

# *The Fingers Preparation.*

## *A passage cooking guide.*

This article is my first attempt to write something essential on basic string instrument technique, and specifically on finger preparation. There are a lot of articles covering that topic, but I wanted to add a few ideas, which I accumulated through years of studying, practicing, and performing. This work would not be possible without years I spent as a student with my professors and colleagues. Lots of thanks to Pr. Yuri Gandelsman, who gave me many important insights on left hand mechanics. As an educator and a teacher myself, I have found that some principles of finger preparation need to be repeated over and over again to my students. This article might be a helpful source for them as a reminder of those principles.

### ***Introduction***

The finger preparation is essential on string instruments. Because of simple physical properties of the strings, if the timing is wrong and the finger is not pressing the string when the bow starts its movement on the string, the vibration of the string will be disturbed, and consequently it will affect the articulation and the quality of sound, first of all. In legato, we can hear poor finger preparation when the phrase is disturbed by noisy changes between the pitches, slight rhythmical imperfections, and overall sloppiness. There are just few conditions, when the finger preparation is possible:

1. When we change the pitch by going from higher finger to lower finger on one string.
2. When we change the pitch by changing the string and the next note is played by different finger.
3. When two consecutive (or not) notes are fifth apart, so we place the finger on both strings.
4. When playing chords, or any technique that could be presented as a chord, as, for example, bariolage. We do not have much time between chords, so we try to change all the fingers in the most effective way to connect chords smoothly.

Point 3 and 4 seems to be of the same nature, as we prepare fingers in advance by placing them on different string simultaneously. As I have found, we should use that principle for first 2 points as well, when it is appropriate. That was actually the most important phrase of the whole article and now we are going to look closer what it means, using examples and exercises.

### ***Principles of finger preparation.***

String instruments are probably the hardest to master, as they have such an extremely wide variety of techniques in terms of sound producing. Color or timbre, dynamic or articulation, stroke... any musical idea needs an adjustment of how the instrument played in terms of mechanics. One of the skills that can make your life easier is a skill of finger preparation. Simply put, your next note should be ready before you finish previous one. That is possible in 4 situations described earlier. Now, let's look closer what exactly we can do in terms of mechanics and finger movements.

One of the most important skills in playing string instrument is to be comfortable. It means that for successful career as a professional violinist you need to achieve that level of comfort, where playing something challenging and demanding will be easy for you. I remember when as a student I performed Bach's Chaconne on viola at the concert, and after slightly more than 12 minutes of playing I realized that my right hand was numb because of tension and overworking. My left hand was very tense as well almost through the whole piece. That should not happen, our first goal when we practice is to achieve the level of comfort and easiness of a performance, at least on physical level. To be more relaxed, we also need to remember that the tension in one hand affect the other, or it can come from other parts of

the body as we play, for example from the shoulders and the back. Sometimes the tension and overworking is purely psychological, when we work harder than we need in passages that just needed more careful and thoughtful practice time.

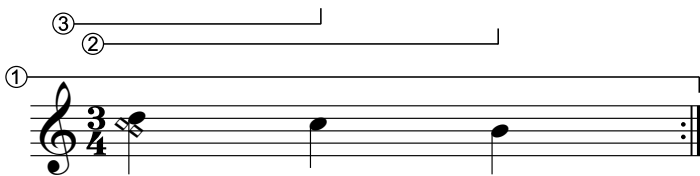
The first step on a way to be relaxed is to understand what exactly we are doing when we play the instrument, what are the muscles that work and how to be as effective as possible with out movements. Finger preparation is just one of the many skills that can help us with that. I see many student, especially beginners, who have their finger movements connected to the right hand movements, when the bow change is a signal for a left hand to change a note, or vice versa. We should start separating our hands as early as possible to be able to learn music faster and to play more accurate. There are only two types of mechanical motion for finger preparation in terms of timing:

1. Preparing next finger in between the notes
2. Preparing next finger together with the previous finger.

When the first point is covered more often in string literature, the second point does not get enough attention, in my opinion. I believe that in many cases, placing two fingers on the string simultaneously will be beneficial in few ways. First of all, it will save finger movements, which is especially important for combinations of 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> fingers, that are not always willing to work separately. Second, it will help to maintain more relaxed hand posture. Third, it creates more stable hand frame and may improve intonation.

Lets look closer to some simple solutions in finger preparation.

Example 1:



Numbered brackets show approximate timing for each finger. For that three-note motive, the most effective way in terms of finger mechanics would be to follow:

1. First finger is on the string before we place 3<sup>rd</sup> finger. Especially for beginners it is important to emphasize that we prepare 1<sup>st</sup> finger before, then we prepare 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>. It will help to develop hand frame faster, and the student will 'feel' the physical distance between the pitches better. Together with listening, it is a great way to learn correct intonation. (in the beginning, it is a good idea to play the B, or even to play an open A, then B with the first finger, then D with 3<sup>rd</sup> finger, just to be sure we get the perfect intonation right away)

2. 3<sup>rd</sup> finger prepared before we start playing, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> finger drops almost together with the 3<sup>rd</sup>, in a relaxed way. It doesn't need to press the string with the full weight yet. As the 1<sup>st</sup> finger on the string already, there is no need for the 3<sup>rd</sup> finger to press too hard, as the string is already closer to the fingerboard.

3. Now we start playing first note. Student should pay attention to the beginning of the note, as we did everything possible in the left hand to make it perfect, now it is the right hand's turn. We are not going to discuss that here, though. During the first note, we start adding weight to 2<sup>nd</sup> finger as it is the next one.

4. Thus, when we need to play C, the only movement we need to do with our 3<sup>rd</sup> finger is to take it off. Taking off the finger should be an active movement, and not just removing the weight. There is a comparison I have used in lessons, that proved to be helpful for students. For example, student can imagine that the finger was glued to the fingerboard, so taking off cannot happen slowly, but as a fast

release.

5. Same thing happens again when we need to play the last note with the active release of the second finger.

This little exercise must be played few times, and repeated in different *tempo*. Of course, when repeated, the 1<sup>st</sup> finger stays on the string at all times. By practicing this way, we reduce the unnecessary finger movements, we can improve finger independence, and we can work on relaxed left hand as well.

Here is a little example of exercises that we can practice with different combinations:

The image displays four musical staves. The first three staves are in 3/4 time. Each starts with a single eighth note, followed by a double bar line and repeat sign. The second measure contains a triplet of eighth notes, also followed by a double bar line and repeat sign. The third measure contains a continuous run of sixteenth notes. The fourth staff is in 2/4 time and consists of a single line of eighth notes with various accidentals (sharps, naturals, flats) and a double bar line at the end.

Of course, there are many other combinations possible. For example adding a string-crossing, which gives a whole new option of finger patterns and the ways we can anticipate next note and combine finger movements to achieve the most effective mechanics in the left hand.

It is very important to encourage the student to practice his or her music in slower tempo, to find spots when preparing next note is possible and it would give better results in faster tempo. If student will make that kind of thinking a habit, it will reduce dramatically amount of time spent in class on simple mistakes, and it will help student to learn new music faster and forget it slower, as there will be connection forming between the sounds, the notes on the page, and the physical movement of the finger.

## ***Finger preparation exercise on example of Kreutzer Etude no.2.***

Now I will treat Kreutzer's etude no.2 as an exercise for finger preparation. We should play it very slow, so we have time to think ahead and control finger movements easier. First few measures I tried to provide as many details as possible, and after that the principle stays the same – prepare the next note when it is possible, using the patterns from previous measures. If followed precisely with numbered brackets, this exercise can illustrate many occasions when fingers should not be synchronised with the right hand and change of the pitch, when two fingers can be placed together; and how fingers connect pitches to each other inside of melodic line. The right end of the bracket shows the exact moment when we should take off the finger.



The image shows a musical score for guitar in treble clef, spanning measures 21 to 25. Measure 21 begins with a double asterisk (\*\*) and a bracket for the first finger. Measure 23 features complex fingering diagrams with numbers 1, 2, 3, and 4. Measure 25 concludes with a double bar line.

\* When the bracket ends down, the finger should be placed on both strings. In this case G and C with second finger can be placed together much earlier, but only as an exercise. When playing that etude, I prefer to place G and C together only on the last 16<sup>th</sup> note of the second quarter. Placing fingers together on 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> quarter is also an extreme solution just for practice purpose. When performing, fingers should be changing between the notes.

\*\* This is an exemption in our exercise. 1<sup>st</sup> finger cannot be prepared here. We can play that B with the 2<sup>nd</sup> finger, but then it will be too far to reach the octave with the 4<sup>th</sup> finger thus it will not be prepared.

## *Conclusion*

Practicing this etude in described way is not simple, especially for those students, who already got a habit of left and right hand synchronisation in separate strokes, or for beginners. If student practices thinking about finger preparation earlier, in the beginning of his education, he/she will be able to show a better progress later. Finger preparation seems to be not so important in the beginning, when the repertoire is easy; but as soon as the student gets more challenging piece, the struggle becomes real. In teaching beginners, I think it is very important to anticipate problems by addressing advanced technique such as finger preparation as early as possible.

Working with younger students, I try to find the visual expression of the idea. When we speak about finger preparation, I often mention spider monkeys. Those funny creatures move in an amazing way, when their tail acts as an extra limb, and all the limbs are moving simultaneously, aiming for each next movement, but very gracious and relaxed. Same way our left hand needs to feel. Aiming for the next note before we end the previous one, stretch and adjust its shape when it is necessary to reach an uncomfortable note, change the shape slightly when moving through different strings and positions.

By practicing challenging passages in a way described earlier, student might be able to learn it faster and more effectively, to become more comfortable and relaxed, and to learn a useful skill of finding small but very helpful solutions to make their playing better. It is also important to remember that comfortable and relaxed not necessarily means weak, remember to keep fingers active, fast on placement and also when taking them off the fingerboard.