
BASICS

Changing position

What is a 'position'

The term 'position' is an abbreviation for 'position of the hand'. The first finger is normally the marker of a position of the hand: on the A string, first-finger B (♭, ♮ or ♯) are all 1st position; first-finger C of any type is 2nd position; first-finger D of any type is 3rd position; and so on.

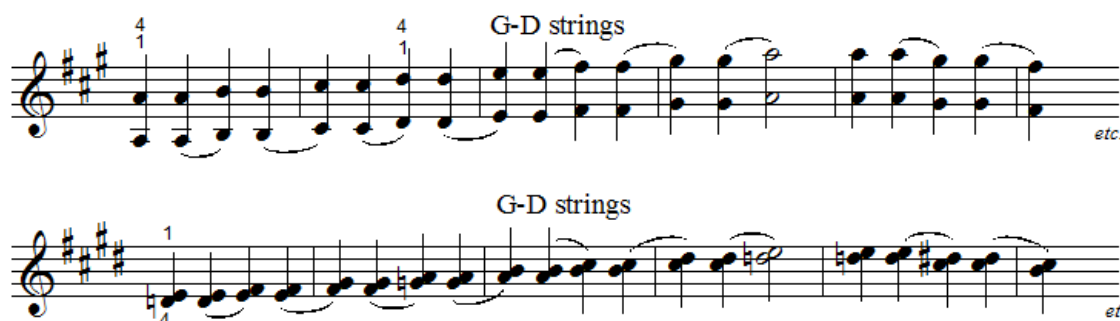
½ position on the A string gives first-finger A♯, second-finger B, third-finger C, fourth-finger D.

The frame

In each position of the hand, think of the fingers as basically covering a perfect-fourth range. Galamian called the perfect fourth between the first and the fourth finger the 'frame' of the hand on the violin.

In 1st position small hands are more likely to have a natural spread that is less than a perfect fourth, while large hands may have one that is wider; and the frame gets smaller the higher up the fingerboard you play; but still the perfect-fourth always serves as a natural reference-point.

- Strengthen the feeling of the frame in each position by practising octaves and major seconds:



Two musical staves for G-D strings. The top staff shows a sequence of notes with fingerings 4 and 1, illustrating octaves. The bottom staff shows a sequence of notes with fingerings 1 and 4, illustrating major seconds. Both staves end with 'etc.'



Fig. 1 Extending the first finger towards the third may weaken the clear feeling of the position



Fig. 2 Keeping the first finger on or above the string maintains the

Good fingerings are often the ones that do not disturb the frame. There is a feeling of 'blocks' of fingers all working within the position, and a clear sense of the position of the hand without too much moving around from note to note or phrase to phrase (wherever possible or musically desirable).

Use extensions sparingly (i.e. reaching a finger higher or lower beyond the range of the normal notes in that position) so that they do not upset this secure feeling of the position. Although extensions are an essential part of left-hand technique, if they are used in the wrong place or too many times in a short space of time, there is a danger of losing sense of what position you are actually playing in, which always leads to all kinds of intonation problems.

Shifting

Thinking of positions as 'positions of the hand' has a direct effect on the way you move from one position to another, since you want to avoid anything that weakens the clear feeling of the frame.

For example, when shifting upwards from third finger in 1st position to first finger in 4th, it may cause a momentary insecurity if, while playing the third finger, you extend the first finger up to a place just behind the third finger (Fig. 1). Instead, keep the first finger on or near the string in its natural position (Fig. 2).

During the shift the first finger may naturally extend forward a small amount before arriving on the E; but this is entirely different from any conscious, deliberate movement.



Musical staff showing a shift from third finger to first finger. The first finger is shown extended upwards from the third finger.

BASICS

Going 'up and over' the shoulder

One of the factors to consider in shifting is the difference between shifts in low, middle and high positions.

In low positions (for example shifting between 1st and 4th position) there is nothing in the way of the hand, and it can move up and down the neck without the elbow having to move left or right to help it get into position.

In high positions (for example shifting between 7th and 9th position), you can move the hand almost from the wrist alone, without needing to move the arm much at all.

But moving from, say, 3rd position to 6th position, the shoulder of the violin or viola is in the way.

The essential thing is not to go 'around' the shoulder, but to go 'up and over' on the thumb.

Otherwise, the left elbow may end up too far in to the centre of the body. The best place for the elbow is always only as far to the right as necessary, i.e. as little as possible.

Here is a traditional exercise which my teacher Yfrah Neaman showed me when I was an undergraduate at the Guildhall School of Music:

On the G string alone

simile

The idea is to feel how to steer the elbow and hand in each area of the fingerboard as you move smoothly and evenly up and down the string.

- Start on the first finger in 1st position with a feeling of the elbow 'hanging' naturally. It will be positioned slightly more to the right of vertical since you are on the G string. (Doing the exercise on the E string, you would start with the elbow more to the left.)
- Gliding up the string notice how, until you get to the place where the neck joins the body of the instrument, you can move the hand without the elbow needing to move to the right whatsoever. Simply move the forearm at the elbow and let the rest take care of itself.
- Then when you get to 4th position continue upwards with a feeling of the hand going up on the thumb, which moves into its new place under the neck at the join with the instrument. As you move up, the elbow must swing slightly to the right, but endeavour not to move it any more than you really have to.
- Having arrived in the upper area of the fingerboard, notice how you can now continue upwards with a feeling of moving the hand alone.
- Descending, everything happens in reverse. The essential thing to avoid is that you leave the elbow behind when gliding back down past the shoulder of the instrument to the lower positions. Getting it stuck is rarely a problem in ascending shifts, but coming down from the top of the fingerboard you can accidentally leave it behind and end up back in 1st position with it sticking out far too much to the right. Instead, as you come down below 5th position, and the thumb goes back on to the side of the neck, allow the elbow to swing back to the left.

Next month's Basics looks at how to use rhythms and accents to master fast passages