chords even when the bow is not playing heavily:

Example



As played in the left hand under the bow stroke:



This passage can seem impossibly difficult to play in tune if the left fingers over-press. Instead, when the fingers remain almost as light as when playing harmonics, the passage immediately feels much easier because then the fingers can move quickly to each new position.

- Practise on the back of your hand, 'fingering' the notes so lightly that the fingers tickle your skin rather than press.
- Then find the same lightness when playing the passage.

Mobility exercises

The essential thing in playing double stops is to keep the hand as soft and free as it is when playing the simplest single notes, i.e. as free as they are when you are not playing the violin.

Mobility exercises are good for discovering how to give and release, in the hand and fingers, while maintaining enough muscle tone to play.

BASICS

Exercise 1

Playing any double or triple stop, move the hand around while keeping the fingers in tune on the notes.

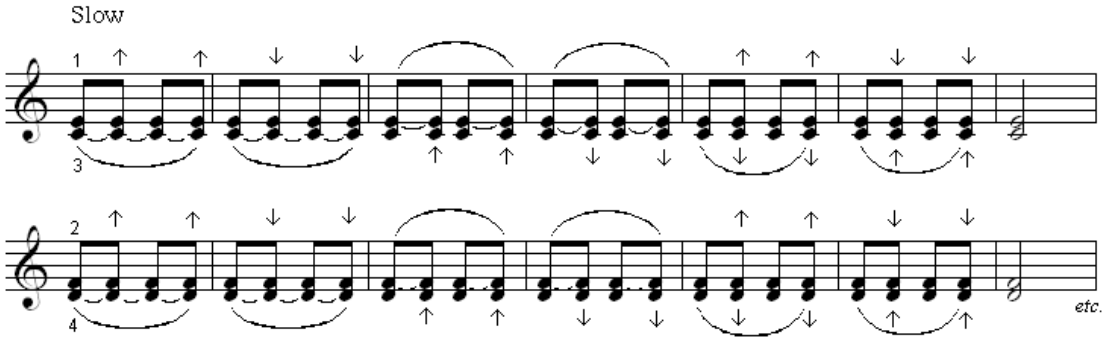
Even if there seems to be little movement possible, see how you can ‘give’ even just a fraction more in each joint. Afterwards, even the slightest extra freedom in the hand that you have gained feels enormous when you return to normal playing.

- Pull the knuckles out, away from the neck of the violin, so that the fingers lengthen slightly, all the time keeping the notes in tune – or as in tune as possible.
- Pull the hand in, as though trying to touch the neck of the violin with the knuckles.
- Pull the hand back, as though to flatten the notes, but keeping the fingers in tune.
- Push the hand forward, as though to sharpen the notes, but keeping the fingers in tune.
- Move the hand in circles, clockwise and anticlockwise, ‘giving’ in every joint and allowing every possible movement, however slight it is.

Exercise 2

- To gain more feeling of lightness and instantaneous adjustability, move the fingers above and below the correct tuning.

The arrows represent moving the finger a quarter-tone lower or higher. Where there is no arrow, play the double stop in tune:



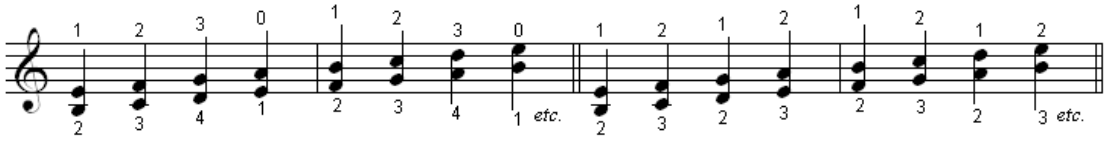
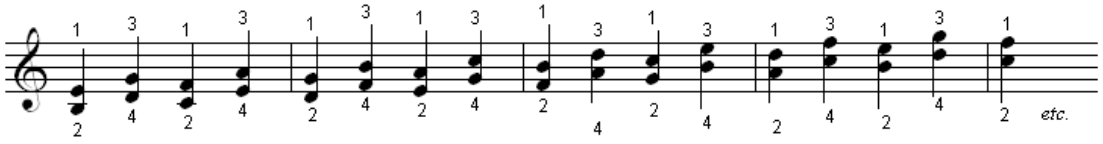
- When the arrow is above the stave, the lower finger does not move, and *vice versa*. When there are two arrows, move both fingers at the same time.

Fourths

Few violinists practise perfect fourths, perhaps because few scale books include them; yet they are a powerful tool for shaping the intonation of the entire hand.

Perfect fourths appear frequently in chord-playing, so the more used you are to playing them the less there is to practise when you play, say, unaccompanied Bach.

Once you get exercises in fourths well in tune, or play them in scales and broken thirds, they improve not only your feel for other double stops, but for ordinary single notes as well:



Broken fourths are particularly helpful in training the hand position so that the fingers do not lift too high but stay near the string; and in learning all the different tone-semitone patterns of the four fingers: