
BASICS

Freeing the left hand

Moving fingers from the base joints

One of the hallmarks of any good left hand is that the main movement of the fingers is from the base knuckle joints. Look at any great player. Heifetz is a wonderful example, his fingers having an extraordinary, spongy liquidity of movement absolutely independent of the hand, which remains quite still; but almost any other great or good player would do as an example since if they did not move their fingers completely freely from the base joints they would not be able to play at that level in the first place.

One way to understand the finger movement is to look at how the arms, legs and fingers all have three levers: the upper leg, upper arm and upper finger are the strongest, and the large, main movements of the limbs originate from them. The danger violinists and violists must avoid is that they drop and raise the fingers partly with a movement of the hand, rather than moving from the base joints. This is like trying to walk by replacing part of the upper leg movement by rotating the back with each step.

When they use the fourth finger, some players try to move the finger only from the middle joint. This is like trying to throw a ball by keeping the upper arm still and using only the forearm.

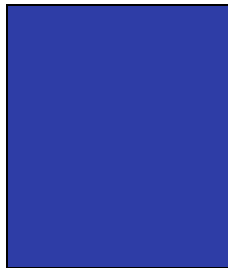
Dorothy DeLay used to say that you should not talk about 'good' or 'bad' in violin technique, but rather think in terms of 'more efficient' or 'less efficient'. Dropping the finger partly from the hand is certainly a less efficient way of moving the finger – costly both in terms of extra effort and the possibility of tension.

Simple test

Without the violin, hold the left hand in front of you in playing position, with the fingers in a naturally curved shape (Ex. 1).

Do not use any muscular action to find this shape: make a straight line through the forearm, wrist and hand; position the forearm so that the hand simply 'sits' on the forearm without needing any muscular effort to stay there.

- Move one finger at a time, without any active movement in any of the other three fingers. Look at the angle made in the line from the back of the hand to the finger: it should change as the finger moves, without the hand moving whatsoever. The curve or shape of the finger should not change.



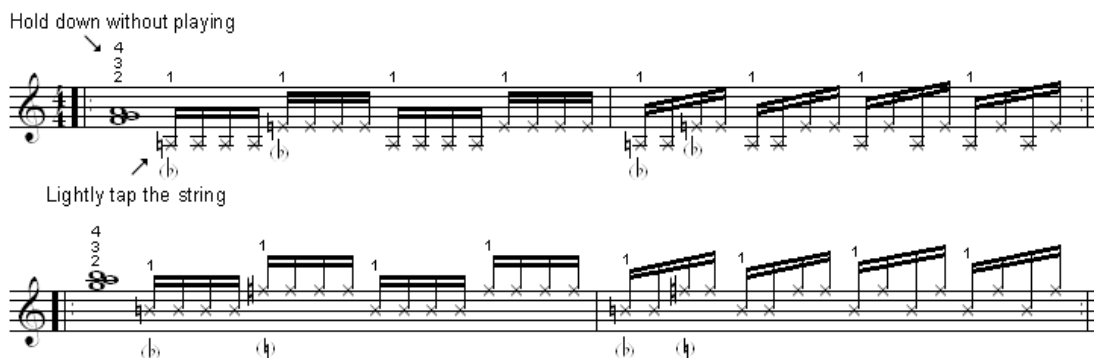
Ex. 1 Allow the fingers to naturally curve

Silent tapping exercise

Hold down three fingers and tap the remaining finger. The held-down fingers prevent the hand from taking part in the finger movement, so this is a very simple way to warm up in a matter of seconds and keep the left fingers in good working order.

Tap 'down, down, down, down' so that on the free string you can hear the pitch of the note you are tapping. Equally, raise the finger with energy.

Hold down without playing



Lightly tap the string

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Repeat the same patterns with the other fingers, tapping with one finger while holding down the other three:

The image shows three musical staves, each representing a different finger: 2, 3, and 4. Each staff begins with a sequence of notes and rests, followed by a sequence of bowing patterns. Fingerings are indicated above the notes. The patterns involve tapping with one finger while holding down the other three.

Freeing the wrist

In low positions the back of the hand should be in a straight line with the elbow, wherever possible. Sometimes there may be certain chords that feel comfortable only when the wrist moves out slightly, but for normal playing a straight line at the wrist is the most suitable.

Obviously in higher positions there has to be an outward bend at the wrist.

In the lower positions, sometimes you can produce a good feeling of release by allowing the wrist very slightly to give in; but a hand position that is based on the wrist sticking out may be prone to tension.

Relaxation exercise

If you find that your wrist tends to lock, which then makes the hand and finger action feel less free, practise a few simple notes while moving the wrist in and out:

The image shows a musical staff with four notes. Above the notes, the words "Out In Out In" are written. Below the staff, the word "simile" is written under the first two notes and "etc." is written under the last two notes.

- Push the wrist out slightly, so that there is an outward bend.
- Pull in slightly, so that the wrist curves inwards. Feel the ease that a 'giving' wrist creates, rather than the feeling of effort or strain when the wrist pushes outwards.
- Experiment with different degrees of finger pressure to stop the notes, and see what effect there is on the freedom in the wrist. Over-press the string, and see if you can find how to keep the wrist free anyway.

Add a sideways movement in the left upper arm to the in-and-out wrist movement:

- Begin with the elbow in a middle position, and the wrist in a straight line.
- As you push the wrist outwards, move the left elbow slightly to the left, and then as you start to pull the wrist back in start moving the elbow back towards the centre again.
- Carry on moving the elbow to the right so that you end up with the wrist bending in and the elbow fully to the right; then, as you start to push the wrist out again, move the elbow back towards the centre so that you end up with the wrist straight and the elbow in the middle position.
- Repeat in a continuous, flowing circular movement.

Afterwards, with the wrist in a straight line and without over-pressing the string, you will find that your entire hand feels unusually relaxed and free.

Next month's BASICS looks at how to practise key bowing patterns.