
BASICS

Thirds in double-stops

Fig. 1

Reach back from the upper fingers

The balance of the hand is the first essential thing to consider in the playing of thirds. The most usual reason for difficulty in playing them is if the left hand is arranged to favour the first or second fingers (the lower finger of the two notes of the third), which then forces the upper fingers to have to stretch up to their notes.

Instead you can easily arrange the hand so that there is a feeling of balancing the hand on the upper finger of the interval, with the lower finger reaching back. You can see this reaching-back principle most clearly in playing tenths because they are so extreme.

Fig. 2

Which part of the fingertip?

This technique of reaching back is easy to add to your thirds playing, and the improvement in them will be astounding if previously they have seemed too difficult. The first thing is simply to consider which part of each fingertip contacts the string.

Divide the fingertip into three: left, middle and right (Fig. 1). If you place the upper finger too much on the left side of the fingertip, the angle of the hand will lean backwards. You can see this particularly in the angle of the base joints to the neck. Fig 42 shows the fourth finger more on the left side of the fingertip, and the knuckles are angled steeply to the neck; Fig 3 shows the fourth finger more on the right side of the fingertip and the knuckles are more parallel with the neck.

Fig. 3

While the upper finger is best placed away from the left side of the fingertip, the lower finger should not be placed too far to the right of the tip. Of course the exact placement of the fingers depends on the actual notes and the width of the hand at the knuckles, and the length of the fingers; but wherever possible it is often desirable to have a sort of V shape between the fingers (Fig. 4) rather than for the fingers to be parallel (Fig. 5). Again this depends entirely on the part of the fingertip used by the lower finger (more to the left) and the upper finger (more to the right).

Fig. 4

Start with only the upper finger

The other thing to do to improve this aspect of thirds is to place the fingers separately:

Place the third finger on its own, without the first finger. Balance the hand so that the third finger is naturally curved, relaxed and comfortable.

- Without altering the balance of the hand, or the shape of the third finger, reach back with the first finger and play the major or minor third.
- Still without changing anything else, go back to playing only the third finger without the first finger on the string. Two photos of your hand and third finger, one taken before reaching back with the first finger and the other taken after removing it from the string, should be identical.
- Repeat with the next third: place the fourth finger on its own. Make sure the hand is arranged so that the finger is curved, and sitting on the string more on the centre of the tip or a little to the right of centre.
- Reach back with the second finger without affecting the balance of the hand or the shape of the fourth finger (or affecting it as little as possible).

Fig. 5

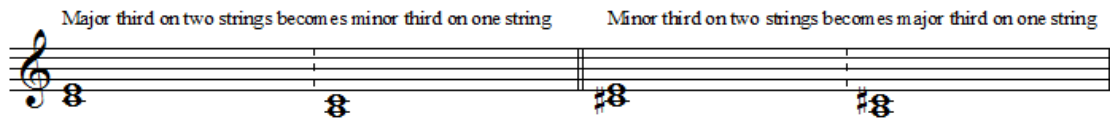
Major = narrow, minor = wide

A confusing factor if you are not used to playing thirds is that although a major third is aurally wider than a minor third, in terms of spacing on the violin the minor third is wide and the major third narrow.

Play third-finger C on the G string with first-finger E on the D string. Together they make a major third; but if you put the first finger on the G string instead, the fingers would be a minor third apart.

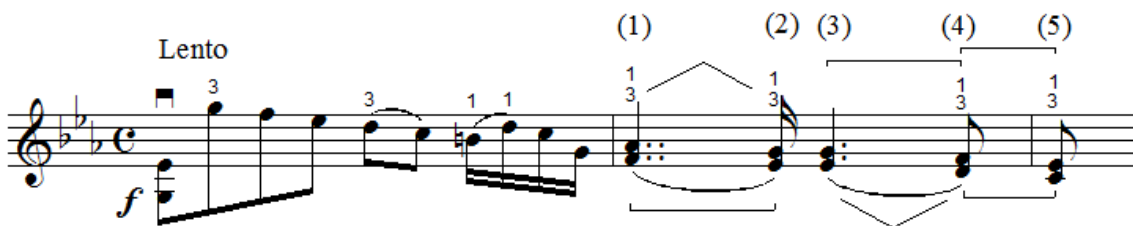
Conversely, if you played third-finger C# on the G string with the first-finger E you would get a minor third; yet if you moved the first finger across to the G string it would be a major third below the third finger.

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All you need to think is ‘small’, or one-and-a-half tones apart, for a major third; and ‘large’, or two tones apart, for a minor. When moving with the same fingers between thirds of different types, it is often helpful to think only of the finger that moves the bigger distance, and let the other finger look after itself.

In this passage from Sarasate’s *Zigeunerweisen* the first thing to do, in the moment just before shifting to (1), is to place the third finger on E on the G string (without playing it), to make a minor third with the first finger playing G on the D string. Then the shift up to the minor third is equidistant. From (1) to (2) the lower finger moves a tone while the upper finger only a semitone. From (3) to (4) it is the other way round, and from (4) to (5) the fingers are equidistant again.



Keep the left fingers light

A common problem in double-stops is that the left fingers over-press because the right hand is allowed to influence the left. The weight of the bow in a double-stop is spread between two strings, just as if you weigh 50 kilos and stand on two weighing machines at the same time, the machines will measure 25 kilos each. Naturally the weight is not spread evenly between the two strings, if only because the strings in a double-stop are different lengths (with the exception of perfect fifths) and therefore require different degrees of weight, not to mention the effect of the different thicknesses of adjacent strings. But still the principle remains that double-stops require much greater bow-pressure than single notes played at the same volume.

But the left fingers do not need to press harder into the strings. Double-, triple- or quadruple stops do not require double, triple or quadruple finger-pressure. Keep the finger just as light as in playing single notes. This is one of the great ‘secrets’ of double-stop playing that makes all the difference, and suddenly tension and lack of mobility (and therefore lack of good intonation) turns into easy facility.

One way to practise this is to start off with too-light fingers, so that the sound is scratchy and distorted. You can do this with a light bow, but it is even better if you emphasise the difference between the hands by playing extra-heavily with the bow (make a really unpleasant noise!).

Feel how light the fingers can be when they are not stopping the strings properly. Then repeat with a quarter finger-pressure, then half, then three-quarters. Each time the double-stops will sound better, until with three-quarters pressure the tone should be pure but the hand and fingers will feel much less effortful.

Play one line at a time

The classic method of practising double-stops is to put both fingers down on the string as normal, but to bow only one string at a time. You can extend the effectiveness of this by using a normal fingering as a model. Imagine if you could have the best player in the world sitting in the corner of your practice room, and whenever you wanted to know how something could be played, this person was always happy to demonstrate. How would that player sound if they stopped both notes but played only one string? You can easily find out by playing the upper or lower line on its own but with an easy, normal fingering (1). So that is how good it could be! Then get the same result but while silently stopping the other line (2). Then repeat the other way round, shown in (3) and (4):



Afterwards, playing both notes together, the tuning and ease of playing will be noticeably improved.