

The Use of Etudes in the Early Development of Position Playing on the Violin

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The idea of playing in different positions on the violin has been in circulation for the last 400 years. In its present shape the fingerboard has approximately twenty five diminishing semitones per string, while the ability to move around the fingerboard remains one of the fundamental techniques in left hand virtuosity. Technical foundations that allow violinists the freedom and ease of shifting need to be systematically developed from the early stages of violin instruction.

The term 'position' is used to describe the area of the fingerboard where the 1st finger on any string corresponds to a particular interval from the open string (i.e. second – 1st position, third – 2nd position, fourth – 3rd position etc.). However, this division is quite approximate as minor, major or augmented interval may still represent the same position.

The knowledge – and introduction of *positions* represents a large and significant challenge in violin pedagogy. When speaking of positions Leopold Auer writes: "Since playing in one position only is so elemental a matter as scarcely to justify the use of the word 'technique' in its more comprehensive sense, a consideration of left-hand technique would of necessity begin with the change of positions"¹.

The earliest description of different positions in literature is found in relation to the viol and is described in Sylvestro di Ganassi's *Regola Rubertina* (1542-43)². Playing in different positions however developed slowly on the violin. Almost a century later Marin Mersenne comments in his *Harmonie Universelle* (1636-7) that "the best players reach an octave above the open strings [...] on all strings"³ indicating that violinists were only accustomed to the use of the first three or four positions on all strings. The use of "all strings" is an important point, since the use of higher positions on the E string developed earlier than on the other strings. During the first half of the eighteenth century the range of the violin extended. Treatises by Leopold Mozart and Francesco Geminiani incorporate the use of seven positions⁴, however, there are instances in virtuoso music (e.g. Locatelli's *L'Arte del violino*) where the range is extended to the fourteenth position.

A change of position is the technical matter of transporting the hand to any place on the fingerboard. In addition, it is an expressive technique providing a musical effect (*portamento*, *glissando*). Coordination between the vertical motion (lifting and placing fingers) and the horizontal motion (movement of the hand along the

¹ Leopold Auer, *Violin Playing as I Teach It* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1921). 85

² David D. Boyden, *The History of Violin Playing, from Its Origins to 1761 and Its Relationship to the Violin and Violin Music* (London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1990; reprint, 2002). 86

³ Ibid. 154

⁴ Ibid. 338

fingerboard) forms the basis of shifting. Carl Flesch wrote that changing positions “forms the most difficult problem of left hand technique”⁵

During the early development of the young violinist various methods have been used to determine the timing when different positions and changes of position can be introduced. The common practice recommends introducing different positions after the left hand has been established in first position. This method means that a young violinist is only exposed to the positions after playing in first position for quite some time. Barinskaya recommends that “preliminary exercises for changes of positions can be introduced in the beginning of the second year of violin study”⁶. Such a late introduction of shifting, however, can lead to excessive pressure on the neck of the violin, difficulty in the smooth mobility of the arm and the application of fingerings from the new position to the notes already learned in the first position. Other methods (i.e. Géza Szilvay’s *Colourstrings*, Yova Yordanova *Primer*) suggest moving the hand (to harmonics or third position) as a preliminary exercise to shifting at a much earlier stage. For example, in Yordanova’s “*Primer for little violinists*”⁷, the second and third fingers are introduced in first and then third positions before the first finger is introduced. This approach has more benefits in freeing up the ‘neck grip’, however it does create other potential issues, primarily with hand shape (leaning against the side of the violin). In *Colourstrings*⁸, the notes are introduced as harmonics, which solves the problem of intonation temporarily, but slows down the development of dropping and lifting finger action.

Either approach to timing the introduction of positions has its own benefits and challenges and is usually chosen at the discretion of the teacher. However, both approaches have many similarities. In the first instance, the position itself has to be established. Then the action of the arm has to be taught, and finally different types of shifts can be discussed. For the introduction of positions, the teacher places the hand of the student in second or third position and the student becomes acquainted with this position.

There are a number of studies and short pieces in one position ranging from the very basic (i.e. 4-8 bars long) to more advanced that include more complex rhythms and bowings. When selecting appropriate etudes, the teacher might like to consider the complexity of rhythm, bowing and the length of the etude. I have observed that it will be easier for a student to sight-read a study or piece in a new position, if it has more scale-like passages with consecutive notes (Ex. 1), rather than wider intervals. In addition, a teacher may change the fingering of an already learned etude, so that it is played with different fingerings in a different position.

⁵ Carl Flesch, *Violin Fingering : Its Theory and Practice*, trans. Boris Schwarz ; foreword by Yehudi Menuhin (London: Barrie & Rockliff, 1966). 51

⁶ Anna Barinskaya, *Early Violin Instruction*, trans. Evgeny Sorkin (Moscow: Muzyka, 2007). 48

⁷ Yova Yordanova, *Primer for Little Violinists* (Moscow: Muzyka, 2009).

⁸ Géza Szilvay, *Violin Abc Colourstrings* (Helsinki: Fennica Gehrman, 2009).

finger playing a note after the shift or the last note. He further describes portamenti as:

- 1) "From the lower to the higher-lying finger;
- 2) With the same finger;
- 3) From the higher to the lower lying finger;"¹⁴
- 4) "'*fantasy portamento*' representing a combination of the *B-* and *L-* portamento."¹⁵

Ivan Galamian describes three fundamental types of shifts:

- 1) "The same finger plays the note preceding and the note following the shift;
- 2) The shift (sliding motion) is performed by the finger that is on the string when the shift starts, but a new finger plays the arrival note¹⁶.
- 3) The shift is performed by the finger that will play the arrival note¹⁷"¹⁸

Galamian also describes other types of shifts such as the "*retarded shift*" as follows: "The finger is first stretched to a new note outside the position in which the hand is resting at the moment and after the stretched finger is placed on the string, the hand follows thereafter into the new position"¹⁹. The *combination shift* starts its slide with one finger (*as in the B portamento*) and finishes with another finger (*as in the L portamento*).

Yankelevich describes four types of shifts:

- (1) The same finger slide; [...]
- (2) The slide from a lower finger to the higher finger when shifting up (and opposite when shifting down); [...]
- (3) The slide on the arriving finger [...and]
- (4) The slide from a higher finger to the lower finger when shifting up (and opposite when shifting down)²⁰.

Yankelevich also mentions that there are other types of shifts including open string shifts, shifts using stretching or contracting fingers and shifts using harmonics and glissandi.

Fortunatov²¹ and Garlitski²² refer to four types of shifts, namely

- (1) The open string shift;

¹⁴ Flesch, *The Art of Violin Playing*. 31

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 34

¹⁶ This is essentially identical to Flesch's B-portamento

¹⁷ This is essentially identical to Flesch's L-portamento

¹⁸ Ivan Galamian, *Principles of Violin Playing & Teaching*, third ed. (Ann Arbor (Michigan): Shar Products Company, 1985). 25

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 25

²⁰ Yuri Yankelevich, *Pedagogic Legacy* (Moscow: Postscriptum, 1993). 76

²¹ Konstantin Fortunatov, ed. *Selected Studies*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Muzyka, 2009). Translated by E. Sorkin

²² M Garlitski, *Step by Step: Primer for Young Violinists* (Moscow: Soviet Composer, 1977). Translated by E. Sorkin

- (2) The same finger shift;
- (3) A shift from a lower finger to a higher finger (when sliding up and reverse when sliding down);
- (4) A shift from a higher finger to a lower finger (when sliding up and reverse when sliding down) or the *substitution shift*.

For greater ease of discussing shifts a summary of the various classifications can be given as follows:

In this paper:	Flesch	Galamian	Yankelevich	Fortunatov/ Garlitski
Same-finger slide	Same finger portamento	Type 1	Type 1	Type 2
B-Slide	<i>B-portamento</i>	Type 2	Type 2	Type 3
L-Slide	<i>L-portamento</i>	Type 3	Type 3	Type 3
Combination Slide	<i>Fantasy portamento</i>	Combination Slide	Not specified	Not specified
Substitution Shift	Not specified	Not specified	Type 4	Type 4
Retarded Shift	Creeping into positions	Retarded shift	Not specified	Not specified
Shift through open string	Open string	Not specified	Not specified	Type 1

In violin instruction, a *shift through an open string* is often explained before other types as it resembles preliminary exercises for shifting (i.e. memorizing the feel of positions²³) and is therefore more familiar to the young violinist.

In this shift special attention should be given to the coordination of the shift with the bow change. The shift to a different position should take place in the middle of playing the open string to avoid unnecessary accents. Furthermore and given the relative simplicity of this shift, there is more opportunity to pay attention to the basics of shifting, in particular:

- (1) The role of the elbow, which will move down when shifting from first to third position;
- (2) The role of the thumb, which slides with the rest of the hand. The placement of the thumb is discussed at length by Galamian²⁴ and Flesch²⁵. However, extra care needs to be taken by the teacher to discuss with the student role of the thumb during shifting.
- (3) The shape of the hand, which should remain the same in first, second and third positions. Making sure that the wrist remains relaxed and in a correct shape²⁶.

²³ Simon Fischer, *Practice : 250 Step-by-Step Practice Methods for the Violin* (London: Edition Peters, 2004). 155

²⁴ Galamian, *Principles of Violin Playing & Teaching*. 17, 18, 22, 24, 25

²⁵ Flesch, *The Art of Violin Playing*. 17, 27

²⁶ Sometimes young students want to lean with the wrist against the side of the violin in third position. Although the contact of the wrist and the side of the violin is permitted, a teacher must ensure that the student is not relying on this contact to arrive in a particular position.

There are a number of short etudes composed for this shift. It is recommended to start with a study where this shift is played with separate bows and in simple rhythms (minims, crotchets, and quavers) due to the ease of coordination of the movement of left hand. Some simpler etudes for this type of shift are more similar to exercises and lack musical content (Ex 3). This type of exercise is an important step in the development of shifting, however it should be used sparingly, to prevent loss of interest in the young violinist. However, there are etudes that combine recurring open-string shift within a musical content. An example of this is A. Komarovsky's Op. 2 No. 26 (Ex. 4).

Ex. 3 M. Garlitski "Step by Step"



Ex. 4 A. Komarovsky Opus 2 No. 26



Further work on open-string shifts will require the introduction of this shift to the second position (Ex.5), in slurs (Ex. 6), in a context of arpeggio (Ex. 7) and in longer studies (F. Wohlfahrt Etudes Opus 45 Nos. 32-35).

Ex. 5 A. Komarovsky Opus 2 No.8



Ex. 6 F. Wohlfahrt Opus 74 No.33



Ex. 7 F. Wohlfahrt Opus 74 No. 30



The *same finger slide* forms the foundation of the *B and L slides* by preparing the fingers to slide lightly on the string. The point of attention for the student would be the relaxation of the sliding finger before the slide (keeping the contact with the string, but not the fingerboard), then the slide itself and finally the arrival in the new position. Galamian also stresses that: "The bow, too has a considerable role to play [...] by moving slower and by diminishing the pressure during the actual change of position it can eliminate a great amount of sliding sound [...] This is a point that should be stressed, especially in the beginning stages of instruction"²⁷. In his *Selected Studies* Fortunatov recommends etudes by Komarovsky (Volume II No.27, Ex. 8, slides between 1st and 3rd positions) and Wohlfahrt (Opus 45 No. 48, Ex. 9, slides between 1st and 2nd positions) as good introductory etudes for this technique. Other etudes for this type of shifting include Wohlfahrt Opus 45 Nos. 39, 41 (the latter combined with the *Open string shift*).

Ex. 8 A. Komarovsky Volume 2 No.27



Ex. 9 F. Wohlfahrt Opus 45 No. 48



While increasing technical complexity, the *B slide* should be introduced next as it builds on the abilities acquired in the previous types of shifts, namely the motion of the hand and the relaxation of the sliding finger. *B-*, *L-* and *Combination slides* can be practiced on the same etude material, however, not at the same time. As *L-* and *Combination slides* are used more in a musical context rather than for the "transportation" of the hand, it is recommended that a young violinist begins learning this group of shifts with a *B slide*. Komarovsky's Volume II No. 28 (Ex. 10) can be a good preliminary study for this slide.

²⁷ Galamian, *Principles of Violin Playing & Teaching*. 27

Ex. 10 A. Komarovsky Volume II No. 28



Galina Turchaninova recommends that the *L slide* finish on a vibrato note²⁸. This seems a valid point, as a quasi-glissando at the end of the slide will sound musically inappropriate unless followed by a note with vibrato. Therefore the ease of vibrato needs to be considered before the introduction of *L-* or *Combination* slide. Komarovsky's study (Volume II No 28) cited earlier has a minim length note as the arrival note of the slide. Accordingly there is the flexibility to use this study with vibrato and *B-*, *L-* and *combination* slides.

The *substitution shift* is executed by substituting fingers on the same note, as well as constituting a type of shift needed in a scale. The use of this shift in a scale signifies the importance of freedom and precision in executing this shift. The focus of attention in etudes using these shifts should thus be on the new finger getting prepared and on "pushing" the previous finger out of its place. Gnesina's etude (Volume II No. 2, Ex. 11) can be an example of a good elementary study for such a *substitution shift* (1st to 3rd positions).

Ex. 11 E. Gnesina etude (Volume II No. 2)



There are a number of exercises written for the *retarded shift*, however only a few are appropriate for young violinists. A number of simple etudes and duos containing the *retarded shift* can be found in the '*Violinschule von Ries-Sitt*'²⁹ (1873). Hubert Ries also employs the same *Retarded shift* idea as a primary means to shifting in his Etude No. 6 from "12 Studies for the Violin" (Ex. 13)

Ex. 12 H. Ries, H. Sitt Violin School (Vol. 2 No. 206)



²⁸ Galina Turchaninova, "Teaching the Violin Basics.," (Lecture, Teacher Development Lecture Series, Moscow 1996).

²⁹ Hubert Ries and Hans Sitt, *Violinschule Von Ries-Sitt* (Leipzig: F. Hofmeister, 1915).

Ex. 13 Hubert Ries Etude No. 6 from "12 Studies for the Violin"



Etudes using combinations of different types of shifts

Once the different types of shifts have been explained and the student feels comfortable with them, etudes combining various types of shifts can be introduced. This greatly helps the student to start applying their knowledge in choosing the appropriate type of shift. I have observed in my teaching practice that following an initial introduction of different positions and the movement of the arm between the first three positions, the *shift through the open string*, the *same-finger slide*, the *b-slide* and the *substitution shift* can be introduced closely together.

After the first three types of slides are introduced Wohlfahrt's etude Opus 45 No. 47 (Ex. 14) represents an excellent example of a study containing a combination of these slides. Wohlfahrt's etude Opus 45 No. 58 (Ex. 15) is a good study combining the *Substitution shift* with other types.

Ex. 14 F. Wohlfahrt Opus 45 No. 47



Ex. 15 F. Wohlfahrt Opus 45 No. 58



A successful preparation of the last two etudes completes the introductory stage of learning about the position playing and shifting in the early development of a young violinist. It opens up the possibilities of freely playing in the first three positions. At this point all the Wohlfahrt etudes Opus 45 as well as Kayser's Opus 20 become accessible. The further choice of etudes can be determined by the combination of skills that are needed to be developed at that moment.

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