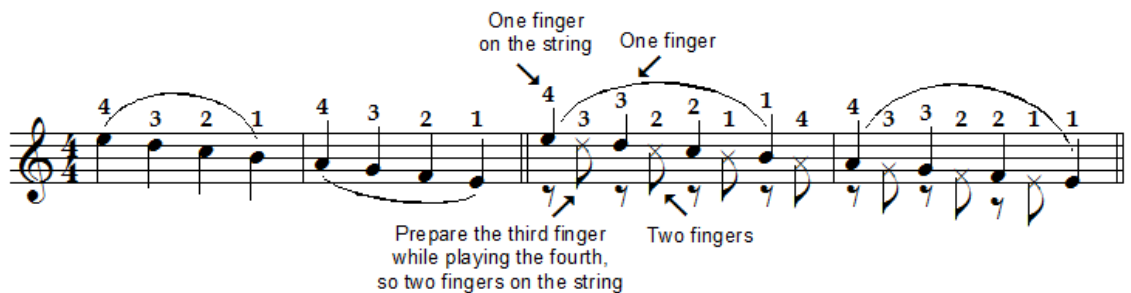

BASICS

Finger preparation

Finger preparation is an extremely important feature of the left hand. In any descending passage each lower finger must be placed on the string before lifting the upper finger; and any new finger on a new string must be placed on its note before the bow plays it.

This is obvious when you think that the string vibrates between the nut (at the scroll-end of the fingerboard) and the bridge; or between the finger (which is a 'moveable nut') and the bridge. The reason an open string rings so well is not 'because it is an open string' but because each end of the string is truly and definitely stopped. When the stopping is made by a finger rather than the nut, the string-length must be established before you can bow it. How can you bow a not-fully-stopped string?

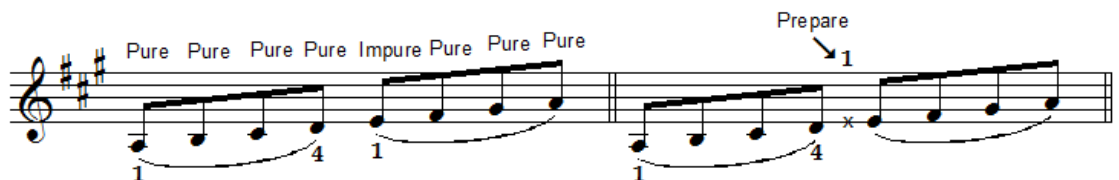
A simple analogy is of climbing down a ladder, where you have to place your foot on the lower rung before putting your weight on to it. For a moment you have two feet on the ladder – one on the upper rung, one on the lower rung – then only one, as you remove your foot from the upper rung and place it on the next lower rung, when again for a moment you have two feet on the ladder. The sequence is 'one foot, two feet, one foot'. The same applies to finger preparation where, in a descending scale (and 'scale' comes from 'scala' which means ladder) the sequence is 'one finger on the string, two fingers, one finger':



There are plenty of excellent teachers, with excellent students, who do not teach finger preparation as such, arguing that if you listen carefully to your sound you will instinctively prepare: while practising, the student hears the slightly raspy sound at the beginning of the note which comes from bowing the incompletely-stopped string, and not liking the impurity they play it again and find how to make the note sound pure without actually knowing what they did to put it right. The argument is that if you listen properly you don't need to know about 'finger preparation'. And what is the correct timing anyway? 'Just in time' is good enough for a pure-sounding note; so if you look at it like that, finger preparation becomes just part of good co-ordination.

The problem with this is that although listening seems like an obvious thing for a musician to do, the fact is that listening is an art that must often be developed – and while the average student is on the way to acquiring good listening they meanwhile have an uncountable number of impurities in their tone as a result of not getting their fingers down in time.

Anyone who sits on scale examination panels becomes all-too-used to hearing the following from even a majority of students (shown in the first bar), and the answer to the problem is shown in the second:



But these are not elementary players. The same student may be also be playing vastly complicated technical pieces, and playing them apparently well. But despite the fact that they can run up and down the fingerboard with ease, if you listen closely you can hear many notes that are not actually pure, and one of the reasons for these constant impurities is simply the lack of good finger preparation.

One of the pieces that post-graduate students often bring is the Mozart D major violin concerto, since this is a typical audition piece for jobs in orchestras. You would think that by the time the student is at this stage, such a simple thing as finger preparation would be automatic and no longer an issue. Yet time after time one hears the following:

BASICS



The problem is that they are placing the second finger F# on the string at the same time as bowing the note, and placing the third finger G at the same time as lifting the fourth finger A. The key point is that there are two types of timing: technical timing and musical timing (Ivan Galamian's terms). Musical timing is when you want the notes to sound, but technical timing is earlier: the finger must be placed before you want to hear it.

Holding fingers down on the string is a close cousin of finger preparation, and in this same Mozart example the first finger A must be held down on the string until after the F# has begun to be played, even though the note will not be played again. It is simply impossible to play a true legato between the two notes if the first finger A lifts off the string before the second finger F# is in place.

Try it for yourself and see: first, try to play a real legato but lift the first finger as you drop the second finger. Then do it again, this time holding the first finger down. The difference is obvious. But since countless advanced students make the elementary of lifting the first finger as they drop the second, the 'listening without knowing what you are doing' approach does seem to be inadequate – unless you are a Yehudi Menuhin or Joseph Hassid.

It is very rare that I am able to give anyone a violin lesson without complaining at some point about their lack of finger preparation or lack of holding down fingers (especially the finger that precedes a string crossing – called 'overlapping'). A typical example is from the Bach Gigue in the D minor Partita:



In this case, if you do not hold the fingers down, so that finger preparation is taken care of, it is like 'playing the piano on the violin'. It is true that in fast, separate-bow passages, or passages of *sautillé*, the finger action is more like playing the piano, but in general the act of holding down fingers, and preparing, is part of the art of the left hand.

Simple finger-preparation exercises, which instil the habit of preparing the fingers into the unconscious, so that even without good soloist-level listening the tone remains pure, is one of the short-cuts that is easy to take. You can practise as in the second bar of Fig. 1, playing very slowly and deliberately whatever the final tempo; or practise systematic exercises which cover going from each finger to each other finger.

Here is a dedicated exercise for preparing the first and fourth fingers in the scale. Add it to your collection of simple, 30-second warming up exercises:

