

# Arpeggio shifting

## No such thing as a shift

No discussion of shifting can take place without first establishing the most important aspect of it, which is that much of the time there should be no such thing as a 'shift'. Things are never so good if you try to do everything with mental control and measurement, playing 'note-note-shift-note' when instead you can forget about shifting entirely and just play 'note-note-note-note'. Then you can let the shift take care of itself. You get it 'for free'. It is remarkable how much more accurate technique suddenly becomes when you eliminate shifting and just listen and play as a musician first and a violinist second, rather than trying to do it the other way round.

Part of the art of forgetting about shifting is in mentally picturing the notes before playing them. You need to 'pre-hear' the notes and phrases, and units of a passage, in advance, and the faster you play the further ahead of your fingers you need to be.

Professional chess players know what will happen as a result of a move before they make it – or at least, they don't move until they think they know. Instead, casual players may have an attitude of 'let's see what happens if I do this' – and may then find out the answer to their horror. Similarly, if your approach to shifting is a conscious one of 'making a shift' instead of letting it happen, and is also one of 'let's see where I end up if I move the finger like this', then shifting may often be a nuisance to have to accomplish.

## Fundamentals

Having said that there is no such thing as a shift, it is nevertheless very helpful to know exactly how things work. Even though in the end a gymnast performs their routine as one, seamless sequence, they have of course studied and rehearsed every detail that makes up the complete movement.

The first thing is to know the distance of the shift. The shift shown in Example 1a is a major third from 3rd finger D to 1st finger F#. This is called an exchange shift because it ascends from a higher finger to a lower finger, and the fingers sort of swap over midway during the journey.

However, the basis of the shift is actually a perfect fifth from 1st finger B to 1st finger F#. A shift is a change of position, which in turn is an abbreviation for 'position of the hand'. The position is measured from the first finger. 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. So here we are going from 1st position of the hand to 5th position of the hand.

Three musical examples on a treble clef staff with a key signature of one sharp (F#). Example (1a) shows a shift from D (3rd finger) to F# (1st finger) labeled 'Major third'. Example (1b) shows a shift from B (1st finger) to F# (1st finger) with an intermediate note G (marked with an 'x') labeled 'Perfect fifth'. Example (1c) shows a shift from B (1st finger) to F# (1st finger) with an intermediate note G (marked with an 'x') labeled 'Substitution'. Fingerings are indicated below the notes.

Example 1b shows the standard way of thinking of it. The perfect fifth is established by introducing an intermediate note between the two notes of the actual shift, shown by an x-note which is barely, if at all, audible. This is the way I was taught to approach such shifts when I was a young student, but later I discovered that there is a further feature to add to it. At the same time as feeling and sensing and pre-hearing the perfect fifth shift from B-F#, you should actually move the hand up on the 3rd finger, not on the 1st. Shift up to an F# with the 3rd and then substitute the 1st for the 3rd (Example 1c).

An arpeggio sequence could then be practised like this:

A musical sequence on a treble clef staff with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 3/4 time signature. It consists of three arpeggiated chords: D major (D-F#-A), E major (E-G#-B), and F# major (F#-A-C#). Fingerings are indicated below the notes, showing shifts between positions. The sequence ends with 'etc.'.

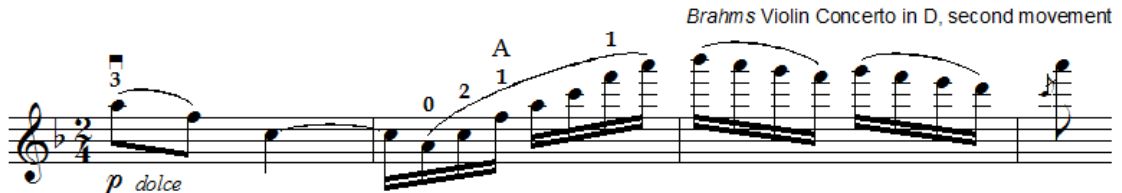
In actual playing, the mechanics of the shift are not exactly like this since the fingers do exchange earlier on in the shift than on the arrival note. But try practising some shifts in this way for only a few minutes and then play the shift again normally. You should notice a big difference in ease and accuracy.

## 'Trill' the shift

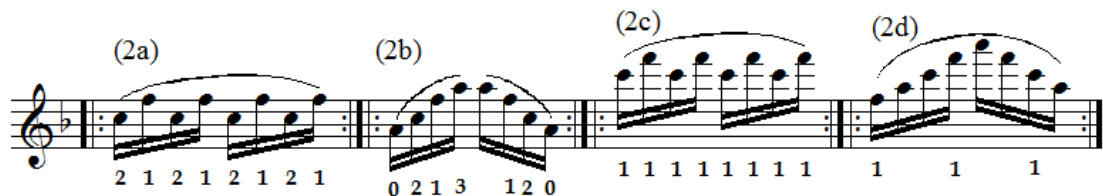
One practice method to get the shift working in such a way that you can forget about it and just play 'note-note' is to go backwards and forwards on the two notes like a trill:



Naturally this practice method can be applied throughout the repertoire:



Example 2a shows 'trilling' the first shift from C to F. Afterwards you could make a loop by adding the note before and after the shift, and go round and round (2b). You can do the same practice with single-finger shifts too. Example 2c shows the C to F 1-1 shift, and 2d shows notes added either side of the shift to make a continuous loop:



## Co-ordination

When co-ordination between the finger and the bow in separate-bow passages is not precise, it is usually because the finger is late stopping the string before the bow begins to move on that note. A great way to practise is to play fast, repeated strokes on each note (Example 3a). Keep the bow strokes absolutely regular without delaying a stroke to give the finger or the shift more time to arrive on its note. The result should sound exactly the same as if you played across the strings without shifting. The finger-action and the shifting has to be done very quickly if the bow is not to make the distorted noise of a half-stopped note on the first of a group of four:



After only a short practise like this the arpeggio (or passage from the repertoire) will feel remarkably easier.

Another way is to practise by doing the opposite of the problem: if the tendency is for the finger to be late by a fraction of a second, try raising or dropping the finger, or arriving at the end of the shift, a fraction too early. This is called over-lapping practice. For the sake of clarity Example 4 uses dotted quavers and semiquavers (dotted eighths and sixteenths) to illustrate the method, but ideally you should play more like quadruple-dotted quavers and 128th-notes. Again, the new feeling of control and ease afterwards is striking.



Next month's BASICS looks at tone production