BASICS

Leaving fingers down on the string

One of the great secrets of left hand ease and security is the art of keeping fingers down on the string. As a general rule avoid the feeling of 'playing the piano on the violin', i.e. one finger automatically coming up as the next finger goes down. It is true that sometimes left finger action on the violin is similar to keyboard finger action (particularly in the very fastest passages), but the moment you start to keep fingers down as anchors, or when you prepare fingers on the string ahead of playing them, the action on the fingerboard is markedly different from that of playing the piano.

Returning to the same finger

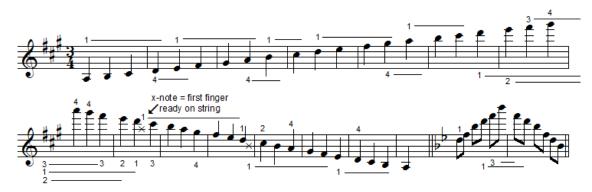
The most obvious time to keep a finger down on the string is when you play from a lower to a higher finger, and then play the same lower finger again (1-2-1, 1-3-1, 1-4-1, 2-3-2, 2-4-2, 3-4-3). Of course in slower passages this may not apply. You would not leave your first finger down in the opening of the Tchaikovsky Concerto, even though you are returning to it after the second note:



But in faster passages keeping fingers down on the string saves energy and makes tuning consistent.

Scales

- One finger to leave down whenever you can is the first finger, which gives a great feeling of stability. Playing a three-octave scale the first finger can stay on the string the whole time, except for the brief moment before it is needed on a new string.
- Ascending, the fourth finger should stay on the string while you cross to the next higher string.
- Hold fingers down at the top of a scale or arpeggio, otherwise you have to find each of the notes again:



Practise holding fingers down even if in the end it might be more natural to let them come off the string a little. Afterwards, when you are playing musically and listening and not thinking about your fingers, they will stay down or lift as a matter of instinct; and anyway the held-down fingers touch the string so lightly that often you will not know whether the finger is actually on the string or not.



BASICS

String crossing

Keeping fingers down on the string is part of the technique of playing from one string to another. It is easiest to see this principle in slurred notes but it does apply equally to separate-bows too. For example, in an arpeggio the finger on the lower string must remain in place until the new finger on the new string is actually played:



Try doing it the 'wrong' way deliberately: lift the third finger at the same time as you place the first finger. Even if you try very hard to play smoothly and evenly, notice how there is no real connection between the notes; and then see how very much smoother and more even it is when you do leave the third finger down.

The importance of keeping the finger on the previous string a little longer becomes obvious when you consider that when the notes in a string-crossing are joined seamlessly, for a brief moment the two separate notes are played together as a double stop. I always love repeating to students the comment of the great Armenian-American teacher Ivan Galamian, who said that this double stop between the two notes should be so brief that you cannot hear when it begins or when it ends. (How can something exist if it has no beginning or end? Yet it is there.)

As usual, the way to practise it lies in exaggeration: play a longer double stop and gradually shorten it:



Apply the practice method to the first bar of this passage from the Brahms D minor sonata and see how incredibly smooth the string crossings are afterwards:

Brahms: Sonata in D minor, op. 108, mov 1, b. 61



You can make this principle into a quick all-combination warm-up exercise:



Add different key signatures, and also play the exercise on the other pairs of strings.