
BASICS

Changing soundpoint

- 1 Near the bridge
- 2 Between the bridge and the centre point
- 3 At the centre point
- 4 Between the bridge and the end of the fingerboard
- 5 Near the end of the fingerboard

The soundpoint is the bow's precise place on the string relative to the bridge. It is also known as the point of contact, or in America the sounding point. Carl Flesch and Dorothy DeLay divided the area into five, and of course you can also think of points between them.

I was already a post-graduate student before I encountered the idea of numbering the soundpoints, and at first I was a little suspicious of it. It seemed too mechanistic instead of artistic, since I had been used to the soundpoint being the result of the musical intention (hopefully) rather than the music coming from the technical intention. The essential difference is between 'making music' and 'making sound'. However, it soon became clear that there was no contradiction whatsoever between playing musically while at the same time measuring what you are doing with the bow. At the end of the day it is only about knowing what you are doing, which can surely never be a bad thing.

Speed, pressure, soundpoint

The three elements of tone production are speed of bow, pressure (or weight) and the distance from the bridge. When these three are in the right proportions (slower and heavier nearer the bridge, faster and lighter nearer the fingerboard), the string vibrates freely and the tone sings. This perfect balance of speed, pressure and soundpoint is called the 'tonus'. You have to find the tonus in every note, which means that you have to listen so intently that you catch every last sound that comes from the bow's contact with the string. To have a fabulous tone you have to be a fabulous listener.

Exercise 1

Feel the qualities and tensions of the string while moving the bow towards and away from the bridge. In this exercise you need to angle the bow so that it is not quite parallel to the bridge:

- When the bow is angled 'in', so that the point is nearer the fingerboard than the frog (Fig. 0), the bow naturally wanders towards the fingerboard during the down-bow. During the up-bow the bow naturally wanders towards the bridge.
- When the bow is angled 'out', so that the frog is nearer the fingerboard than the point (Fig. 2), during the down-bow the bow wanders towards the bridge, and during the up-bow towards the fingerboard.

Place the bow on the A string at the point, on soundpoint 5, and angle the bow inwards (Fig. 0):

- Beginning there on soundpoint 5, slowly push the bow up-bow a few centimetres. As the bow moves, allow the bow to drift across to soundpoint 2 or 1. Do not *make* the bow change the soundpoint: *let* it drift naturally because of the angle of the bow to the bridge. Play more and more heavily into the string as you get closer and closer to the bridge, until ending up with a very heavy, slow bow.
- Having arrived at the bridge – using only a quarter of the bow to get there – stop the bow on the string; do not change anything; then pull the bow down-bow back to where you started. As the bow moves, allow it to drift back towards the fingerboard to soundpoint 5, lightening again as you go.

Each group of four tied crotchets represents one continual, unbroken semibreve. Draw the bow smoothly, without making each quarter-note distinct from the next:

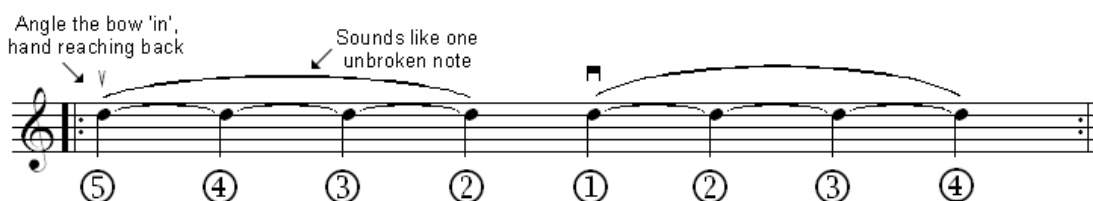


Fig. 2

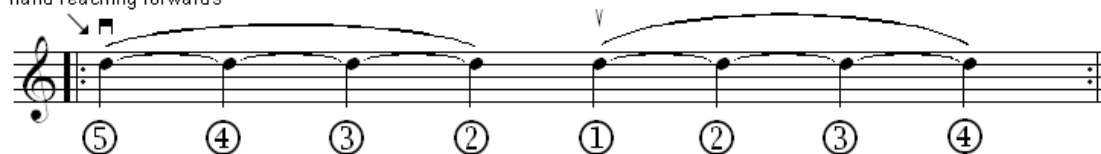
Bow moves towards bridge on down-bow; towards fingerboard on up-bow

- Repeat at the middle; and at the heel.
- Repeat using longer strokes in the lower half; at the middle; in the upper half.
- Repeat using three-quarters of the bow beginning at the heel; beginning at the point-of-balance.
- Repeat using whole bows.

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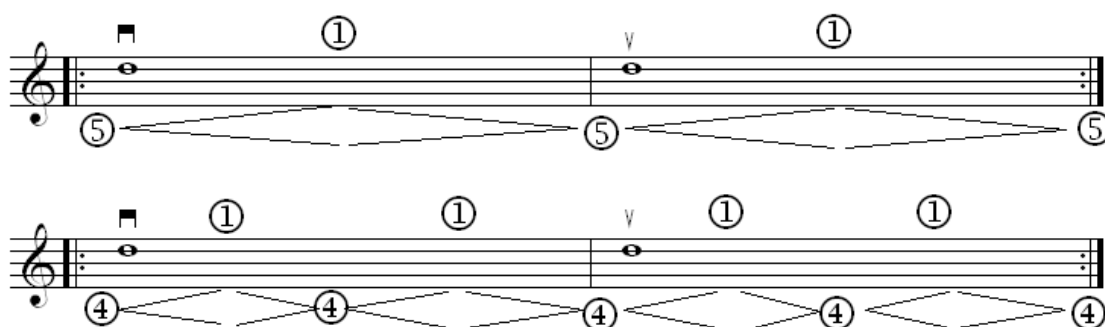
- Then angle the bow outwards (Fig. 2), and repeat the sequence the other way round:

Angle the bow 'out',
hand reaching forwards



- Repeat on each string in low, middle, and high positions (3 x 4 = 12 possibilities). Also play on double stops, making 24 possibilities to explore in all.

Exercise 2



- 1 Play whole bows, down-bow and up-bow on one note. Start on soundpoint 5, move to 1 during the lower half, and back to 5 during the upper half. Repeat on the up-bow.
Speed pattern: fast-slow-fast. Pressure pattern: light-heavy-light.
- 2 Move towards and away from the bridge twice in one bow. Start at the heel on 4. Use a quarter of the down-bow to reach the bridge, drift back to 4 by the middle of the bow, and the same in the upper half.
- 3 Then move to and from the bridge three times, four times, up to about eight. With each increase in number start nearer the bridge, ending up using only soundpoints 2-1.

Doing this exercise for the first time, many players angle the bow correctly to travel towards the bridge, but then – *before* arriving at the bridge, and having further to go to get there – they change the angle as though they already want to move towards the fingerboard. Instead, keep the angle that is taking you to the bridge until you arrive there; only then, as you sustain the bow with a very slow bow, close to the bridge, change the angle to send the bow travelling towards the fingerboard again.

Also, make sure you do not automatically move the bow faster as you pull in to the bridge instead of slowing. This often happens because playing nearer to the bridge requires extra weight, which is an increase in energy; moving the bow faster would also be an increase in energy; the one sets off the other. Instead, you need to slow the bow dramatically as you move into the bridge.

Unintentionally speeding up the bow as it moves nearer to the bridge is like unintentionally pressing the left fingers harder simply because of playing more heavily with the bow; or unintentionally playing an *accelerando* because of playing a *crescendo*.

Natural feel

All tone exercises require great sensitivity of touch, and springiness, flexibility and responsiveness in every joint; but these exercises are perhaps some of the most sensuous of all. It is virtually impossible to do them well using 'detached mental control'. You have to *feel* the hair in the string, and the string giving ever-so-slightly under the bow, the increasing resistance of the string as you get nearer to the bridge, the springiness of the stick and the sensations of your fingers on the bow, while all the time locking your ears on the sound.

The improvement in control of the bow, and in purity and depth of tone, that comes from numbering the soundpoints, and from becoming master of the bow at every distance from the bridge, is simply inestimable. Make these exercises part of your daily warm-up routine.

Next month's BASICS looks at left hand finger action.