
BASICS

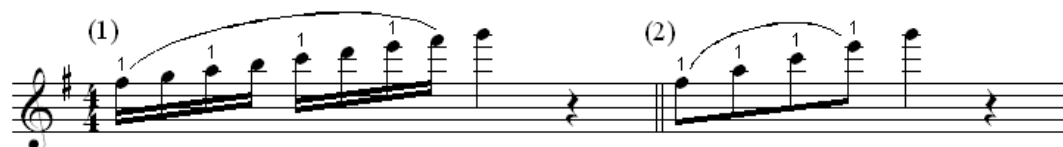
Changing position

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–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.

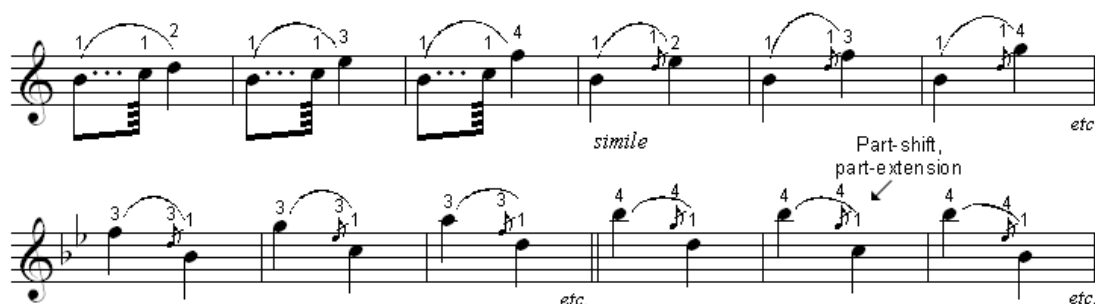
Hear the next notes in your mind before you play them, and then let the fingers find the notes themselves. When you simply play the next note rather than shifting and then playing it, the shift happens on its own, automatically and instinctively. You get it for free.

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:

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Stop the bow on the string Glissando slowly and lightly into the note

Same fingerings: 1-2, 1-3, 1-4

etc.

Listening to the shift

Reliable shifting depends upon two things: being sensitive to the feel of the hand and fingers contacting the instrument and the string; and close listening. Both provide 'feedback' so that the hand knows exactly where it is, and the finger can find its note accurately.

A common accident is that the shift over-shoots and the finger has to come back down again to the arrival note:

(1) Normal Romantic shift

(2) Over-shooting the B

Fast Slow

(1) Normal Romantic shift, the finger moving quickly up to a place somewhere below the arrival note (not necessarily an A#), and then moving slowly into the arrival note.

(2) Over-shooting the B, so that the finger has to come down again – perhaps straight to the arrival note or as shown: first too high, then too low.

The faint background sound of the finger gliding up the string, and slowing into the note, tells you instant-by-instant exactly where the finger is. So if you miss the note and continue shifting beyond it, it can only mean that you are not receiving the instant feedback that the sound provides, i.e. you are not listening.

Imagine watching a slow-motion, close-up film of the finger shifting up to the note and over-shooting it: you can see the finger nearing the note, getting closer and closer, getting to it, but then passing it and continuing on. Yet the sound was there all the time telling you exactly where the finger was.

Therefore, not missing the note is not a question of learning 'better shifting technique', but simply of better listening and reacting split-second by split-second.

LISTENING TO THE SHIFTING FINGER

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

(1) Sul G

(2) Sul A

Light, slow glissando

Listen to the glissando between the notes

(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:

Also find the same harmonics by starting in the same place but moving the finger down the string.

(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.