BASICS

Changing position

There is no such thing as a shift

It is a paradox that it is possible to think that there is no such thing as a shift, and yet at the same time to practise shifting. But in fact there is no contradiction.

The thing to avoid in, say, playing an ascending scale is that the shift becomes a great big thing in itself that you have to make happen between playing the two notes of the shift. The danger is that you play ‘note–note–shift–note–note’ instead of forgetting altogether about the shift – refusing to accept that there is any such thing as a shift – and playing ‘note–note–note–note–note’:

In slower passages you may wish to make more of the shift for expressive purposes, but the faster the passage the more you have to play ‘without shifting’:

(1) Typical passages like these become ‘bumpy’ and without flow, if you play note–note–shift–note–shift–note. To play smoothly and fluently at speed you have to play simply note–note–note–note.

(2) It is helpful to isolate the shifting finger. Play the notes purposefully but without thinking of the shifts. Afterwards keep the same feeling in the first finger as you add the other notes back in.

Hear the next notes in your mind before you play them, and then let the fingers find the notes themselves. When you simply play the next note rather than shifting and then playing it, the shift happens on its own, automatically and instinctively. You get it for free.

But having said that there is no such thing as a shift, at the same time the more you practise the bare elements of shifting, so that they become utterly free and reliable, the more you are then able to forget about them in the general course of playing.

One way to practise shifting is to play simple sequences of fingerings that cover every area of the violin. Step-by-step sequential exercises expand and sharpen your knowledge of the geography of the fingerboard. The increased security in changing position that comes from constantly remembering the feel of every finger, on every note, is remarkable.

There are endless variations to choose from, but the following are typical useful sequences.

- Exercises for Classical (‘beginning-finger’) shifts focus on an intermediate note to find the exact position of the hand:

- Exercises for Romantic (‘end-finger’ shifts) may focus on slowing down into the arrival note:
LISTENING TO THE SHIFTING FINGER

Start off by listening to harmonics up and down the string. Children are always fascinated by the sound:

(1) Starting on the harmonic G, move all the way up to the top of the fingerboard, and down again, several times. You can also hear many other harmonics between the ones shown.

Move the finger in a steady, feather-light glissando rather than moving from harmonic to harmonic:

(2) Then listen to the sound of the lightly-shifting finger in a normal shift, repeating several times.

Next month’s BASICS looks closely at what the right hand and fingers do during various bow strokes.