
BASICS

Left hand finger action

Wishing to improve without changing

As string players, the thing that most of us want all the time is to improve our playing, both musically and technically. Contained in the word 'improve' is the implication of some sort of change, but the big trap that many of us fall into is that although we wish to improve there is a general reluctance to actually change what we are doing. We continue to do the same thing but expect or desire a different result.

Nowhere is this clearer than in matters of changing the left hand position or finger action. It is usually quite simple to improve a student's tone production – so that they leave the lesson a better player than when they arrived – but if you suggest changes to the left hand setup or finger action they may leave the room unable to play anything fluently, if they try to do what you say. This because they may be able to play quite well while doing it all 'wrong', but not be able to function at all – at first – when they try to do it 'right'.

This is one of the reasons why a student may come back to the next lesson without having made the suggested changes. To borrow an analogy from the great psychologist Carl Jung, imagine that you are standing on nice, solid ground on the edge of a chasm. You want to cross to the even better solid ground on the other side, but in between there is a rocky, fast-flowing river to cross. You begin to wonder whether it is worth making the crossing, and you keep putting it off. Where you are does not seem so bad after all.

However, it is only at first that positive changes have an apparently negative effect. If you persist just a little beyond the initial, awkward starting-point, you can quickly get used to the new setup and be able to play as well as before but without the previous disadvantages. It is just a matter of getting started. The dangerous river is really a shallow stream.

The most important thing is always to be playing, and to be playing musically. So one solution is to focus on the new feelings of, say, keeping the fingers closer to the strings, or moving the fingers from the base joints, in your warm-up and technical development work. Little by little the new sensations creep in to your general playing without you even noticing.

Illustration 1

The eighteenth century approach

Finger action depends first on the basic position of the left hand. In the 18th century the Geminiani chord was a standard way to find the hand position. In 1751 Geminiani wrote in *The Art of Playing on the Violin*:



...a Method of acquiring the true Position of the Hand, which is this: To place the first Finger on the first String upon F; the second Finger on the second String upon C; the third Finger on the third String upon G; and the fourth Finger on the fourth String upon D. This must be done without raising any of the Fingers, till all four have been set down; but after that, they are to be raised but a little Distance from the String they touched; and by so doing the Position is perfect.¹

In Germany in 1756 Leopold Mozart gave similar advice in his *Violin School*, and made a little exercise out of it. After giving the same instructions to place the first finger on F, the second on C and so on, he continues:

...in such a fashion that none are lifted, but all four fingers lie simultaneously on the right spot. Then try to lift first the index-finger, then the third; soon the second, and then the fourth, and to let them fall again at once, but without moving the other three from their places. The finger must be lifted at least so high as not to touch the string and you will see that this exercise is the shortest way to acquire the true position of the hand and that thereby one achieves an extraordinary facility in playing double stopping in tune when the moment arrives.²

Hand based on the first finger with the other fingers reaching forward

Illustration 2

Hand based on the fourth finger with the other fingers reaching back

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The German violinist Andreas Moser commented on this position of the hand in 1905:

'Since Corelli's pupil, Geminiani, in his Violin-School of 1740, identified [this chord] with the normal position of the fingers of the left hand, this notorious "grip" has wrought confusion in all the later treatises, most of which are based on Geminiani. In the time of our forefather, however, this position of the left hand was by no means so absurd...the neck of the violin was, until well into the second half of the eighteenth century, two or three centimetres shorter than it is at present...to play this chord in the first position involved only that stretch, which would nowadays be required were it played in the third or fourth position. Every experienced teacher must have observed that not one half of his pupils can execute without effort the Geminiani "grip" on the violin of today, with its increased dimensions, and that indeed the position causes difficulty to many a distinguished violinist all through his life.'

Anyway, in the light of our understanding today of the benefits of reaching back from the upper finger – so that there is a wider spread at the base joints and the upper fingers do not have to stretch up uncomfortably to their notes – both Geminiani's and Leopold Mozart's instruction to begin with the first finger, and then place the second, third and fourth in that order, is not good advice.

If you begin with the hand balanced to favour the first finger, and then reach forward from there to find the other notes, there is a danger that you will end up in the position shown in Ill. 1. Instead, it is completely different if you begin with the fourth finger, and only then reach back with the third, second and first fingers in that order (Ill.2).

- Before placing the other fingers, make sure the fourth is curved. Then, as you reach back with the lower fingers, change the curve of the fourth finger as little as possible.

Clearly you cannot play with the hand fixed in this position; but after setting it in this exaggerated shape for a few moments a normal, 'middle' position feels more comfortable than usual.

A less drastic approach is to place all four fingers on one string – instead of one finger on each string – but otherwise to do as Geminiani said:

- Place the fourth finger on, say, A on the D string. Then place underneath it the third finger on G, the second on F, and the first on E (Ill. 3).
- Leave the first down and lift the second, third and fourth fingers just above the string (Ill. 4).

Keeping the fingers close to the strings

Keep the unused fingers close to the string, i.e. while shifting with the first finger, hover above the string with the fourth finger. If the unused fourth finger was to touch the string, the note should be in tune, or at least nearly in tune.

Itzhak Perlman is a good example of someone who keeps their fingers very close to the strings. Watch the close-up shots of his left hand in films of him playing fast passages from, say, the Tchaikovsky Concerto. His fingers barely raise at all. It is the same when it comes to playing a fast vibrato: the faster you want to go, the narrower the vibrato must be, simply so that you do not have to go too far before going the other way again. Similarly, if you do not raise your fingers too high it is obvious that you can begin to drop them again much sooner.

Preventing the fingers from lifting

Help students find a new feeling of playing with their fingers very close to the strings by cupping your hand over theirs for a few moments while they play (Fig. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**). Forcibly prevent the fingers from lifting more than the slightest amount.

They might play a scale in one position, or a scale in broken thirds, or a passage in one position from a piece. They can even play a passage that includes shifts if you move with them as they change position.

It will probably all sound terrible as the fingers do not clear the strings properly and the fingers are cramped and unable to move properly. But afterwards, with the constraining hand removed, it is easy for them to recapture the feeling of keeping the fingers close to the strings.

Illustration 3

Having placed the fourth, third, second, and first finger, in that order, on the D string

Leaving the first finger down, raise the second, third, and fourth fingers just clear of the string

Illustration 4

Illustration 5

Prevent the fingers from lifting

Next month's BASICS returns to the left/right hand, with