

Fingered octaves

One approach to fingered octaves is to decide that since they are not required in elementary or intermediate repertoire, it is not necessary for any but the most advanced violinists to develop the ability to play them. However, the whole process of learning how to keep the hand free while playing them, and of placing the fingers on the most suitable part of the fingertip to widen the hand at the base joints, is very good for the left hand in general; fingered octaves make other, lesser tasks seem a trifle by comparison; and although you may not need them now you may need them tomorrow. At the specialist music schools, young children playing fingered octaves is a commonplace.

Keep the hand free

The basic problem of fingered octaves is that they consist of two extensions at the same time: the third and the fourth fingers both have to reach up out of the normal perfect-fourth frame of the hand. The lower finger pulls the upper finger down, and the upper finger pulls the lower finger up. The first reaction many players have is to tighten the hand in anticipation of these extensions. They soon associate fingered octaves with that tension, and forever afterwards suppose that fingered octaves make their hand tight. But it is not the fingered octaves that make your hand go tight, but you who do the tightening.

- Without the violin, hold your left hand in the air in playing position. Allow every muscle in the hand and fingers to let go so that the fingers fall into a natural shape (Fig. 1).
- Move the fingers from there into the position they may be in to play fingered octaves (Fig. 2).
- Wait! Are you clenching the muscles at the same time as widening the space between the fingers? Has your wrist suddenly tightened?

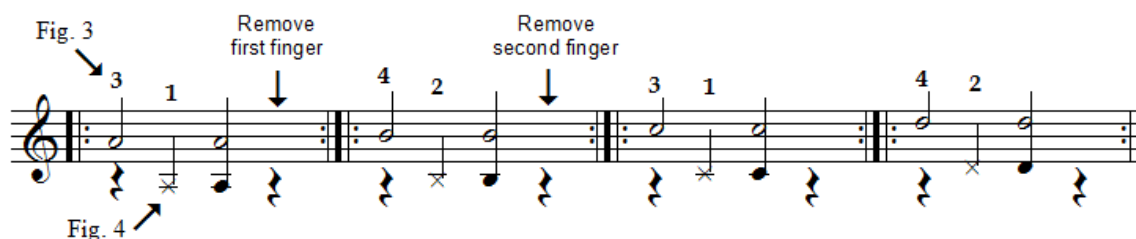
Do you have a mental picture of this feeling in the hand as being an unquestionable part of playing double stops, an automatic by-product of widening the hand in any way? Spreading the fingers is one thing; tightening is another. It is like trying to go in opposite directions at the same time. Find a feeling of letting go, releasing and remaining free as you widen the fingers.

Reach back with the lower fingers

One of the most helpful factors in playing a fingered octave is to set the hand position to favour the upper finger and reach back with the lower finger. It is exactly the same issue when playing thirds. Nearly everyone who has problems in either thirds or fingered octaves tries to do it the other way round: they keep their hand balanced on the lower fingers and vainly try to stretch the third and fourth fingers up to their notes.

It is surprisingly easy to develop the habit of positioning the hand to favour the upper fingers. Practise slowly, in the following sequence:

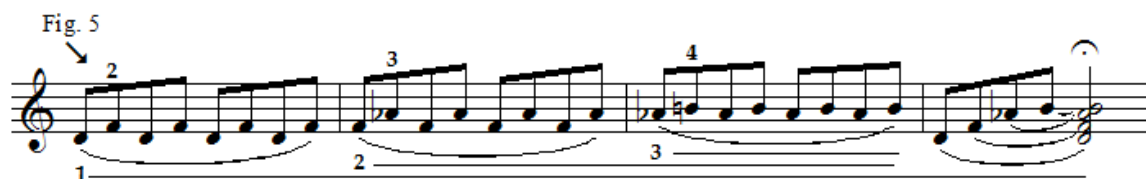
- Place the third finger with the hand positioned to favour it as though this finger is all you are ever going to play. It should be curved, relaxed and comfortable, probably sitting on the string quite upright (Fig 3).
- Then, without allowing the shape of the third finger to change, and without moving the hand, reach back with the first finger, play the octave (Fig 4), release the first and end up back where you started with only the third finger on the string, its shape not having changed throughout the whole sequence.
- Then place the fourth finger on the string with the hand arranged so that the finger is curved and relaxed; reach back with the second finger without changing the shape of the fourth; play the octave; release the second finger; and so on:



The idea of not allowing the shape of the third or fourth fingers to alter, as you reach back with the lower finger, should not be taken too far. Some cannot reach back without it affecting the shape or angle of the upper finger, while for others it is simple to do. Everything depends on your exact physique and inherent flexibility. But what matters is the concept of reaching back. The benefit and improvement offered by the exercise comes from the trying to keep the third and fourth fingers unchanged, while reaching back with the others, rather than what the actual result is.

Practise the elements

Regard the practice of the actual scale or passage of fingered octaves as putting the icing on the cake, and use exercises to make the cake itself. Here is an essential start-up exercise adapted from one by the Polish violinist Zdzislaw Jahnke:



The essential thing is to widen between the base joints; do not contract at the base joints and then stretch up with the extending finger. Look for a V shape between the fingers (Fig. 5). Notice how in Fig. 6 the fingers are parallel – this is to be avoided, and to do so the first thing to consider is which part of the finger contacts the string. For the widest V-shape, and therefore the most widening at the base joints, position the lower finger as far on the left side of the fingertip as possible (looked at from the player's viewpoint), and the upper finger as much on the right side as possible. The fingers become parallel if you position both on the left side.

Repeat the pattern further and further down the string so that the distance between the notes widens:



Gentle, simple exercises increase the range of the hand:

(1) Sul D

(2) Sul D A

(3) Sul D A

- In each bar keep the upper finger as upright as possible, i.e. vertical rather than leaning too much towards the scroll. At times it will lean towards the scroll whatever you do, and this will be natural and 'correct' for you. Simply try to keep it as upright as possible. For the purposes of the exercise, remember to try to position the upper finger as much on the right side of the fingertip as possible, and the lower finger on the left side of the fingertip.
- It does not matter if you cannot stretch far enough for the wider distances. Never force.
- Continually check that you are not over-pressing the strings. Keep the fingers as light as possible, so that a fraction less finger pressure would cause the sound to break.
- Gain the feeling of lightness and freedom by practising the exercises on the back of your hand, with your fingers one side and the thumb the other. Make sure you do not press the thumb or the fingers hard into your left hand. Aim for a 'tickle-light' touch. Afterwards, recapture the same feeling of lightness and ease playing the exercises on the violin.
- Practise the same patterns on each string.