

Since the Basics book first appeared I have often been asked the same two questions: where have all the exercises come from? And which are the most important, the most essential exercises in the collection? The first question is easier to answer than the second.

### Dorothy DeLay's Basics

As a post-graduate I studied with Dorothy DeLay in New York, and she had a small group of exercises which were called 'Basics'. The idea was that every day you should do about 40 or 45 minutes work on basic technique, and in that time cover every aspect of technique.

There were not many specific exercises in the group, though there were some key ones for the left hand – a couple for vibrato, for finger action, for trills, and four fundamental tone exercises. She would suggest that for working on shifts you could use Sevcik or Dounis, or make up your own patterns; and for practising basic strokes such as *detache*, *martele*, *spiccato* and *sautille*, to use Kreutzer No. 2 or something similar. But the key point was to cover every area of technique in one practice session.

When I first began teaching, this small group of exercises naturally sat at the centre of my work, and I added my own exercises in the areas where she was more general and would direct you to Sevcik or Dounis. After a couple of years of writing out the same exercises over and over again for different students, it finally occurred to me to type them out just once and then hand out photocopies. This turned into the very first Basics book, consisting of 20 single-sided hand-typed pages, with hand-written music examples stuck in with glue.

A few years later I bought my first word-processor. The very first job I used it for was to write a reference for a student. The second job was to make a properly-printed version of the Basics book, which I thought would take just a week to do. But there was now so much to add, after years of working on my own technique and that of my students – breaking it all down into the smallest elements and thereby finding new practice methods and new exercises – that the new version took three months and the twenty single sides became fifty double sides.

Over the next few years I continually added to and revised the Basics book and constantly reprinted it. Then the great day came when I finally bought my first real computer. Now armed with an early Windows release of the music-processing program *Finale*, I was at last able to produce the book complete with properly-set music examples, and in the process it expanded to the size it is today.

Although the book had already been 10 years in the making, I then reprinted it ten or twelve times over the next three or four years. The versions were numbered like computer programs: 1.0, 2.0, 3.0, 3.1, 4.0, 4.1, 5.0 and so on. I was keenly aware that I was in a truly unique position: since computers, music-processing software and laser printers had so recently been invented (and only even more recently become available in the home) – and since it was many years since anyone had written a violin technique book of this size – it meant that I had to be the first person in history to write a violin technique book with the aid of modern technology. Never before had anyone been able to produce a fully-working book complete with contents, index and professionally-set music – and to be able to print it out perfectly, have it spiral-bound and distributed to students, friends and colleagues for feedback; be able to work from it, teach from it, find fault with it and make corrections, and then produce a new version and start the process all over again. Nobody had ever been able to do this before.

### So that's what they look like when they're written down!

When I had completed an early draft of the final Basics book, I went to New York to show it to Dorothy DeLay. As she turned over the pages, she would stop occasionally to look more closely at a particular exercise if she recognised it. Several times she looked up and said, 'So that's what it looks like when it's written down!' She had never seen them expressed on paper before, even though she was teaching some of them all the time!

### The essential essentials

I often resist answering the question of which are the most important Basic exercises. You need to be proficient in all of them, or at least always be in the process of improving all of them. Take the tone exercises for example. It is not too extreme to say that until you can simply pick up the instrument without warming up, and play any of the tone exercises completely successfully – which means with a

pure tone throughout and with the least physical or mental effort – unless you can do that, it means that there is more to discover and learn yet. The same can be said of every other basic exercise.

### Pitch, sound, rhythm and ease

At the same time, to say ‘just do everything’ is not quite focused enough. It is more helpful if you think in terms of four categories: pitch, sound, rhythm and minimum effort.

Pitch, sound and rhythm are the three basic elements of music. Musical rhythm is as important as pitch and sound (some would say more important by far), but we can leave that aside for the moment since good rhythm depends first of all on the inner musical sense, and then on all the other elements of technique being in good order. But there is no getting away from it: what you have to do is play in tune, and every note must be pure. So what are the best Basics for achieving all this?

### Tone

The first step is to subdivide the area between the bridge and the fingerboard into 5 ‘tracks’ or ‘soundpoints’ (Fig. 3). You can then also think of soundpoints 1½, 2½, 3½, 4½, 5½. The moment you give a name or label to each distance from the bridge you can plan your use of the bow, and explore each soundpoint’s ideal balances of bow-speed and bow-pressure, in an entirely more practical and organised way. Then everything in your use of the bow improves.



Fig. 3: Divide the playing area into 5 ‘soundpoints’

I call the tone production exercises in the Basics book ‘million-dollar tone exercises’. They are simply the best because they are simple, they are quick to do, and nothing could produce better results. These methods have been used by great players and teachers throughout the ages. They are very simple because everything is stripped down to one issue alone: making the string vibrate freely by finding the best balances of speed and weight at each distance from the bridge. The exercises focus entirely on sound and the sensations in the bow, without any other factors getting in the way and complicating things – such as intonation, rhythm, shifting, co-ordination, string crossing, interpretation, and so on. The four that Miss DeLay taught came via Galamian, and he was taught them by Capet and Mostras. I have added others which are logical extensions of the principal ones.

Exercise 1: ‘Whole bows on each soundpoint’ is featured on page ???

Exercise 2: ‘Short bows on each soundpoint’. Play at the heel, middle and point:

Exercise 3: ‘The pressure exercise’ alternates heavy and light pressure-patterns within long bows:

Exercise 4, the speed exercise, uses exactly the same divisions as the pressure exercise, but here the bow moves fast–slow instead of heavy–light:



Exercise 5: moving towards and away from the bridge:

⑤④③① = Soundpoints



Then you move in and out twice in one bow, three times, and so on.

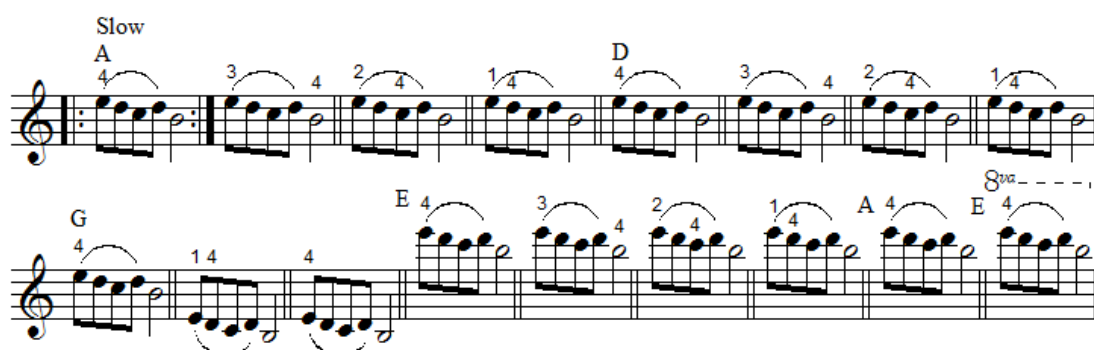
If you are an advanced player, these exercises are a way to maintain your already-high standard in the shortest possible practice time. They also improve your tone production still further. You can liken each of them to a well of endless pure spring water where, however much water you draw up out of the well, there is always more that you can take and use, without ever running out. If you are a teacher or parent of a less advanced or elementary player, with these exercises you can enable them to make a deep, rich, soloistic tone within a single coaching session. Then they have to learn how to keep it and carry on by themselves, but it is a short step from there to finding the same 'voice' in pieces.

## Intonation

Uniform Intonation exercises, which consist of playing exactly the same notes several times but with different fingerings, while making each fingering sound exactly the same in tuning, are extraordinarily effective. Although Ševcik did similar things by repeating harmonic sequences in different octaves, there seem to be no other example in the literature of this approach to tuning. I like to joke that if there is a 'violin heaven', Ševcik, Dounis, Schradieck *et al* are in or up there shaking their fists in annoyance at me, because they did not think of it; or else they are smiling and quietly applauding.

This uniform intonation exercise, which is a shorthand version of Exercise 255 in Basics, consists simply of a random group of notes that you make up as you like. You then play the group everywhere on the fingerboard, with every possible fingering, using an easy-to-remember finger sequence.

Take a short group of notes, or make up a little phrase, and play it in every possible place on the fingerboard using every possible fingering. Begin on the A string in first position. Throughout the exercise, often come back to this first bar to check the tuning. Although you are playing a different fingering in each bar, each bar should sound identical, as though you are actually repeating the same notes with the same fingering. Repeat each bar as many times as necessary until you are certain that each note is absolutely in tune, before moving on to the next bar.



## Left hand

The list of most-important things for the left hand is not actually very long. One thing is not to squeeze the thumb against the base of the first finger; another thing is the importance of not over-pressing the strings. You need to keep your fingers near to the strings, and the shape of the finger should basically stay the same when the finger lifts or drops (unless you are extending the finger). The fingers need to work independently, so that when one is active the other three remain neutral; they should not press or squeeze sideways against each other. Another factor is the question of the exact part of the fingertip that contacts the string. This has an influence on the rest of the hand and the left arm.

All these issues are simple when you deal with them one at a time, and dedicated exercises shine a light on what is happening and what you can adjust. Here is an example of the simplest thing to do both to warm up and to develop the left hand. Warm-up exercises and technique-development exercises are usually the same thing:

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One of the crucial issues for the left hand is for the fingers to move from the base joints. Look at all the great players: without exception they have this wonderful finger-movement without the hand itself joining in. Tapping exercises, especially ones where you keep the unused fingers held down on the strings, are very helpful for developing this, as are silent exercises where you keep the hand entirely still and make quick backward-and-forwards movements of all the fingers at once, moving strictly from the base joints.

Another crucial base-joint issue is that of widening the hand at the base joints. The tendency of many players is to do the opposite – to contract the hand – which is restrictive in many different ways. This is a typical exercise that encourages the widening:

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But there is little point in recommending only one or two exercises for this. Surely the best advice really is to do all of the widening exercises. The same applies to vibrato. Which exercises should you do? Do every vibrato exercise you can. What about shifting? Which are the best exercises for that? Do them all.

## Covering everything in forty-five minutes

The advantage of the small number of exercises that DeLay included in her basics, and then her general instructions about Sevcik or Dounis, is that you really could do the whole lot in 45 minutes and cover every aspect of technique. But once the Basics book had grown beyond its initial twenty pages the problem of organisation arose. How can you do all that in one session, or one day, or one week, or even in a month or a year?!

The answer is perfectly simple. The Basics book is divided into obvious sections such as Left hand, Right hand, Shifting, Vibrato and so on. If in forty-five minutes you should touch on every area, you simply choose something – anything you fancy – from each section and work on it and improve it. The book simply gives you more to choose from.

My preference is often to concentrate on specific areas, so I may spend entire technical practice sessions working only on tone, or only on intonation, or on finger action and so on. In the run-up to performances, however, it always feels good to give everything a quick polish, so then the daily 'touch on every area in 45 minutes' seems really appropriate and helpful.