
BASICS

Finger preparation: the secret of legato

Before I went to study with Yfrah Neaman as an undergraduate at the Guildhall School of Music, I happened to hear him playing on the radio one day. I noticed a striking and beautiful quality of seamless legato in his playing. Soon after I had begun to work with him, I asked him how to develop that quality of smoothness.

‘Finger preparation is the answer,’ he said. ‘You should always have the fingers ready on the string in advance of playing them.’

Finger preparation means that you get the finger ready on the string before the bow sets the string into vibration. The left fingers lead the bow and the bow follows.

If you play the piano or the harp, all the different string-lengths you might need – all the notes – are already there, waiting for you should you wish to play them. Playing the violin, you have to create the different string-lengths as you need them. First you stop the string, and then you bow or pluck it in order to hear the note. The finger must be there first. You cannot play, with a clean tone, a string-length that has not yet been completely stopped.

Stepping down a ladder: one finger; two fingers; one finger

When you step down a ladder, you lift one foot off the rung you are standing on, and put all of your weight into the foot remaining on the rung. For a moment you have only one foot on the ladder.

While you stand on that one foot, you place the other foot on the rung below. For a moment you have two feet on the ladder, your weight partly going into the upper rung, partly into the lower.

Having positioned the foot on the lower rung, you then remove the foot from the upper rung and put all of your weight into the lower foot. Now you have only one foot on the ladder again.

Finger preparation works in a similar way: first you have one finger on the string; then you place a lower finger, so now you have two fingers on the string; then you lift the upper finger (to uncover the lower finger), so you have only one finger on the string again.

Sonata no. 3 in D minor, op. 108, Brahms
Second movement

espress.

One finger - two fingers - one finger

Silent lower finger

Oddly, teachers who continually stress the need and value of finger preparation are rare. It seems that most players or teachers never mention it. This might be because finger preparation is one of those technical issues where you can get the same result whether you work from a musical or a technical angle. If you concentrate on wanting a seamless, legato quality, the fingers may automatically and naturally prepare; or, doing it the other way round, because you prepare your fingers you get a seamless, legato quality.

Clearly, there is magic and artistry in preparing fingers the ‘musical’ way. Getting there by means of a conscious, controlling, ‘placing the finger early’ technique, or by practising exercises, seems to some musicians as too detached or intellectual, rather than artistic or expressive.

The classic objection to thinking about technique on this minute level of detail is that if a centipede began to think about which leg to put forward next, he would soon get confused and be unable to walk. In the same way, as the objection goes, if you think about how to play every note and make too many conscious directions, it is impossible to play the violin. Therefore, finger preparation should be left to instinct.

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Yet even otherwise advanced players often do not prepare fingers well, and the effect of playing a half-stopped string for an instant is plainly audible. There is no harm in concentrating on preparing fingers until it becomes a habit, so that afterwards you can forget about it again.

You can easily instil finger preparation into your playing with simple warm-up exercises. They quickly engrain the habit so that preparation happens automatically in the normal course of playing, without you having to think about it.

The notes to prepare

Playing any descending notes – e.g. in a descending scale or arpeggio – the next finger that is about to be played needs to be placed on the string before you lift the current finger.

Any first note on a new string must always be stopped before the bow plays it:

Written Played

The important thing is to know the type of places where there may be a danger of the finger being late. For example, in an ascending scale the first finger must not be late on each new string (shown as '+'):

Fuzzy beginning if finger is late

Practise preparing and placing fingers exaggeratedly early, like a syncopation:

Place early, while playing the fourth finger

Typical exercise

Place and lift the silent x-note fingers in time underneath the playing fingers:

Lift the third finger exactly on the beat

simile

Place the first finger exactly on the beat

Next month's BASICS stays with the left hand and looks at freeing the basic finger action.