

# Freeing the left hand

Technique is what we all want to develop on the violin, and always have more of, and most admire in the violinists we look up to. But what is it exactly? Like an engine which is made up of many small components, or like a mosaic comprising a thousand fragments, technique is the sum total of how we go about all the different aspects of playing. It should be called 'techniques' in the plural.

Fig 1.

Caption:

Never squeeze the thumb backwards and against the base of the first finger

For example, during a recent student recital it was striking how the violinist, during passages in first position which included notes such as first-finger D# on the D string, would shift the whole left hand into half position for that one note, and then shift back into first position in order to continue. Instead he could have kept the hand in first position and simply reached the first finger back on its own to play the D#.

You could say that when it came to playing those D#s he had no technique, or that his technique of playing those notes was poor. Dorothy DeLay would say that instead of thinking in terms of 'good' or 'bad' technique it is better to think in terms of 'more efficient' or 'less efficient' ways of doing things. This student did have a technique for playing the D#s – by shifting the whole hand – only this is an inefficient way of doing it which he could very easily replace with the better way of reaching back with the finger.

Fig 2.

Caption:

Practising with the thumb exaggeratedly forward

So if you want to develop greater freedom in the left hand, what are the ways of playing which you could replace with better ones? What are you doing which you must stop doing, and what are you not doing which you could start doing? Here are the top things to think about to help the left hand stay entirely soft, free and easy.

## 1 Thumb light against the neck

If the thumb presses sideways against the neck the fingers naturally counter press, leading to a feeling of squeezing the neck of the violin between fingers and thumb. Of course some counter pressure is natural and necessary, and is not a fixed amount but increases or decreases with every note and phrase; but the principle is to keep the thumb as light as possible.

Fig 3.

Caption:

Fingers straightening as they lift

One remedy for squeezing is to support the scroll on a shelf and play without the thumb on the neck at all. Then keep the feeling of independence when you put the thumb back and play normally. But is it a question of pressing the thumb too hard so you squeeze, or is it that you press the strings down too hard (see no. 3) and therefore counter press with the thumb? The answer is usually both.

## 2 Thumb remaining open at the base joint

In first position, where should the thumb be in relation to the fingers? Between the first finger and the nut, or opposite the first finger, or between the first and second finger, or opposite the second finger? The best answer is probably to let it sit where it naturally wants to sit, which means firstly that there will be a clear open space between the base of the first finger and the thumb, and that the thumb will be mobile and incredibly 'clever' in doing different things with every note you play – if you leave it alone and do not get in the way of its instinctive reactions.

Fig 4.

Caption:

Keeping a natural space between the fingers

The one major thing to avoid is squeezing the base of the thumb and first finger together (Fig. 1). It is often helpful to play for short periods with the thumb exaggeratedly forward, opposite the third finger (Fig. 2). Afterwards the urge to squeeze backwards will seem ridiculous.

### 3 Amount of pressure to stop the string

For normal playing finger pressure should be only as much as necessary to produce a pure tone. Sometimes you may want to stop the string more firmly to create certain tone colours, or when playing pizzicato if you want the note to ring; but the general feeling of playing should be one of the string being 'bouncy' under the finger. You do not need to press the string all the way down to the fingerboard, and if you do the thumb has to counter press all the more. At its worst, excess finger pressure makes the hand seize up.

Make the hand feel astonishingly soft and easy by practising a passage with too little finger pressure. Then gradually add more until the tone is pure but without the strings touching the fingerboard.

### 4 Fingers moving from the base joints

What this means is that if you hold the left hand in playing position without the violin, and move the fingers as if playing, the hand remains entirely still. What must be avoided is any movement of the fingers from the hand.

The obvious thing to do to fix this is simply to place three fingers on the strings and to silently tap the remaining finger up and down. The held-down fingers prevent you from moving the hand, and you only need to do this with each finger for a few seconds each day to keep a good finger-action.

### 5 Fingers changing shape as they move up and down

During simple up-and-down movements of the finger on one string, the shape of the fingers should basically stay the same whether the finger is on the string or lifted above the string. It is a tell-tale sign of tension in the base joints, and of not moving from the base joints, if the fingers straighten slightly when you lift them (Fig. 3).

### 6 Fingers squeezing together

Again without the instrument, put your left hand into playing position and notice the natural space between the fingers. At the very least there should be light between the fingers. For there to be no space, you have to squeeze the fingers together sideways with a lateral movement, and this is the movement to avoid linking with finger action in playing (Fig. 4).

The first thing to do is just to soften everything in the palm of the hand. 'Soften' is often a more helpful word to use than 'relax', and so is 'widen'. Since every problem of tension is one of contracting or shortening the muscles, the answer always lies in lengthening, widening and expanding. The second thing is to check the exact part of the fingertip that is contacting the string (see no. 7).

### 7 Fingers too high

It is obvious that lifting the fingers too far from the strings is a waste of energy and time. For the most efficient and easy left finger action you should stay as close to the strings as possible most of the time (Fig. 5). It depends on the tempo. In faster playing you must stay close to the strings; in slower playing you can raise the fingers more if you want. But even then you should keep them close anyway if you want to avoid too much percussiveness in the fingers, or if you want to improve intonation.

### 8 Angle of knuckles to neck (fingertip placement)

Look at the line of the left knuckles: the hand will probably not feel comfortable if the knuckles are absolutely parallel to the neck of the violin, but they should not be at too much of an angle to the neck either (Fig. 6).

Fig 5.

Caption:

Keeping fingers close to the string

Fig 6.

Caption:

The hand is at too great an angle to the neck of the violin

Fig 7.

Caption:

The fingers are too parallel to each other

Fig 8.

Caption:

Slight 'V' shape between first and third caused by the fingertip placement.

The determining factor is the exact part of the fingertip that contacts the string. Think of the tip of the finger as divided into three: left, middle and right. If you put two fingers down both on the left side of the finger – say, first finger B on the A string and third-finger D – the fingers will be more parallel to each other and the knuckles will stick up at an angle to the neck (Fig. 7). If you put the first finger down on the left side of the tip, and the third finger down on the right side of the tip, the fingers will form a slight 'V' shape and the knuckles will be more parallel with the neck (Fig. 8).

### **9 Wrist sticking out**

As a basis keep a straight line from the forearm to the back of the hand. At times it may help to soften the left hand if you allow the wrist to give in a little, but pushing out at the wrist usually takes away from any feeling of ease or freedom. (Excepting certain four-string chords which do feel easier if the wrist pushes out a little.)

### **10 Upper arm pulling in**

Keep a good space between the upper arm and the side of the chest. The upper arm should naturally move from more to the left when playing on the E string, to more to the right when playing on the G. This movement might be so slight as to be unnoticeable, but without it the hand may have to compensate to get the fingers down on the string, and again this is an 'inefficient' way to go about reaching the strings.

### **11 Squeezing the violin between the chin and shoulder**

The problem of holding the violin is of course greater the longer your neck. But without going into the shoulder rest/no shoulder rest debate here, the crucial thing is that there is no sense of squeezing the violin between the chin one side, and the shoulder the other – whether or not you use a pad.

Most of the time the natural weight of the head alone is enough, without any need for extra pressure. It is only during descending shifts that a momentary extra contact may be desirable and natural – but this must last no longer than the shift itself. If you squeeze the violin without respite, tension may spread from the neck and shoulders down into the arm, hand and fingers.