
BASICS

Reader's questions

I would very much appreciate it if you could recommend some exercises or instructions on how to master fast string crossings as in Mozart Violin sonata KV 305 bars 44 to 49.

Sonata for piano and violin in A major, K305
Mozart



The first thing is not to try to play every note one by one at a fast tempo but to think and play in groups. Feel the two-in-a-bar pulse and let notes 2-6 of each group play themselves.

At the same time you can feel each down-bow as 'active' and each up-bow as 'passive', or as a sort of rebound. This also brings out the melody of the lower line, making the upper notes an accompaniment to the accompaniment.

Are you keeping the bow close-enough to the two strings? It is helpful to think in terms of seven levels of the bow: the four open strings, and the GD, DA and AE double stops. (Some players think of each string having three levels, for example the bow in a middle position on the A-string level, or on the A-string but almost touching the D, or on the A-string but almost touching the E.)

In this case you need to play around the DA level rather than trying to go all the way between the D and A levels. You could practise like this:



Afterwards, *almost* play double stops but not quite.

An important question is where in the bow to play it. Try playing it at the extreme point: notice how the point of the bow makes tiny movements while your right hand has to move a long way. Then try it at the extreme heel: notice how the heel of the bow makes tiny movements while the point moves a long way. Somewhere at the middle of the bow, or a little above or below it, is therefore probably the place to play it.

One thing you might like to do is practise it on open strings, and also play sustained double stops with one bow to a bar.

Over the years, I have had many students whose left hand 4th finger 'locks' in the middle joint. I would be very interested in your comments on the subject.

Many players find that when the fourth finger is placed on the string it often collapses in the middle joint and partly straightens (III. 1a). This may make the finger feel clumsy, weak or tense. To lift off the string again, the finger then pulls back out sideways again.

Coupled with this, there may be a feeling of a resistance point somewhere in the middle of the movement which causes a 'bump': if you move the finger back slowly, you reach a point where it seems to be unable to go any further, and then it suddenly snaps back faster and further than you intended.

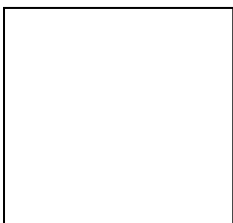
In most cases this condition is quite curable. I always brush it aside when new students worry about it, and tell them it is no problem and that it will 'come out in the wash'. Players find it difficult to correct only because they look in the wrong place. While the problem may appear to be something to do with the middle joint of the finger, in fact the slump is primarily to do with 1) the precise part of the fingertip that contacts the string, and 2) how far away the base joint is from the neck.



III. 1a Straight fourth-finger with 'locked' middle joint



III. 1b Curved finger



III. 1c Pulling the base knuckle joint in towards the neck

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Fingertip It is easy to demonstrate and prove that if you place the pad of the fourth finger on the string the finger will want to straighten; and if you place more of the tip of the finger on the string the finger will want to curve.

Exactly the same applies to the right hand: if you contact the bow with the pad of the thumb and the pad of the little finger, they will each naturally want to straighten, which is why it is imperative that the contacts be with the tips of those fingers. The fingers lose all those lovely, subtle, imperceptible bending movements if they are straight rather than bent or curved.

Base joint Another cause of the slump in the middle of the left fourth finger is the base joint being too far from the neck, causing the finger to move almost horizontally to reach the string.

See how in **III. 1a** the base knuckle joint sticks out, and the angle of the hand is turned too far away from the neck of the violin. The finger has to straighten simply in order to reach the string.

- So bring the base joint closer in to the neck (**III. 1b**) and place the fourth finger more on the tip of the finger. The angle to the string makes a big difference. Think of keeping the fourth more upright to the string rather than slanting.

A really good strengthening exercise is simply to place the tip of the fourth finger on the E or A string – make sure the finger is nicely rounded – and then pull in the base joint until it is touching the neck (**III. 1c**).

It depends partly on your hand as to whether you can actually reach the neck or not, but it does not matter if you cannot – the gain comes from the trying. Pull in many times, each time going a little further. Aim for a straight line between the back of the hand and the upper joint of the fourth finger.

To make it easier, begin with the tip of the fourth finger on the G string and pull in to touch the neck from there. Repeat on the D, A and finally the E string. You can also do this on the back of your hand (**III. 1d**), which is very useful for warming up on the bus on the way to your lesson or concert.

However, in slower playing and on long notes you may often want more of the pad of the fourth finger on the string so that the vibrato is fuller. The middle joint will not collapse if you do not go too far on to the pad, and if you do not allow the base knuckle joint to stick out. Keep doing the pulling-in-and-out exercise.

What is the role of the base of the index finger of the left hand in holding the violin? I find that I am 'grasping' the neck of the violin between the base of the index and my thumb and this is causing me forearm pain.

This seems to be the number one problem in the left hand for many violinists. The thumb should not stay fixed in one position on the neck of the violin, but is naturally mobile and 'clever' in the way it moves in relation to the actions of the fingers. Sometimes the best balance in the hand is when the thumb is quite near the nut; sometimes the thumb may be quite far forward and 'open', almost opposite the second finger.

- Practise not squeezing with the thumb by playing with it exaggeratedly forward, opposite or nearer the third finger (**III. 2a**).
- Put an eraser or a small, soft ball between the base of the thumb and the first finger (**III. 2b**). Playing like that for just a few minutes each day, for only a few days, may be all that you need to form a new habit of not squeezing.

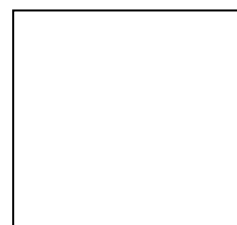
Many players do not realise that the thumb – as well as being able to move forwards and backwards – can also rotate slightly, clockwise and anticlockwise, on the neck of the violin. Move it from all the way down at the base joint near the wrist. Frequently rotate the thumb one way and then the other, for a few seconds, to make sure it is free.

The index finger does have a super-important role in stabilising the entire hand – and intonation – by lightly brushing against the side of the neck when playing in low positions. Unfortunately, many children are taught to keep the index finger well away from the side of the neck at all times, which causes terrible problems. So detaching the index finger from the neck completely, in order to stop gripping, is not the answer.

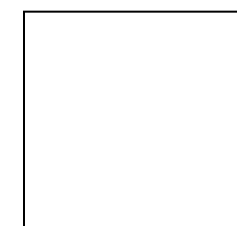
Perhaps you are pressing the strings too hard. Then the thumb has to counter-press too much as well. Most of the time the strings do not need to be pressed hard down in to the fingerboard. Minimum finger-pressure is always the rule – just enough to make the tone pure, and no more. Then the thumb naturally releases.



III. 1d Practising on the back of your hand



III. 2a Practising with the thumb exaggeratedly forward



III. 2b Using an eraser to keep the space open