

Instalment 1

Most of the musical examples in the series will have this pretty usual form:

Example 1

Sometimes I write a metronome mark to remind you to play slowly!

M.M. ♩ = 56

Normal Arabic numerals like these indicate fingers

Keith David Harris

A number in a circle indicates a string, in this case the 3rd string, D.

Please try Example 1, really slowly(!), with single down-strokes, and stopping the notes with the fingers I indicate.

It's not particularly difficult or profound, but please try to make it sound nice anyway.

Now try the following:

Stop the note F-sharp with the 3rd finger instead of the (perhaps) customary 2nd finger.

Example 2

Please play the note a few times, beautifully and slowly. Take your finger off the string and put it back a few times, and see if you notice any differences in the feeling.

And how does it feel?

Weird perhaps? Even *wrong*? Or just normal?

(I know people who feel almost nauseous when they do something like this in a completely unaccustomed way. On the other hand, I know lots of people – my pupils among others – to whom it's as normal to use any one of the four fingers of the stopping hand as any other, for any given single note.)

Please try the same note now with the 1st finger, and compare the result. Does it sound good? Is it easy? Slowly – easy does it!

Example 3

And then with the 4th finger – the pinky...

Example 4

Of course this should be in every way as good as with the other fingers. If it's not, please see if you can figure out why, but please don't do anything violent to make it work! We can explore the matter further at a more appropriate time.

(I am utterly convinced that many mandolin players develop their technical habits in a way that disadvantages their 4th finger – all their fingers in fact, but that's a long story...)

And finally, once again the notes we played at the beginning, but this time with a different *fingering*. Please observe the fingers indicated carefully, and make sure that your habits don't take over and make you move a finger you really didn't intend to!

Example 5

Play slowly and beautifully!

M.M. ♩ = 56

When you feel you are really in control of what is going on, try example 1 again, and compare the *feeling* (and of course the musical result!) when you use different fingers.

Instalment 1 (continued)A few extra considerations:

1. Before you begin to play, stop *all three* notes. So when you strike the note G, you will have be stopping the notes F-sharp and E *as well*.
2. When you change to the second note, F-sharp, you do not need to put the finger on the note – because it is already there! Instead, you take the G-finger off the string.
3. The 1st finger likewise is already stopping the note E, so to play this note, you simply remove the F-sharp finger.

4. When you play F-sharp again, make sure that the E-finger stays in place, and by the time you play the last note, G, all three fingers are once again in the stopping position.

Of course there should be no break in the sound between the notes.

That's enough for the beginning.

Please go through our little exploration again. I'm sure you will become conscious of different things each time you do. Next time you pick up the mandolin, take a few minutes, and just play the notes a few times – with the different fingerings – and notice the sensations.

More next time!

Which one to use?A series (not just) about fingering on the mandolin by Keith HarrisInstalment 2

In the first instalment, I tried among other things to point out that there is often more than one possible *fingering scheme* for a musical passage. This is not really surprising, to people who know that there is (at least often) more than one way to skin a cat. Some of the ways may be better than others however, and nicer for the cat too.

This time, I'd like to pursue the same principle – trying different ways while sparing the cat – but exploring a different area. This is an area which some people are less familiar with, and which some even regard as difficult. It's not – if you do it the right way.

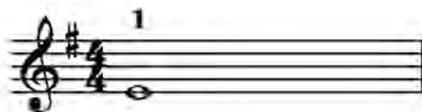
The subject is going to be: stopping (*fingering*, if you prefer that word) strings not by using fingers which are next to each other when the hand is stationary, but by moving the whole hand along the fingerboard.

Like lots of things, what may appear to be a single activity involves a *process*, a number of activities, some of which are carried out simultaneously. We are going to explore the process by breaking it down into parts, smaller units, which are easier to cope with. When each element is secure, we can put them back together to carry out the whole activity.

Let's try the different elements involved. They may look easy and obvious, but let's make sure of them anyway.

Please stop the note E at the 2nd fret on the D string (*e'* – “one-line E” to use the Helmholtz system to give it a more precise name) carefully with the 1st finger. When you feel confident that you have prepared everything properly, play the note with a single stroke – beautifully! – and see how long it rings for.

Example 1



Now, keep the 1st finger pressed on the string, make a single stroke and straight away, while the string is still sounding, *slide* the finger – slowly – until it reaches the 5th fret, the note G.

Example 2



Please do this a few times. Take your time. Keep the finger pressed down with **constant pressure** while you slide; it should maintain a snug contact with the fingerboard. Slide it slowly, and see if you can hear all the sounds in between – a sliding sound (a *glissando*) – as it moves.

Practise this for a little while – slowly and reflectively, observing as much as you can.

Now try the *gliss.* (abbreviation of *glissando*) in the other direction, from G downwards to E (*g'* to *e'*, to be more precise).

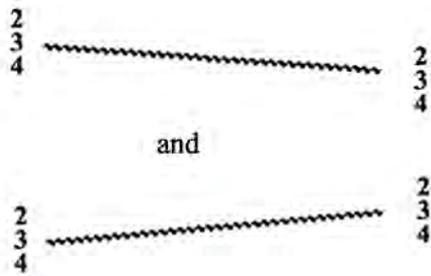
Example 3



Instalment 2 (continued)

For a bit of variety, try the *change of position* (as it's often called, although the term is not as straightforward as many people think...) slowly, meditatively, in both directions – using each of the other fingers:

Example 4



Take your time! Is the result different with the different fingers? (It shouldn't be...)

An important detail:

If you can, have a little bit of distance between the fingers. If this is difficult at first, don't get upset about it, but keep this objective in mind whenever you try Example 4.

This friend from Brisbane knows how to do it...

(Note also the straight line made by the back of the hand and the first segment of the fingers. Ah! She's a good student!)



Do you remember the final exercise in Instalment 1? Please play it – *slowly* – again a few times, before you continue with our current exploration.

In this instalment it's numbered as

Example 5



It may well seem really easy, but please humour me, and do it another few times anyway...and think of the photo above!

And then do it yet again, but this time wait on the second note in the second measure, F sharp, and just see how long you can keep this note ringing:

Example 6



An explanation:

What we are going to do next is a little like adding a ready-made building block to another one, which is already in position.

The building block (X) that is already in position is Example 6, which we have just practised; the "ready-made building block" (Y), which we add on, is Example 2, which we practised thoroughly before.

Instalment 2 (continued)

When you try Example 7 – putting the building blocks together – please concentrate on two things in particular:

- I. Wait for a while on the F sharp as indicated by the pause sign ☹, and use the time to get your bearings, and then
- II. join the E, the first note of Example 2, on **very smoothly, with utterly no break in the sound.**

Our building blocks so far will look like this:

Example 7

Block X Block Y

S-l-i-d-e slowly!

f

Just let this note ring for as long as you can...

and while it is still sounding, join this one on smoothly! Then s-l-i-d-e...

Please try this for a few minutes, and see how good you can get at it.

- Do you remember to join E on to F sharp with no interruption?
- Do you hear a continuous sliding sound between E and G?

Something to think about:

Until now, we have deliberately made the slide slow and drawn out. Hopefully you've begun to feel comfortable with it, and are pretty sure that your finger will find the upper note, the G, safely.

Please try the slide again now, at first slowly, but then increasing the speed bit by bit.

Example 8

S-l-i-d-e slowly!

a little quicker...

and even quicker...

Think about

- the nice space between the 1st and 2nd fingers in the photo above, and try
- to lead with the (pinkie-side) edge of your hand, which *drags* the finger along.

It really isn't very far, and with a bit of experience, you can probably do it in what amounts to **no time** (a concept I develop at length in my book *The Mandolin Game*², if you want to go into the subject more...).

Just to make sure you're doing the right thing:

When you feel you can make the change in no perceptible time, try counting slowly to **four** when you play E, and then play G, exactly when you come to **one** again. The slide is now executed not *before*, but exactly *on* the count of **one**.

Example 9

Wait..... until here!

one two three four one

Count slowly and evenly, then play G exactly on the count.

We've almost reached our goal...

Try

Example 10

Leave the 1st finger on E for the whole duration of F#,

one two three four one two three four one

..... count slowly and evenly, then finger G, with the 1st finger, exactly on "one".

At the very instant when you have been joining E on to F sharp, you change position, so that the note you strike is not E but G.

Note:

In Example 10, it's the 1st finger that does the shifting – from E to G – in **no time**, but you don't hear E: after F sharp you hear G, just as with the fingering in Example 5.

When it's done correctly, there is no break of any sort between F sharp and G.

So at last

Example 11

At the risk of labouring the point:

Please take care that the change from F sharp to G sounds exactly the same, whether you stop the notes with the fingers 3 – 4 or with 3 – 1. The “change of position” is easy, safe and extremely useful. More about this in later instalments.

Here is another example so you can gain more fluency:

Example 12

A tip:

If you find that your thumb presses on the back of neck, creating friction which hampers you when you slide, you're not the only one. The truth is that you should remove the thumb from the neck, or at least relax it, just before you make the slide. Sound easy? It is of course, but only if you do it the right way. Some people just seem to do it intuitively, the same as there are individuals who just “know” how to use a baseball bat. Most of us need a bit more information though. The subject is treated in detail in Game G of [The Mandolin Game](#).

(Editor's Note: Readers of Plucked Strings should be grateful to to Keith Harris for providing these extremely helpful lessons which we can practice at our leisure to improve our technique as plucked string players. I look forward to future instalments.)

Another Obituary!

Takashi and Silvia Ochi occupy a unique place in the history of the mandolin in the 20th century. Particularly through their work with the Saarland Plucked String Orchestra and the Deutsches Zupforchester, both directed by the legendary German guitarist Siegfried Behrend, and also a number of recordings with the Jean-François Paillard Chamber Orchestra, they pointed the way to new and courageous possibilities for the instrument. Through their contribution, the mandolin became regarded as an instrument capable of producing sounds which meet the expectations of serious and discriminating music lovers.

Takashi Ochi, ably partnered – on stage and privately – by his German wife, was personally a sensitive and subtle musician, a highly gifted and modest man who embodied the best characteristics of a Japanese gentleman, living in Germany and

becoming a citizen of the world. He was an enormously popular teacher. The currently high state of development of the mandolin in Germany – widely played, taught at several music universities and with numerous virtuoso performers taking part self-confidently in normal concert life – owes very much to Tadashi Ochi.

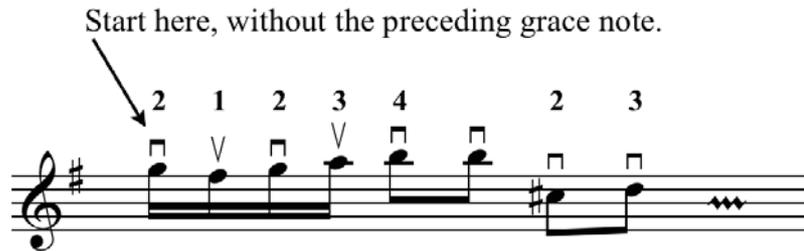
Takashi Ochi, born in 1934 in Imabari, passed away in the early hours November 16th, 2010, at his home in Heppenheim. He will be sadly missed by his wife and family, and also by many friends and admirers all over the world.

Keith Harris Marburg.

My Scottish friend had originally asked about the treatment of the *grace note*, the little note at the beginning of the phrase – *acciaccatura* (“*crushed note*”) is the more academic term. When I asked him to leave out that note though, he was able to focus his attention on other things, and quickly became aware that there were more problems than he had previously noticed.

Try it yourself without the little note a few times – slowly! – and observe carefully what goes on:

Fig. 3



Remark:

- Temporarily omitting something that seems difficult frees your attention for other things.

In fact, even without the perceived problem, about the only aspect that worked as my friend wanted it to – most of the time at least – was the first three semiquavers.

Apart from this aspect:

1. the A was often a little unclear, even out of tune, and the 3rd finger felt a bit awkward;
2. it was hard to get the 4th finger to stop (*finger/fret*) the note B cleanly and in tune; my friend didn't like this fact, but it didn't really surprise him, as he was accustomed to regard the pinkie as “weak” anyway;
3. the C# was oddly unreliable, and this *did* surprise him;
4. and this was only the left hand, without considering the question of whether the stroking (plectrum hand) was consistent and reliable!

How good are *your* results in each of these areas?

Comment:

- Things often get better if you repeat them a few times, and concentrate on “getting it right”. In the best sense, this is what practice is all about. Things sometimes improve just by dint of effort and hard work though, even if the means applied are not very efficient. The cost of this inefficiency – doing something “the wrong way” can be very high in terms of physical strain and unsatisfactory progress. A surprising number of people seem to follow the motto: “Why do it the easy way if there is a hard way?” Mandolin players do this an awful lot!

I suggested to my friend that there were sensible ways of approaching each of the difficulties. He trusted me enough to put his inefficient habits aside and try my suggestions long enough for them to work. This required very much trust however, as he needed to consider a number of apparently irrelevant details before he could put them together into the “big picture”.

If you trust me too, please try the following suggestions. I generally won't even attempt to explain why certain things in the standard approach don't work very well: that would take too long. Believe me though, there are very clear explanations.

We explored an applicable technique in Instalment 2 in the last issue of this magazine. You will get a lot more out of the current article if you review Instalment 2 first. When you've done that, please try some preliminary exercises:

Exercise 1:

Make sure that the 1st finger keeps stopping F# while you play the note G.
The 1st finger stays put while the 2nd finger rises and falls (stops and "unstops").



Please play *very* slowly.

Exercise 2:

1. Stop the note F# with correct pressure.
2. Maintain this pressure, and slide the finger along the string between F# and A.
3. Make a stroke when you reach each note.
4. Slide very slowly at first, consciously producing a sliding sound (*glissando*).
5. When you feel confident about reaching the notes accurately, slide more quickly until no slide can be heard.

Careful though! The *notes* should be slow and long; the *slide* is quick.

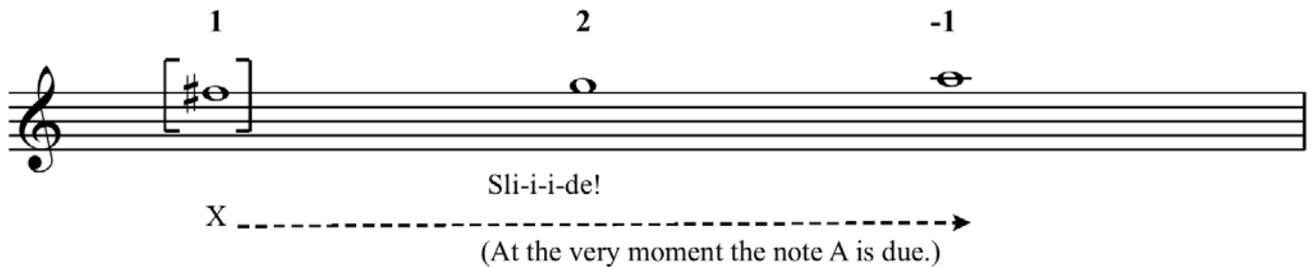


Exercise 3:

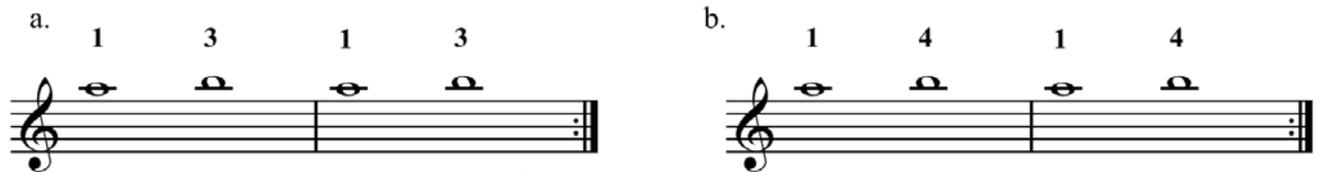
Make sure that the 1st finger keeps stopping F#

while you play the note G.

You ultimately stop (fret) the note A by sliding the 1st finger along the string from F# to A.



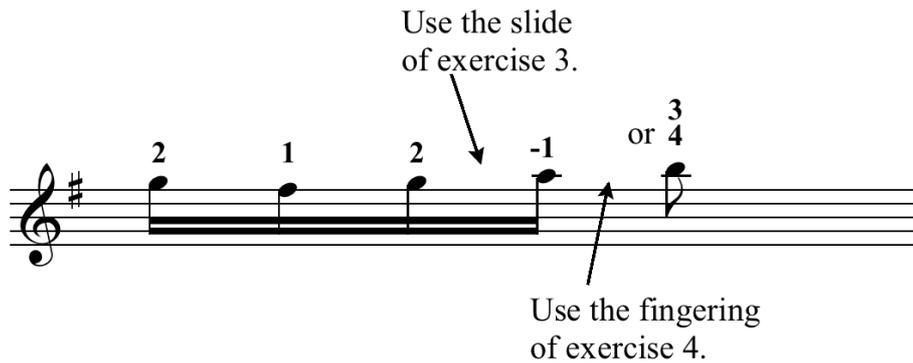
Exercise 4:



The 1st finger keeps stopping; the other finger moves.

Please practise both with 1 – 3 and 1 – 4. Possibly both finger combinations are a little unusual for you. Try our musical example now (*without* the grace note), using the principles in these exercises:

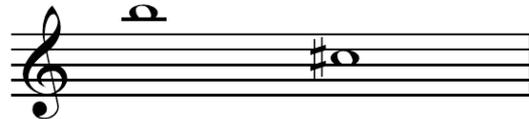
Fig. 4

A non-standard (but really good!) fingering solution:

Please practise these five notes very slowly and very often. Use alternate down and up strokes, even at the slow tempo, and try to make the 2 – 1 slide completely smooth.

I'd like to break my resolution once only, and explain the reason for something.

The very next two notes in our example are: **Fig. 5**



Of course there are very many possible ways to finger these notes, but I'd like to ask you to consider just three of them:

Fig. 6



Example a is the traditional violin-type solution, the one my Scottish friend first thought of. Apart though from the question of whether the higher note, B, is clean (*if it's not clean, by the way, the reason is not that the pinkie is "weak"!*), the C# itself turned out oddly to be difficult or unreliable. Perhaps one reason is that with the traditional fingering, the 2nd finger has very recently played a note at the 3rd fret (G), and it would need to reorient to stop a note at the 4th fret – and on a different string! This adds up to an uncomfortable amount of hidden multi-tasking, and is asking for trouble...

Examples b and c both assume the above "non-standard" fingering.

Example b is the logical continuation of the fingering in Exercise 4a. This is very comfortable for the 3rd finger, but playing C# does require stretching the 1st finger back somewhat from where it just was (playing the note A). This is usually not hard, especially if the 3rd finger continues stopping (as it should!) until just after the C# has been sounded. This helps both with orientation and leverage.

Example c is of course the most comfortable solution. After the slight *squashing* (an *underextension*) required to put the pinkie on B at all, the hand naturally expands backwards somewhat (if you let it...), making C# a comfortable fret for the 1st finger. And even though the following note – D with the 2nd finger – may not seem worth a second thought, it also works best if preceded by 4 – 1 rather than 3 – 1.3.

But what about the grace note at the beginning of the bar, which after all was where the whole discussion began? Sorry! We're out of space, so it will unfortunately have to wait till the next issue.

Which one to use?A series about stopping – and starting again at the right moment – on the mandolinInstalment 4 by Keth Harris

The story so far...

During a video lesson recently, a friend in Glasgow (he was in Glasgow, I was in Germany...) asked me a few things about measure 3 (see Figure 1) of the mandolin concerto by Johann Adolf Hasse (1699 – 1783).

Fig. 1



In Instalment 3 (in March 2011 edition of Plucked Strings), we examined several aspects of this extract but omitting the grace note for the time being. We ended up with this solution (the fingering is mine):

Fig. 2



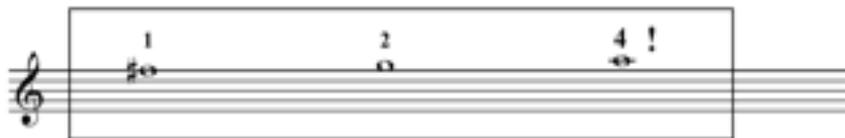
Our main subject this time is the grace note we deliberately left out then.

I could start the discussion by describing how the grace note should sound. I prefer to leave this till later, however, and instead to invite you go through some physical sequences (*exercises*, if you prefer that word), which, with a bit of luck, will equip you to carry out the *acciaccatura*¹ easily and correctly.

The first exercise is static – it's to do with holding a certain position, a little like a yoga posture. It shouldn't be very strenuous, but try *to relax into it*, so that you exert as little energy as possible.

Carefully stop **all three notes** in Fig. 3 with the fingers indicated and continue holding them all down for around 10 seconds. Have a short rest and then repeat this a few times. You can gradually increase the time over a number of days if you like a challenge, but it should never get unpleasant – you're not trying to win a bet. Please make the slight effort that may be required to finger the note A with the pinkie (some people do it very easily). **Important: If anything hurts or gets uncomfortable, just stop! Don't be a hero!**

Fig. 3



Whereas the exercise in Figure 3 is static – a holding exercise – Figure 4 is dynamic (involving movement).

Very important: *Once you have fingered a note, leave the finger comfortably but firmly in place until there is a musical reason to raise it.*

Fig. 4



Please play Figure 4 slowly and regularly five or six times, or until you feel very comfortable with it, before you go on.

Whereas my Scottish friend – like most mandolin players – had initially tried to play the grace note with a stroke of the plectrum, the appropriate way is a left-hand plucking technique often called a *pull-off*, which we now examine:

¹ There are various sorts of *grace notes* – notes that add *grace* or interest to the music. This particular sort is a *crushed note*.

brain will have already at some level remembered the wrong pattern. The metronome indication is only a rough guide, and is mainly intended to remind you to be conscious of tempo. The best speed at first is very slow!

If you are successful with Figure 9, you've practically mastered the technique. Figure 10 indicates almost the correct execution of measure 3 of the Hasse. We have written it using crotchets instead of quavers and quavers instead of semiquavers etc. to make it a little easier on the eyes, which is why it appears as two bars instead of one.

Fig. 10

The 1st finger stays down the whole time, and the
2nd finger continues stopping G when you play A.

Slowly!

When you finger the note A, stop G with the 2nd finger and F# with
the 1st finger as well; raise 2nd and 4th fingers together when you play F#.

A further refinement gets us practically to the actual solution. It can look a little daunting when written out as in Figure 11, but it's really not very hard. You see, to be correct about the acciaccatura, it should be fast, which simply means you should do the pull-off immediately after you strike the A. The G will then sound a little earlier and ring a little longer than in Figure 10, but the other notes will come at exactly the accustomed time.

Fig. 11

Or to use the original note values:

Fig. 12

It does indeed look a bit complicated in this form, don't you think? Hasse must have thought so too, 250 years ago, and that's why he chose to write it as:

Fig. 13

Play the grace note with a down-stroke exactly on - not before! - the count of 1,
immediately *crush* the A into G by a pull-off, and the next upstroke is the F#.

Figure 13 is certainly visually less complicated than Figure 12, but one has to know what it means – and there is a lot of confusion about how to treat the little notes. The notes (and the way of writing) are from the composer. The suggestions for fingering and stroking – and the explanations – are from me.

One last comment: The sign over the final D in Figure 13 came into use only around 30 years ago. It means to play an up-stroke on only one of the pair of strings. You should try to make this note a little softer, as a resolution of the tension created by the C#, which is a written-out grace note, in this case an appoggiatura or leaning note – C# leans into D.

Oh, and my friend Eddie just couldn't stop expressing his surprise at how easy (and successful!) it was to use the pinkie as suggested...

(A special offer: upon request, I'm happy to send you by email sound files of some of the music examples.)

Keith Harris, Marburg, 2011.

(Editor's Note: Readers of Plucked Strings should be grateful to Keith Harris for his hard work and generosity in providing these extremely helpful lessons which we can practice at our leisure to improve our technique as plucked string players.)

Which one to use?A series about stopping – to get one’s bearings perhaps? – on the mandolin.Instalment 5 by Keith Harris

I’ve spent the last week getting some music I wrote ready for the publisher. This involves ironing out actual mistakes like wrong notes (sharp and flat signs are particularly easy to overlook), or missing things like repeat dots and dynamic (volume) signs like *f* and *p*. It also involves making the music look nice in general, and providing the players with all the information they might need – you know, the sorts of questions that crop up about whether or not to tremolo, down or up strokes, and which finger to use – which is the main topic in this series. Writing in technical suggestions is a slightly dangerous business. There’s always the possibility that players will think: “Who does this guy think he is, and what right does he have to tell *me* what finger to use?” I know that’s how I react myself, whenever I see performance indications in written music. As an editor, arranger or composer, I’m usually happy when players at least consider my suggestions. If they accept and like them, I’m overjoyed – and this happens sometimes too, I’m glad to say! In this Instalment, I’d like to share with you some of my thoughts about the current project (a commission from the Australian Mandolin Music Association Inc.). Perhaps it will clear away the cobwebs in my mind a bit, and I wonder if you will agree with my way of thinking? Please try out my suggestions on the instrument.

The first bar of the 2nd mandolin part looks like this:

Fig. 1

Allegro

It’s a good idea not to try to solve too many problems at once, so I suggest that you first try just the rhythm, very slowly, on the open D string:

Fig. 2

Start at: ♩ = 50 (careful: each click of the metronome should represent one quaver, two semiquavers etc)



- *Comment:* This stroking is pretty conventional, but is worth practising a bit anyway. Please make it very automatic before we introduce more complications.

Most of the notes can be played comfortably on the D string (3rd string). I think the note A is worth special consideration though. I suggest playing it on the open (no fingers) 2nd string:

Fig. 3



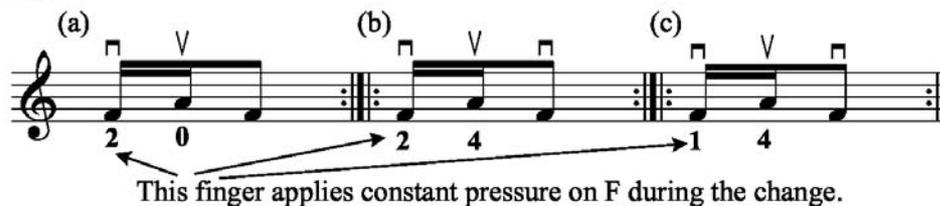
Which One To Use - by Keith Harris

Instalment 5 (continues - 2nd page)

- *Comment:* The innocent looking “0” in Figure 3 is where people sometimes start to get hot under the collar. Particularly conscientious players often want to stop (*finger*) the A, apparently because somebody at some stage has convinced them that a stopped note sounds better than an open string. My experience convinces me that it often doesn’t. Even if the quality of the open A string and the note stopped at the 7th fret on the D string were equally good, I would still favour the open string here. But (and it’s a **big BUT**), the stopped note – at least at this moment in history – probably *won’t* sound equally good. Experience tells me that it will probably sound pretty terrible in fact. The reasons are:
 1. People are accustomed to fingering the preceding note, F, with the 2nd finger, and want to stop A with the pinkie – because that’s what it says in the books. This is a very long stretch for most hands, and the amount of tension between the fingers (2-4) usually means that the string gets pulled out of shape, and the A is out of tune (the subject here is *intonation*, if you care to look it up).
 2. For various reasons (and usually not the reasons people commonly think), the pinkie can’t apply the necessary and correct pressure to make a clean A.

Why don’t you try various options for this combination of notes? Please play *very* slowly at first, and please apply the indicated stroking, even at the very slow tempo:

Fig. 4



- *Comment:* Option (b) is probably the most common choice – and the worst, I maintain; (c) is a realistic possibility, should you really favour the sound of the stopped note over the open string. The 1–4 stretch here works very well with properly trained hands. Of course, you have to get the 1st finger cleanly from the note before on to F...

Oh, by the way, did you notice the number 4 in brackets in Figure 3? I think it’s a really good idea...

So much for bar 1. The second bar illustrates a number of interesting things too. The notes are:

Fig. 5



I’m afraid I struggled with my conscience a lot when I wrote these notes, because I could imagine what some people I know would do with them, and still sleep peacefully at night! Please allow me to indicate where I would anticipate trouble, and try to point out why. The letters here mark the place I talk about – they are not the names of notes.

Fig. 6



- *Comment:* [Letter C] In traditional (violin) fingering theory, both the note G (5th fret) and the note C# (6th fret) are fingered with the same finger, the 3rd or ring finger. A smooth

Which One To Use - by Keith Harris

Instalment 5 (continues - 3rd page)

connection is utterly impossible, because the finger can't be in two places at the same time; because of the moving around required, one or both notes will probably be unclear. Try (very slowly):

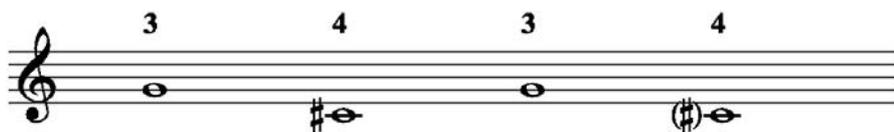
Fig. 6(i)



How is the moment of the change of note? Do you notice an interruption to the sound?

One correct solution could be:

Fig. 6(ii)

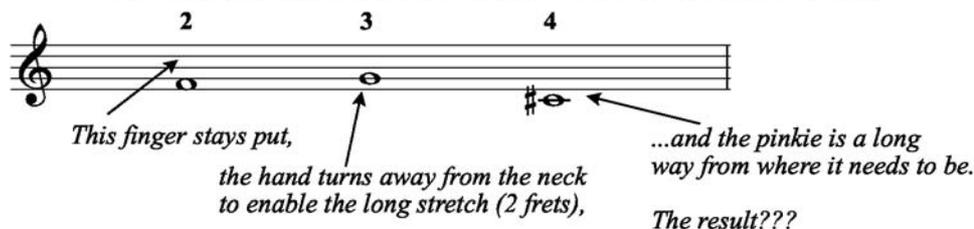


- *Comment:* [Letter B] As Figure 6(ii) shows, the 3rd finger is correct for the note G, but we have to get it there – AND – the hand then has to be in the correct position to support the pinkie on C#. Unfortunately, the effort required to stretch between the 2nd finger on F and the 3rd finger on G (2 frets – a very long way between these particular fingers) often forces the player to turn the hand outwards from the mandolin's neck, which also moves the pinkie further away from the C# fret, where it needs to be. The situation is:

Fig. 6(iii) To ensure a smooth connection, the 2nd finger must remain on F until G begins.

This is a big stretch for most hands, so the hand is often turned away from the neck.

With luck this enables G to be stopped with the 3rd finger, but puts the pinkie a long distance from where it soon needs to be - on the 6th fret on the G string.



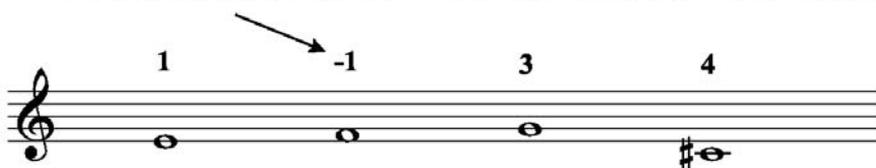
By all means try your luck, but please be careful not to force anything. **If it's uncomfortable, stop!** There are other ways of proceeding, as we will soon see.

Is there a good solution? You bet!

At letter A, slide your 1st finger from the note E to F (earlier Instalments describe how to do this easily and noiselessly). With the 1st finger on F, G with the 3rd finger is very close, so you don't need to turn the hand. The pinkie can now easily stop C#. This is how it works:

Fig. 6(iv)

An easy change of position - sliding the 1st finger up one fret - positions the hand correctly, so that the pinkie can ultimately play C# comfortably.



No turning of the hand required. The hand can remain roughly parallel to the neck, giving the pinkie comfortable access to C#.

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Instalment 5 (continues - 4th page)

- Comment:* [Letter D] The note G looks quite harmless. Not only are we used to it, because we've only just played it with the 3rd finger, but this is also the customary finger for anybody raised on "traditional" fingering theory – which, let's be honest, is practically all mandolin players. But look ahead a little to letter E, where the note G recurs. The situation here is not quite as innocent, because this particular G is followed by B flat, which is quite a long stretch back (4 frets). A strong case could be made for stopping *this* G with the pinkie – which would make the stretch back to B flat much easier. See for yourself:

Fig. 6(v) Bear in mind that each finger should continue exerting pressure at least until the next note is sounded, so there is at least a short time when *both* fingers have to be "down" together.



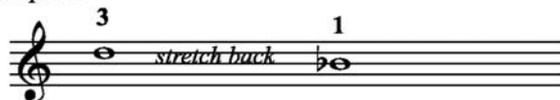
If you decide to use the pinkie at letter E, where there is a strenuous stretch coming up, perhaps it would be better to stop the note at letter D with the pinkie too, to get the hand used to the situation while things are a bit more peaceful.

- Comment:* [Letter F] The stretch from B flat to D is the same distance as the stretch we just coped with, from G to B flat – they are both a distance of 4 frets. It's the same distance, but an additional factor is that a stretch backwards (from the 3rd or 4th finger back to the 1st finger for example) is often a little easier than a stretch upwards. Do you notice a difference between Example A and Example B?

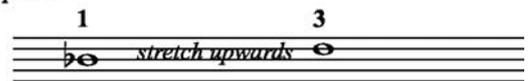
Fig. 6(vi) First put the 3rd finger by itself on the note D. Wait a few seconds, and then **add** the 1st finger to B flat. Hold both fingers down for a few seconds and examine the feeling.

Now reverse the situation. Stop the note B flat with the 1st finger, wait a little, then add the 3rd finger to D. Is the stretch a little easier backwards than upwards?

Example A



Example B



Try both situations with the 4th finger on D instead of the 3rd.

- Comment:* [Letter G] The decision to make here is whether to stop the note D with the 3rd finger or with the pinkie. The decision depends on your conclusions from Figure 6(vi). If you find the stretch upwards better with one finger than the other, that's the one to use.

To summarize, here's my suggestion for how to finger the whole bar:

Fig. 7



Incidentally, at the time of writing Instalment 5, I still haven't decided on a final version of bar 2! Oh well...

Bye till next time –

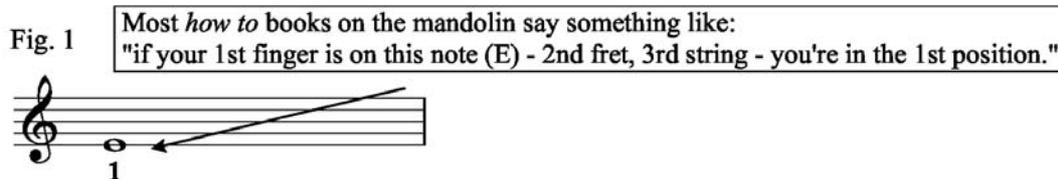
Keith Harris, Marburg.

Which one to use?A series about fingering on the mandolinInstalment 6 by Keith Harrisa few things about *positions*.

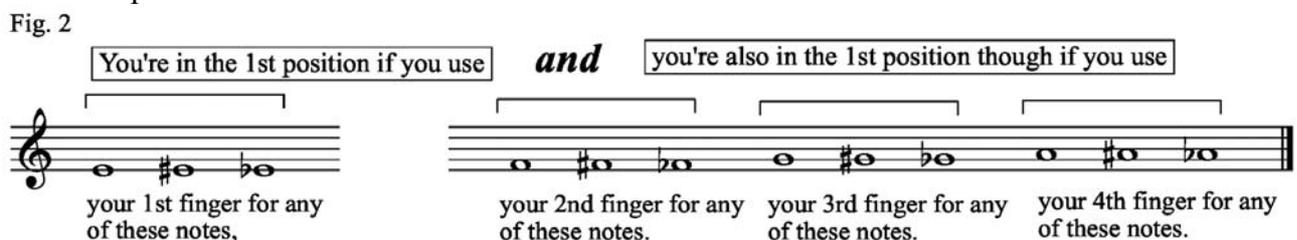
In previous instalments, I may have occasionally mentioned *changing position*, although I didn't use the term *position* too much. The truth is that I don't really like it, at least the way it is usually used, because it conceals a number of unspoken assumptions. Because they are hidden, nobody questions them. I think that's a pity, because I think they hide some rather unpleasant and even harmful things. Instalment 6 may seem a little bit theoretical. Please read it with mandolin in hand, and play the examples carefully, even when they seem to contain nothing new. This Instalment discusses some aspects of position theory which are not new, but seldom mentioned. I generally won't say in this Instalment which things I don't like, but I do encourage you to try out the examples, and see if you see certain problems in this *conventional* way of thinking. We can talk later about better solutions. And if you are one of the many people who have only a vague idea about what *positions* are all about anyway, here's a good chance to satisfy your curiosity!

The more or less hidden assumptions start with the definition or description of positions. Most tutor books say something like:

"The 1st position is when your 1st finger is responsible for the note E on the D string."
(Sometimes the authors are honest enough, or pedantically dogmatic enough, or just plain *brutal* enough, to add: "or E flat or E sharp.")



Although the definition mentions only the 1st finger, there is also an assumption (usually, but not always, unspoken) about where the other fingers should go as well. In the 1st position for example, the 2nd finger stops F (or F sharp or F flat for that matter – anything with the letter *F* in the name) the 3rd finger G, G sharp and G flat, and the 4th finger A, A sharp or A flat. So knowing where any one finger goes also fixes the placement possibilities for the other three. For example:



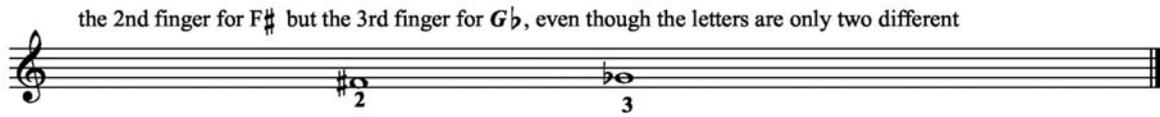
The theory of positions assumes what I can only see as a mystical connection between the fingers and the letter names of notes – the letter name dictates which finger to use. The connection even extends so far that many people play the note at the 4th fret on the D string with the 2nd finger if it's called F sharp, but use the 3rd finger for the very same note if it's

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Instalment 6 continues - 2nd page

called by one of its other names, G flat, regardless of other considerations:

Fig. 3 Some people apply the rules very strictly and use

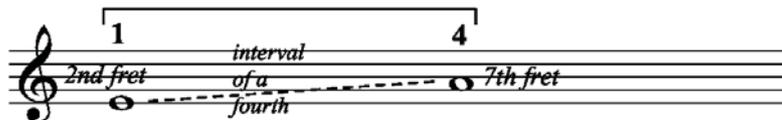


names for exactly the same sound.

(The system underlying this behaviour is fortunately not quite as irrational and arbitrary as it may seem. It is related to the key system used in western music – but to elaborate on that would take a lot of space. Even if it’s not *completely* crazy though, it is nonetheless *pretty* crazy and arbitrary...)

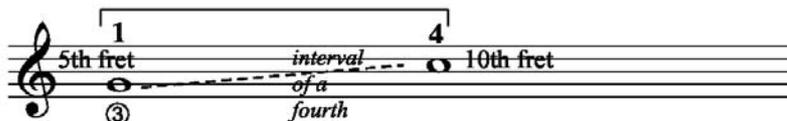
The definition of a *position* also includes another unspoken assumption. This is the assumption that it’s almost always a good idea, in *any* position, for the outside fingers (1 and 4) to span the interval of a fourth – about five half steps – like for example the 1st finger on E and 4th on A, on the same string.

Fig. 4 An unspoken assumption of position playing theory is that



the natural and God-given distance between the 1st and 4th fingers is the *interval* of a fourth (around 5 frets).

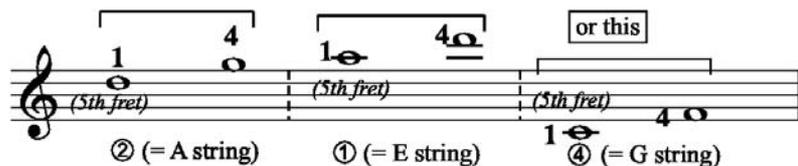
Fig. 5 Figure 4 shows the finger span for the 1st position, figure 5 illustrates the 3rd position.



Just to remind you: the arabic number in a circle is the number of the string. ③ =D string = 3rd string.
An arabic number by itself indicates the stopping finger. 4 = 4th finger.

If you were playing on other strings but at the same frets, the same reasoning would apply – the distance between 1st and 4th fingers is always the same. So

Fig. 6 this is also the third position and this or this



Although I personally can’t see any earthly or heavenly (anatomical or musical) reason for a strict and generally invariable rule of any sort about where the 1st and 4th fingers stop the string, I do feel that this particular combination is *often* a very good idea, and certainly worth mastering.

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Instalment 6 continues - 3rd page

So: can you do these things (Figures 7-9) easily and comfortably?

Fig. 7 The 1st finger continues stopping (*fingering/pressing down...*) E with constant pressure throughout the whole exercise. Only the 4th finger moves, to stop and release the note A.



Fig. 8 This exercise is in no way harder than the previous one. You're not afraid of a few slightly high notes, are you? The little horizontal lines are called *ledger lines*, by the way.

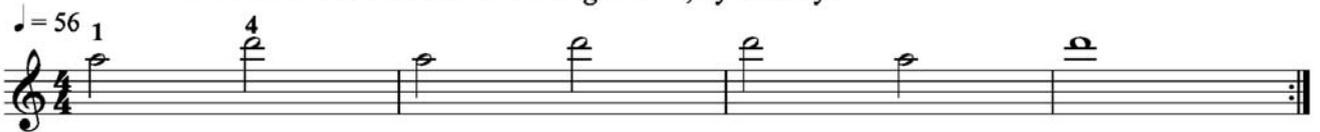
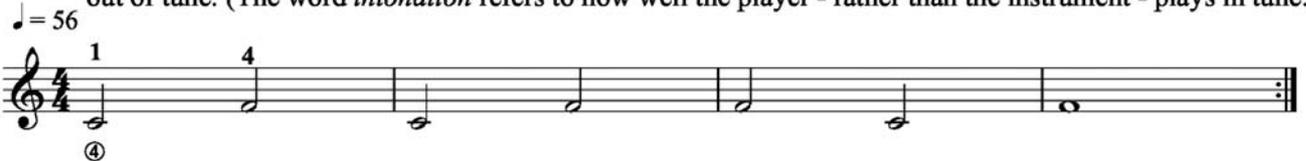


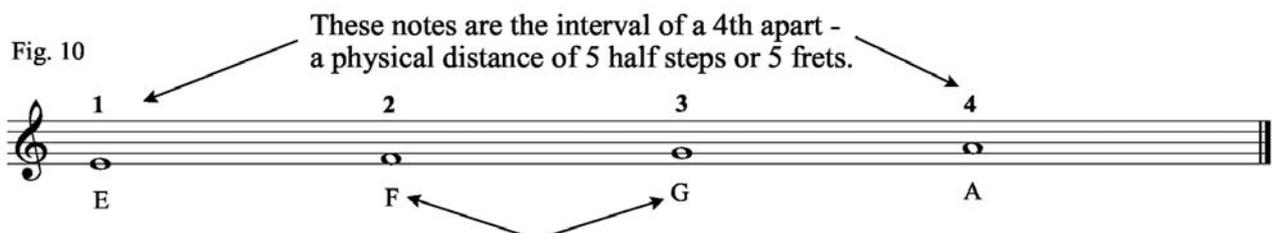
Fig. 9 ...but this one may well be a little harder. Please be very careful not to pull the strings sideways and so play out of tune. (The word *intonation* refers to how well the player - rather than the instrument - plays in tune.)



Position theory goes on to state:

after we have established the distance between the outermost fingers – 1st and 4th – we can think about possibilities for the fingers in between: the 2nd and 3rd fingers.

If we consider the extreme notes from figure 4 – E and A – we have the letter names F and G in between. According to the connection between letter names and fingers, in the 1st position we should use the 2nd finger for anything called *F* (including F sharp or flat or whatever...) and the 3rd finger for anything called *G* (sharp etc...). The reason for this rule is that that's what the *first position* means; if we were to do something different, we would not be in the 1st position, and we'd have to find new words to describe where we are. (Oh horror!)



According to the rules about position playing (a consecutive finger for each consecutive letter), notes in between the outside notes (E and A) and bearing the names of the in-between letters (F and G) would be stopped with the in-between fingers (2 and 3).

Lots of people find it hard to keep all four fingers down at the same time on the notes in Figure 10 – E–F–G–A. The slight difference in Figure 11 however (F sharp instead of F natural) often makes an enormous difference. Does it for you?

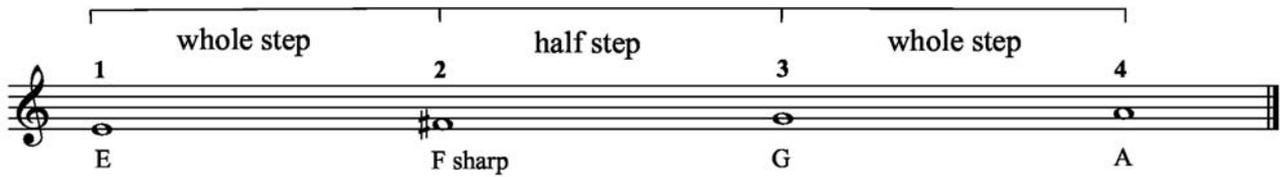
Which One To Use - by Keith Harris

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Fig. 11

By sharpening (making it a fret higher) the F to F sharp, we now have only a half step (one fret) between the 2nd and 3rd fingers and two frets (a whole step) between the other pairs of fingers.

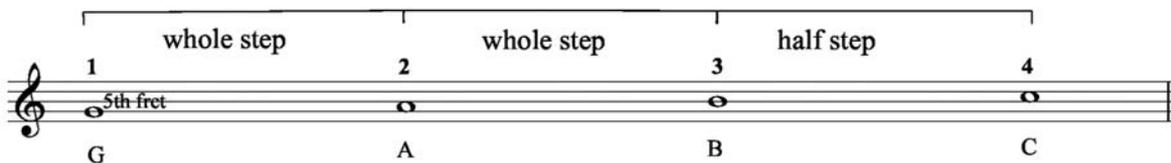


Many people find the pattern in Figure 11 much more comfortable than that in Figure 10. Do you?

This sort of principle – changing notes by a fret while keeping the letter name – crops up all the time. Try for example the *third position* on the D string (1st finger on the 5th fret – the note G – etc):

Fig. 12

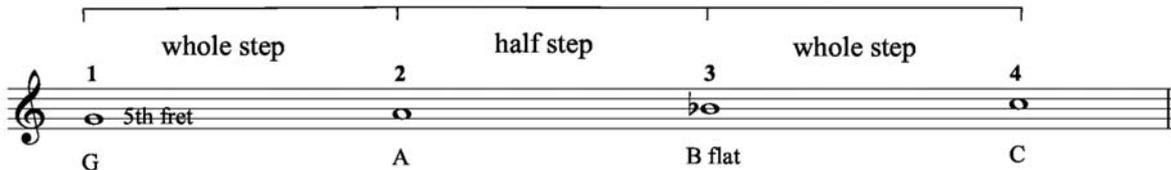
Look at the pattern your fingers make when you stop the natural notes (no sharps or flats).



Don't you just *long* for a comfortable half step between the 2nd and 3rd fingers? Try

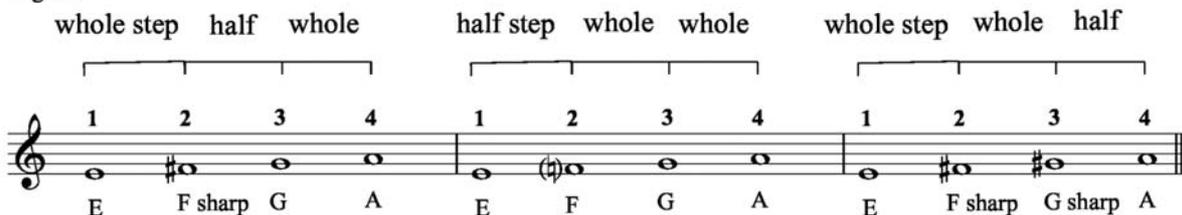
Fig. 13

When we flatten (lower) the B to B flat, we again have the rather comfortable half step between the 2nd and 3rd fingers.



You might well have noticed that putting the 2nd and 3rd fingers on various notes in between the outside notes often amounts to shifting a half step (one fret distance) around to different pairs of fingers. Depending where the half step is, there is often a whole step (2 frets) between the other pairs of fingers:

Fig. 14



Some teachers have even begun to give labels to the patterns the fingers make in Figure 14. (The three patterns in Figure 14 are the *first*, *second* and *third* finger pattern, respectively.) This system is borrowed from violin fingering theory. You will notice that the letter names of the notes stopped with each respective finger are the same in each *pattern*, but sometimes the notes are sharpened – and they could also be flatted of course.

In conclusion, a few things for you to think about:

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Instalment 6 continues - 5th page

- Does each *finger pattern* feel equally comfortable to you?
 - Many people notice a lot of difference.
- Do you recognize some *finger patterns* in music you play?
 - You possibly do, as the idea comes from the violin, and mandolin fingering has generally been borrowed from the violin for the last 250 years.
- If you have tried out the examples in the first four Instalments of this series, how many *finger patterns* have you recognized?
 - If you find any at all, I wasn't paying enough attention.

In fact, the current theory of *positions* implies using various *finger patterns*. Earlier Instalments have already talked a little about how to get comfortably and efficiently from one area of the fingerboard to another. In later ones, we will look at more examples, and also try to understand more about what sensible fingering means.

Keith Harris, Marburg (Germany).

Mandolin Magic: Viewed By Newbie

Rob Kay and I go back a very long way – since he arrived in Perth from Sydney in 1973 or 1974. We have spent many a happy hour sharing music (choirs, StringyBach, other bands), camping, hiking, and even a spot of grog from time to time. In late 2010, we began planning for a bit of a “blokes away from their wives” trip some time in 2011. Many possibilities were discussed – Istanbul, Vancouver followed by a train trip across Canada amongst others. And then suddenly Gympie appeared on the short list. “What the hell is this place?”, I asked Robert, or words to that effect. My only previous acquaintance with Gympie was that I had been provided with a map of the town in my 1971 school leavers’ geography exam and been asked various questions that involved map reading.

Robert described what was being planned, and what a fine specimen of humanity Sue Flower is. I subsequently discovered she is also mad as a cut snake, to use formal DSM IV terms (and I speak as a registered psychologist here), given that she was prepared to accommodate so many people on her property. Anyway, Robert was very much enthused by the idea and I was unable to persuade him that Istanbul also had its attractions. And what an excellent decision it turned out to be.

Given that I knew precisely no-one other than Robert, I was a little nervous. And I was bringing a steel string guitar into the hallowed halls where only classical guitars had

previously ventured. I need not have feared. The small group of musicians who rehearsed avidly amongst the dogs are as nice a bunch of people as I have ever met. (To digress a moment – there are two Kelpies resident at Sue and David’s place, but they also had undertaken to house-sit no less than three other dogs whilst we were all there. Those dogs wandered in and out of all the rehearsals as they saw fit, seeking affection and offering complete deniability to any humans who wished to squeeze out a silent fart).

There were many highlights, and one low light. The latter was when I stuck the head of my beloved guitar into a rotating ceiling fan at Tin Can Bay, cracking the thing. But David kindly loaned me his guitar so all was not lost. (My guitar was subsequently repaired and is just fine, in case anyone was thinking of sending a get well card). The Tin Can Bay concert was extraordinary – most especially the house band. I must own to never having seen a lagerphone made out of a crutch before; a unique contribution to the further development of that instrument.

After several days of solid rehearsal interspersed with food, wine and walks to look at the kangaroos, we were ready for the main concert in Gympie. Fortunately, I could clearly recall the 1971 map and recognised all the local landforms. We spent much of Sunday morning doing final rehearsals in the church where the concert was to take place. It was then I learned

what a virtuoso Sue is on her mandolin. I was stretched out supine on a pew resting my eyeballs whilst Sue and Pam went through their mandolin and piano item (the name of which now escapes me, but I do recall it was written by a foreigner of some sort). As I lightly dozed and listened, I thought “Funny, I was told this was a solo mandolin part but there seem to be two mandolins playing”. It made me so curious that I sat up from my nap to see that there was indeed just Sue’s mandolin. She is clearly the first person to split the nano-quaver into ever smaller particles of sound. I have never heard anything like it.

The whole thing was a delight. Sharing music-making is the fastest way I know to shift from stranger to friend. I hope a good proportion of the Mandolin Magic ensemble can get to Perth next July.

Oh, and there was one other low light. Bloody Qantas pulled their cancel all flights trick on the morning of the concert, throwing all air travellers in to a tizzy of high degree. Could have done without that little dummy spit. But I think Robert was secretly disappointed when they resumed service and we did not have to stay an extra three days after all.

So, thank you to my new friends in music for a most wonderful experience.

Jim Elliott

Which One to Use

A series about making choices on the mandolin.

Instalment 7

So far in this series, we have looked at details of ways to do particular things – with or without a specific context. I thought it might be fun in this instalment to try a short but complete piece – which however certainly requires enough technical know-how to be interesting. We also think a little bit about what it means, when we say that something “suits” an instrument.

A bit of background:

I was born shortly after WW2, and grew up in a society still very much shaped by it. Part of the legacy was being able to hum tunes from the *Warsaw Concerto*, written by the British composer Richard Adinsell for the 1941 movie *Dangerous Moonlight*. I’m sure I shared this ability with almost everybody in the western culture around the time.

As a young adult in England, I recall being asked at a party to play this piece (a deliberately emotionally-charged work, employing huge orchestral resources, in the style of Rachmaninoff) on my instrument, the mandolin. There was no way for me to convince the person (whether he was stupid, drunk or just plain nasty, I don’t recall - probably all three) that the request itself was utterly ridiculous; *I* was the one to feel inferior because I couldn’t fulfil his wish.

In fact, his error in thinking is widespread: not considering that there has to be a fitting relationship between any given task and the material available to accomplish that task. But whereas it’s obviously silly to expect an elephant to balance on an overhead cable or a canary to carry a heavy log in its beak, it’s not quite as obvious that music written with a certain instrument in mind may not work as well on a different instrument. Of course it’s fun to play violin or flute music on the mandolin – or even perhaps tunes from the *Warsaw Concerto* –, but there are differing opinions about whether it’s a good idea to do it on stage – and also about *why* it may or may not be a good idea.

Composers usually have an idea about how their music is to be performed. If the music is well-suited to a particular instrument, the word *idiomatic* is often used. The first of the star virtuoso performers –Paganini, Chopin, Liszt and so on – wrote a lot of the music they played themselves. The music is often awfully hard, and one has to be a real musical acrobat to play it, but it is nonetheless *idiomatic*, because it is tailor-made for the instruments these legendary performers played. Rachmaninoff himself was in this tradition.

Various generations of mandolin virtuosi have also included performer/composers. Two hundred years ago there were people like Leone, Denis and Barbella, and then, at the beginning of the 20th century, Munier, Stauffer and Ranieri. In our own time, Yasuo Kuwahara, Neil Gladd or Stephen Lalor have performed music they wrote themselves.

Even music that may *look* simple can be impossible to play on the mandolin if it isn’t

tailored to the instrument, and that’s only one of several reasons to be careful with *transcriptions*.

Here’s a very modest little piece, “Slipping and Sliding”, which I wrote for particular students to illustrate various possibilities of the instrument. There’s a lot of room for an individual approach to many aspects, and I hope you feel free to try out different possibilities, and see if some suit you (or the tune) better than others. My descriptive notes point out certain technical things or often simply explain what I mean by some of the signs.

- a) Pluck the notes marked with “x” with a spare finger of the stopping hand (if you are right-handed, the left one...)
 - Mandolin players are often not used to reading music written in several parts. Please be careful: the first four bars are notated in two parts, so the dotted minim is sustained for three beats, while the crotchet rest and the two single crotchets are played at the same time.
 - The technique of plucking with the left hand has, as one might expect, a number of descriptions and signs. Frequent is left hand pizzicato or *mano sinistra* (m.s.).
 - You can pluck with any finger apart from the one busy stopping the high g”, but probably 2 for the g” and 4 for the two pizz. notes are expedient.

- b) Try playing this note – f’ on the count of 2 – with the slide technique.

Slipping and Sliding

Composed and edited by:
Keith David Harris

M.M. ♩ = 88-120

Tune “Slipping and Sliding” and text Copyright © 2011 Keith David Harris

- In this little piece this is indicated by the slur sign.
- This means: do not strike the note with the plectrum. Instead, strike the previous note, then move the stopping finger (1st finger in this case), vigorously and exactly on the count of 2, up one fret from e' to f'.
- Important: keep the pressure constant – don't loosen the finger! If you carry out the procedure successfully, you produce a rather soft but very clear f'.
- Tip: Ideally, the slide here involves not a finger movement but rather a hand movement. The pinkie-side edge of the hand leads, pulling the 1st finger along the fingerboard.

c) A slide in the other direction, which sometimes seems a little more difficult at first.

- How to do it: no stroke; this time, it's the thumb-side edge of the hand that leads. The finger maintains a constant and even pressure on the fingerboard.
- Tip: think about throwing a ball. It's useful to "wind up", to gain momentum. In this case by you rotate the hand slightly in the direction opposite to where it's about to move, and then use the built-up energy to throw the leading edge in the direction you want.
- Another useful comparison is perhaps with casting a fishing line, where a lead sinker is thrown, and pulls the fishing line attached to it.

d) The pinkie-side edge of the hand drags the 1st finger smoothly and elegantly along the string, and you consciously produce a drawn-out sliding sound (glissando).

- How to do it: strike the note e' and then start sliding the finger immediately. (A very common mistake is to hold the starting note so long that the string stops making any sound at all.)
- Once the finger starts sliding, however, take your time! The finger should move slowly and evenly. If it reaches the 14th fret (the pitch of the next note, the open e'') on the count of 3, fine. Even if it doesn't get that far though or even goes further, the effect is still fun to hear.
- Whatever happens, it is very important to strike the open e'' string exactly at the right time, on the 3rd count. When you become proficient, you can decide yourself exactly what effect you want to produce; the glissando starting on the lower e' fills the two counts of the half-note, until the right moment (the count of 3) for the higher e''.
- Important: the stopping pressure remains constant. The correct pressure is the amount needed to produce clear sounds. If there is not enough pressure squeezing the string against the fingerboard, there will be just no sound, or at least no good sound. If you apply more pressure than needed, you may not notice it in terms of sound (a lot of people don't...), but you are nonetheless certainly wasting energy, which could be put to better use somewhere else.
- Note: On the count of 3, the right hand plays the 1st string while the left hand is still busy on a different string. This may well feel peculiar!

e) Much the same instructions as for (d), but the gliss. is shorter.

- Remember: this a glissando, where we actually want to hear all the sliding sounds. You could strike both notes or only the first of the two. With the technique called a slide, the movement itself is instantaneous – unlike the glissando – and it produces the second note without a plectrum stroke. Remember that the wavy glissando line indicates an audible sliding sound between the notes.

f) It's not far to this note with the pinkie, so take care not to stretch too much.

- The anatomically correct finger for most people still is the pinkie however, rather than the 3rd finger (which violin players would invariably use), which often means turning the hand outwards away from the neck of the instrument. This moves the pinkie away from the fingerboard, and the general instability of the hand makes it harder to finger accurately. The same is true also for the c' in bar 8 of course.

I also indicate some other things of a general musical nature:

- dynamics (loud and soft – *f*, *p* etc., or *crecendo* and *diminuendo* – get louder or softer, as indicated by the so-called *hairpins*), and tone color or timbre – *met.* – play *metallically*, near the bridge, or *nat.*urally, over the sound hole or *f*-holes. *Met.* often sounds particularly good if you strike only one string of the pair.

I hope you enjoy sliding around the mandolin.

Keith Harris, Marburg(Germany)

Keith Harris has been teaching the mandolin on-line with Skype for a year now. Here are a few reactions from students:

Hans (professional violinist from Vienna, Austria):

"Thanks for last year. The best decision I ever made about learning the mandolin was to take up your offer of two free introductory lessons, even after I had attended various courses with very interesting teachers.

The title of your book is ***The Mandolin Game***. For me though, especially the first ten lessons were more like a ***mandolin adventure***.

Interestingly, your teaching has not only had an impact on my mandolin playing: it has also had a noticeable effect on my many other musical activities – in my string quartet, the Concert House Orchestra, chamber music, the plucked string ensemble. I hope we can keep talking about music for a long time to come."

Eddie (mandolin teacher in Glasgow, Scotland):

(About tuition with Keith Harris)

"I often talk to classes about things that I learned from Keith Harris in the many lessons I have had from him over the years. It amounts

to a lot of what I use for technique and other aspects of playing the mandolin."

About Skype teaching:

"It's just like being face to face with him, and his ability to analyse and solve technical problems is undiminished. I would recommend this to any player and/or teacher who wishes to improve on the mandolin."

Robert (lawyer from Brisbane, Australia):

"Thanks for the technical suggestions ... Looking forward to tomorrow... You have given me a wakeup call about my approach to playing, particularly in relation to some basic elements...in music the world is our oyster... Thanks once again for the new material and the excitement of music... I really appreciate what you are doing for me... Thanks very much for an excellent session last night... I played the up and down strokes correctly... Thanks very much for your persistence with me on this issue... Thanks for a wonderful session last night – I learnt a lot from what we canvassed... it all moves me into a new phase... I tried it out as you suggest and I feel quite comfortable about using the 4th finger on G

and 2nd on E... The fact that I have become quite used to using the 4th helps..."

Robyn (Robert's wife):

"Robert is really enjoying all the support and challenges you have given him over many months! It is a rare privilege to learn so much from you. Without your support and interest, I doubt if he would be at the stage of skill and ability to play... I have seen his skill develop and his ability to address the challenge you give him with enthusiasm..."

He still offers two obligation-free introductory lessons. If (and only if) you then like the idea, regular one-hour lessons would cost:

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If you are interested and would like more information, contact him at:

Email: <keithharris@gmx.de> or Tel.: +49-6421-952344.

Which One to Use? A series about the mandolin

Instalment 9

Another nice surprise

An autobiographical note related to this Instalment:

.Performers travel a lot. Because of this, I decided a long time ago that it just wasn't fair on regular students for the teacher (in this case me) to disappear for months on end, when I was giving concerts or teaching at courses somewhere on Earth. People who are serious about learning something need regularity, and there's a lot to be said for the traditional rhythm of a music lesson once a week.

So, much as I enjoyed teaching, I decided to curtail my private teaching activities severely, and concentrated with a clear conscience on the vagabond lifestyle of a performer. Of course I've always retained a small number of students, who could cope with my timetable - or lack of one! By and large though, for the last three decades I've had to do without the pleasure of accompanying students week for week on their exciting journey towards their personal musical goals.

Since the advent of Internet teaching, however, this has changed dramatically, and it's wonderful for me to be able to keep up a regular programme of teaching, even if I'm off travelling somewhere or a student is away on business. It doesn't always work, but there's often an Internet connection close by. An American student recently took his mandolin on a business trip to Taiwan and had his weekly online lesson in his hotel!

But now to Instalment 9...

In Instalment 8, I described the innovative and independent way of thinking one North American student has developed since starting lessons around 18 months ago. The technical matters he was examining involved the practical application of things we had handled in lessons. He was delighted to find that formerly inaccessible pieces were now possible, and wanted a second opinion about some of his (mostly excellent) solutions.

I had a similar experience (hence the title of this instalment) with a European student just a few weeks ago. The student (a professional violinist from Vienna, by the way) wanted to prepare something which he could perform on the mandolin with his bowed-string colleagues.

The piece my Viennese friend selected is the Quartet in A major for two mandolins, viola and mandolone by the versatile and successful Italian composer Giovanni Francesco Giuliani (1760-1820), and Hans is using the edition published by Trekel of Hamburg (T 6223). Hans thinks it will sound good if he plays the 1st mandolin part on the mandolin, while the other parts are played respectively on a violin, viola and violoncello.

Technically, the piece is not difficult for Hans, so we were able to concentrate in the very first session pretty exclusively on musical aspects - how to apply technique - fingering, stroking...- to get the best possible musical result, which after all is what it's all about!

Before I tell you in more detail about our discussions though, I'd like to emphasise something: People may well have noticed that my *technical* approach is sometimes far removed from what one reads in most books on mandolin playing. I must emphasise however that, on the contrary, the *musical* things I regard as important are not very unusual in musical circles, particularly among people who have been through the same rigorous professional tertiary training that I have.

Here are just a few examples of important things:

- The quality of sound, which has to do with the instrument, the plectrum, the strings, and in particular what the player does with all these things. Of course there are different opinions in the area of sound too, but familiarity with sound is a big topic on all instruments at music universities in Germany, or most other places too, for that matter.
- Homogeneousness. If certain notes “belong together”, they need to blend properly, so that nothing sticks out unpleasantly or sounds out of place. On the mandolin, this has a lot to do with factors like correct stroking and whereabouts on the fingerboard you stop (finger) the note - and many mandolin notes can be produced on a number of different strings, as with the guitar or the double bass for instance, but unlike the piano, where each key produces only one pitch.

I mention this to avoid the possible impression that these standard objectives are unimportant to me. It’s precisely because they ARE important to me that I have reached some non-standard conclusions - particularly about fingering of course, but not only...

As I mentioned above, Hans is a professional violinist, so you can rest assured that he is thoroughly schooled in the traditional patterns of violin fingering, which haven’t changed much in the last 300 years, and which are also used by most mandolinists, regardless of the style of music they play. In our first few months of lessons, we often talked about why I think that a different system is advantageous on the mandolin, but Hans (like my other students too, I might add) is by now so convinced of the fingering principles I recommend, that he applies them spontaneously. In fact, the fingering he applied to this piece illustrates many of the differences.

The 1st mandolin part begins like this:

Fig. 1



Try it yourself a few times before you read on, and see if anything in the following discussion surprises you.

Probably the simplest standard violin-derived fingering is:

Fig. 2



There is some debate about whether or not to use open strings under certain circumstances, but apart from that, it’s more than likely basically what you did too.

Hans didn't.

He did this:

Fig. 3

The first staff shows a sequence of notes with fingerings: 3 4 1 0 4 3, followed by a 'barré' instruction, then 0 4 1 1 0, 4 1, 0 4 3, and 0 4 3 1. The second staff continues with fingerings: 3 4 0 1 0, 4 1 0 4 3 1 0 4 3 1 0, and includes triplets (3) and (3) under some notes.

NB: The fact that I indicate a finger for almost every note in these examples may seem exaggerated; after all, the use of any particular finger for any given note already implies to an extent which finger would be good for the following note, just as the left foot usually alternates with the right when we walk. **But** - the underlying logic of the system used can vary much more than many people think.

Figure 4 shows both fingering solutions close together so that comparisons are easier - traditional violin fingering is above and Hans' fingering below the staff.

Fig. 4

Standard violin fingering

The first staff shows 'Standard violin fingering' with fingerings: 2 3 1 (4) 3 2, 0 3 1 1 0, 3 1, (4) 3 2, and 4 3 2 1. The second staff shows 'Hans' fingering' with fingerings: 3 4 1 0 4 3, 0 4 1 1 0, 4 1, 0 4 3, and 0 4 3 1. A 'barré' instruction is placed between the two staves. The third staff shows 'Hans' fingering' with fingerings: 2 3 (4) 1 0, 3 1 0 3 2 1 (4) 3 2 1 (4), and 3 4 0 1 0, 4 1 0 4 3 1 0 4 3 1 0.

This short extract is melodically very simple, but it illustrates some basic convictions I hold very firmly.

You will soon notice that the violin-style fingering (above the staff) requires the left hand to span a distance of five frets, whereas Hans' suggestions (below the staff) only require a span of three frets. Hans and I (and all my other students as well) are convinced that his fingering requires very much less energy than the usual violin fingering.

Whatever span you use for a given purpose (and it can range between the two extremes shown below in Pictures 1 & 2) the hand needs to be properly trained, and that's a longer story.

But please be VERY cautious and gentle if you try to imitate the photos!

Picture 1**Picture 2**

Generally though, as in life itself, if you have a choice between a hard way and an easy way, and the result is the same, I believe it's better to take the easy way and not waste energy you might need for some other purpose.

Both the pictures above might look exotic, but they in fact show realistic possibilities which come in handy under certain circumstances. It would be silly though to maintain that they expend no more energy than the finger arrangement in Picture 3 (below), even though the excellently trained player in all three photos can alternate effortlessly between various finger arrangements.

Picture 3

Think about this situation:

Whether you lift a 1 pint carton of milk or a 2 pint carton, it's mechanically much the same, but you obviously expend slightly more energy with the heavier carton. So if for some reason you had to hold a carton of milk above your head for five minutes - and had the choice - you would be sensible to choose the 1 pint carton. Similarly, if you have a choice, it's sensible to take the less strenuous way of fingering, and save your energy for when it's needed.

In the case of the musical example, however, neither Hans nor I can see any reason to arrange the hand differently than in the energy-saving manner of Picture 3.

The requirements of this piece are pretty basic, and therefore the fingering is far less intellectually complicated than some things discussed in previous Instalments.

You may well have noticed that Hans' use of the hand in this example is possible only if open strings are used. Please don't jump to the wrong conclusion, though, that either Hans or I avoid problems by making lazy compromises; the open strings in Hans' fingering are chosen not to make the fingering easier, but entirely because of the sound. Hans knows how to avoid them - easily - if he thinks it sounds better. On the other hand, the violin-style fingering is by no means the *only* way to avoid the open string - if one wanted to. There are a number of possible finger combinations which could achieve this objective in a physically far more efficient (energy-saving) way than the above violin fingering; some principles involved have in fact already been treated in earlier Instalments of this series (particularly Instalment 2). And these other solutions are not even "hard", in the way that lifting a very heavy object is "hard", but they do sometimes require more knowledge. Hans has this knowledge, but in this case still favours the fingering shown - because it sounds best.

Even if things are sometimes more complicated though, remember that the brain can take the strain, whereas we all know how weak the flesh can be. A comparison with basic arithmetic might help: most adults can add 47+31 together as easily and securely as 2+2. One addition is not "harder" than the other, but you do have to know what you're doing.

As you might expect, I didn't agree with *all* of Hans' suggestions. I didn't like the *barré*, because it means that the last note of bar 1 (B) would necessarily keep ringing during the first note in bar 2 (F#), where it would clash with the harmony at that point. I recommended a fingering technique I call an "analogous position change", which enables the player, among many other neat and dandy things, to connect two notes smoothly, even when they are at the same fret but on different strings, without inadvertently sustaining one of them too long. It's very easy to do, but this instalment is long enough already! (Oh dear! and we haven't even *mentioned* the plectrum...)

Keith Harris,
Marburg (Germany).

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Instalment 11

Words...words...words...

The real truth about the pinkie revealed!

I can't remember hearing the term *pinkie* (or pink-y) to mean the 4th (or *little*) finger in my childhood in Australia, but perhaps I just didn't pay enough attention. It's certainly standard in various countries where English is the main language though. Apparently it's a borrowing from the Dutch word *pink* or its diminutive form *pinkje*. Whatever it's called, the little finger is a source of anxiety to lots of mandolin players. Many of my students, who routinely use it as freely as any other finger, find this a bit strange. Of course, the truth is that it's usually neither weak, too short, nor unreliable, but just badly trained.

Mandolin players who have grown up with this Flat Earth misconception of human anatomy though (probably most players, I suspect, and certainly myself until a few decades ago), often need gentle remedial help to overcome their completely home-grown and unnecessary fear. This is why I wrote this little *Pinkie Blues* for my American friend and online student Bob, building in lots of applications for the 4th finger - some of which might surprise you. As you can imagine, I couldn't resist the temptation to include other technical features as well - so this instalment doesn't use only the word *pinkie*, but also *slide*, *hammer-on*, *triplet etc.* Lots of the words and the underlying principles will be familiar to anybody who has worked through the earlier instalments of this series. In particular, you might care to revise Instalments 3, 4 and 7.

In Instalment 11, I use lower case letters - eg "**b**" - to mark features I discuss. Sometimes other people use different words to describe the same thing, and the signs are also not very standardised. I use my own here, and try to explain what I mean. There are many other instances of each technical feature in the tune, so please keep an eye out for them.

The title of the tune is of course a multiple pun - on the 4th finger itself (*pinkie*), the colours pink and blue, and also on the various meanings of the word *blues* - as a musical form and also suggesting worry or sadness, perhaps feelings associated by some people with the 4th finger...

Here's the tune:

Pinkie Blues

(for Bob)

Visit Keith Harris' website:
www.mandolin-lessons.com

Use open strings and a generally chromatic finger pattern throughout.

Keith David Harris

a) slide (sl)

b) 4-4

c)

d) pull-off (p-o)

e) sl

f) p-o

g) hammer-on (h-o)

h) sl

i) glide-stroke

j) glide-stroke

k)

3 or 4 both have virtues; the worst finger by far is 2.

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And here are some comments:

a)



This is a standard direction that quavers which look the same length should be *tripletised*, played unequally (with a *swing feel*- long/short in a ratio of 2:1).

b) slide (sl)



Stop (*finger*, if you prefer the word) C# with the 4th finger (*pinkie*). Strike the string, and immediately slide the finger one fret to the right, as if correcting a mistake (*oops!*). Be careful to apply constant pressure with the 4th finger - don't inadvertently relax it. **Do not strike the second note -D- with the plectrum:** if the *slide* is done correctly, you will hear the note softly but clearly. You can practise the *slide* slowly: Strike C#, then let it ring for a few seconds before moving the whole hand energetically to the right. The use of the pinkie in this situation is by no means arbitrary; it really is the most efficient finger in the context.

c)



There are a number of interesting aspects at *c*.

1. You almost certainly know the standard downstroke sign , but perhaps you are less familiar with this sign:  - an upstroke sign with a dot. It was introduced around 30 years ago, and indicates an upstroke on only one of the pair of strings. (There is a similar sign for a *downstroke* on only one string of a pair , but I didn't need it for this tune.) These signs would obviously be meaningless for instruments with single strings, like the violin or modern guitar, but they come in handy for double-strung instruments like the mandolin. Generally, the sound has more "body" if both strings of a pair are sounded - the thinner sound of a single string then provides a useful contrast.
2. Remember the *swing* treatment of the equal-looking quavers.
3. For the left hand: as you play the notes C, C# and D, leave each finger down; by the time you play D, three fingers (2, 3 and 4) are all exerting the same force on the string.
4. I think it sounds good to let the higher D keep ringing when you play the lower D (this also applies to letter *b* among other places). The written music doesn't indicate this, although it *could*, of course, but it would be harder to read. There's lots of room for *artistic licence* when you play music.

d)



The *pull-off* is a very common technique in particular with the classical and other forms of guitar and also with various styles of mandolin playing such as *bluegrass*. Various forms of it have been discussed in earlier instalments. It can even be found in mandolin music of the early 20th century as *left-hand pizzicato*, although this often refers to plucking only open strings with the left hand (see measure 4 of *Slipping and Sliding* in Instalment 7 of this series).

In this case,

1. stop both the notes involved (D and C) simultaneously with the 4th and the 2nd fingers respectively.
2. Strike D with the plectrum, then - being careful to keep the left hand completely stable - no twisting and turning! -
3. use the pinkie instead of the plectrum to pluck the string, producing the note C (already stopped with the 2nd finger). To do this, make sure the segment of the finger adjoining the hand forms a straight line with the hand (as is usual on the guitar, lute, violoncello and practically every string instrument except the violin - funny that people don't notice this...), then pluck the string by bending it even more than usual, shortening the distance between the fingertip and the palm of the left hand. After plucking the string, the 4th finger follows through somewhat, heading in the direction of the player's toes and passing just over the E string. At best, this is an extremely effective way of executing a *short grace note*. It works well in particular because it doesn't require coordination with the right hand. It is very easy once you get the knack. Don't use too much force and scrape the tip off your finger!
4. As at letter *c*, let some of the notes on the 2nd string (A string), in this example C and the higher D, keep ringing when you play the open D string.

A further refinement in example *d* is that the 2nd finger can then remain on C until the end of the measure - in particular when the pinkie stops D, and also when C is produced, not by putting the 2nd finger on the string (it's already there!), but by taking the 4th finger off.



Mechanically, this *slide* is not much different from that at *b*, just with a different finger. Be careful though: if you stopped the quaver F# two notes earlier with the 3rd finger, you may well have to stretch the 1st finger back somewhat more than usual to reach the 1st fret - D#. Of course, if you stop F# *with the 2nd finger* (for no better reason than that people have been doing so for 250 uncomfortable and inefficient years), you may have to stretch the 2nd finger back even further - a real *extension* - which requires a lot more control than players usually notice. The pinkie itself on F# though, would make the D# particularly safe and easy, whereas the 3rd finger would harness static forces for the slide. Why don't you experiment with these different possibilities and see if you can spot various pros and cons?



This comment doesn't deal with any technical matter at all; it's just to remind you to observe the change of *key* (from *major* to *minor*). You change back again to the original key (G major) at measure 25.



The *hammer-on* is usually regarded as the opposite of the *pull-off*. In my book *The Mandolin Game* (Trekell, Hamburg), I use the term *hammer-off*, which I think better describes the reverse movement. After all, as we saw in *d*, the *pull-off* is a plucking movement, and the *hammer-on* just isn't, I'm afraid. In *g* you do it by striking the open A string, and then immediately (with a "hammer"-like movement) stopping the B^b vigorously with the 1st finger. The forceful finger movement makes the note sound, you don't strike it with the plectrum. The speed is even more important than the force.



The teacher in me just couldn't resist giving various contrasting examples of a *triplet*. I'll talk about the others at *i* and *j* in due course.

When examining the situation at *h*, it's advisable - as so often! - to look first of all at what the *right* hand needs to do.

So please try the following.



What to do:

1. Strike the open D string, making sure that the plectrum ends up resting against the A string. Wait a few seconds in this *resting position* (this term is discussed in detail in *The Mandolin Game*), then
2. allow the plectrum to *fall* through the A string(s) and come to rest against the E string. Wait a few seconds again, then
3. play A by raising the plectrum so as to catch only the lower of the pair of A strings (see *c* above for an explanation of the sign ∇) bringing the plectrum into position for a further downstroke onto the D string.
4. Please practise this stroking pattern slowly and carefully for a few minutes, until you can do it easily and fairly automatically - it needs to work smoothly and reliably even when your attention is focussed on other matters.

When you feel confident that the right hand will do what you want it to when you want it to,

5. instead of making the initial downstroke on the *open* D string, replace D with the note G (as in example *h*), fingered with the pinkie. Wait a few seconds, leave the 4th finger securely where it is, and then - as in 2 above -
6. allow the plectrum to *fall* through the A string(s) and come to rest against the E string. Both G and A will now sound together. Wait a few seconds again, then
7. stop the note B \flat with the 1st finger, at the very same moment sounding it with an upstroke on one string (as practised in 3 and 4).
8. As your pinkie should still be stopping the note G so far, use your 3rd finger for the slide from C \sharp to D. Your pinkie will leave the G when you make the slide.
9. The most expedient finger for the next note, C \natural , is the 1st finger, which at the beginning of the next measure then slides back to B \flat at the first fret.



This shows yet another way of playing a triplet. The rhythm will be as in *h*, but the *sound* of the notes should be interestingly different.

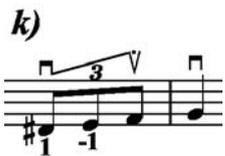
1. Use a *chromatic* fingering (adjacent fingers for adjacent frets) for the first four notes - so the note G will be fingered with the pinkie.
2. Both the down and the up-strokes for the triplet itself should strike *both* strings of the pair. To do this, make sure the plectrum is held at right angles to the instrument - try to make the up-stroke sound in every way like the down-stroke.

3. Strike the higher G with an up-stroke on one string. The contrasting sound is nice, but there is also a mechanical reason: after sounding the note with an up-stroke on one string,
4. the plectrum then continues its upward path out over the G string, which it can then comfortably strike with a down-stroke.



How to do the *glide-stroke*:

1. Right hand: The plectrum strikes both the G and the D strings, practically at the same time. I have indicated two joined down-strokes, but you might also think of it as one stroke with a slight interruption.
2. Left hand: Finger the note C# with the pinkie. At the very moment the open D string sounds, relax the pinkie, leaving it resting lightly on the string, so that the note C# stops ringing. (If you're curious, look up what a harpsichord player 300 years ago did for an *acciaccatura*.)



And yet a third way of playing a triplet.

A preliminary exercise for the right hand:

1. Play the D string with a down-stroke.
2. Wait for the time value of two quavers of a quaver triplet, then
3. play the third quaver with an up-stroke on only one of the pair of D strings.

It's not hard, but please practise this exercise for a couple of minutes to make it automatic:



And the the left hand:

1. Finger D# with the 1st finger.
2. The note E is sounded not by a plectrum stroke, but by the 1st finger *sliding* energetically from D# to E. (You may need to suppress an urge to make a stroke with the plectrum at this moment...)
3. Stop the note F# - sounded by an up-stroke on one string - with the 3rd finger, then G with the pinkie.

Concluding comments

If you have trouble with the 4th finger, you certainly aren't the only one. If you seriously want to improve matters though, stop believing that the problem is due to an unchangeable anatomical reality. It probably isn't, but rather

caused by an inefficient use of the left hand - which you can certainly change, if you get the right information which oddly seems to be in extremely short supply...).

Most of those really good players who use the pinkie with apparent ease also believe (wrongly, but it's nice to have something or someone to blame...) that the problem is based on the way the hand is built, and compensate by long hours of practice. This often causes more bad intonation than they care to admit (due to faulty distribution of forces in the hand), and may even lead to arthritis in later years.

The good news is - there are sensible ways to do things!

As Linda, another of my online students, recently wrote (not to me - but I do have her permission to quote her):
"What I'm getting from Keith is a smart way to play that will not wear my body out.I find that my playing is much more consistent now than before."

And my friend and respected colleague Mark David, conductor of the Providence Mandolin Orchestra and himself a fine guitarist, authorised me to quote this regarding the mandolin:

"I have been enjoying your ideas of left hand fingering. I am using much more 'closed position' fingerings. You know what? You're right! It is better by far and causes much less stress on the hand. And makes things more musical AND more fun!"

Perhaps ***Pinkie Blues*** will give you some insights into the matter and make your playing more fun too.

Good luck!

Keith Harris (Marburg, Germany.)

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Which One to Use Instalment 12

A Festive Instalment (we're getting in early)

In this series, you will have noticed that I often describe the experience of some of my students. I like doing this, because I simply have to describe what I observe. It means that my suggestions are based on things that are currently being experienced by real people.

This Instalment is based on the experiences of Marietta, one of my Skype students in Vienna, who incidentally has given me permission to use her name. Her original interest in the mandolin was prompted by the goal of playing Christmas music with her husband, who plays the guitar. By the time you read this, Christmas 2013 will in fact be just around the corner, so the Instalment is topical. It's also Christmassy in a number of other ways:

- It uses a Christmas tune - probably the most famous of all - Silent Night, Holy Night, which incidentally was written by two compatriots of Marietta, Joseph Mohr (words) and Conrad Franz Xaver Gruber (music).
- It's a holiday Instalment - nothing strenuous, just doing things a little different from usual, and in the easiest possible way. (Please don't get me wrong: the easiest way doesn't mean sloppy or messy, it simply means efficient.)

A bit of background

Marietta has been taking (Internet) lessons with me for about four months at the time of writing - in the hot German August (well, I'm in Germany, she's in Austria, but it's hot there too!) of 2013. Four months ago, she had only a smattering of previous musical knowledge, let alone prior knowledge of the mandolin.

This is not the right place to explain the reason for every activity we are going to try on the mandolin, although, as my students know, I certainly could. But I think you will have fun trying out my suggestions anyway. At the end of the Instalment, I'll put two approaches to fingering the tune - mine and the more common way - next to each other, so you can see the differences. Perhaps you'll experience the mandolin differently than before, and you might want to use some the ideas here to improve your own playing.

The method should be familiar from previous Instalments - just breaking the overall task down into bite-size chunks, which can be easily managed.

Please bear in mind that Marietta doesn't have any ingrained mandolin habits, which could make my suggestions seem like weird contradictions. This makes both our lives easier than if we had to sort out lots of wrong habits. If you have been playing for a while however, you most probably will have lots of habits, and anything, which is different from these habits, might well feel peculiar and even wrong. So please compensate as best you can, and reserve judgment until you have tried the practical activities described here fairly and seriously.

Of course, by experiencing the innate logic and effectiveness of the technical aspects, Marietta (and you!) will be able to transfer the technical approach involved to similar situations. The process of examining specific situations, and eventually deriving useful generalisations, is of course the way most scientific thinking works.

Please join me (and Marietta) in looking at the building blocks for the tune Silent Night, Holy Night. The first stage is making the most basic building blocks - the notes - sound as good as possible.

Please use Example 1 to sharpen your awareness of quality of sound.

Very slowly, play G (the first note of the tune, which after all is pretty basic) with each finger. The tram-tracks sign means to make an actual break. Please use this pause to relax, feel good, and then to make sure that the next respective finger is optimally placed. If the notes you make sometimes sound different from one another, don't get upset and tense about it. Do try to think about why they don't all sound the same though, which of course they should, and see if you can influence the matter.

Ex. 1

In Example 2, again try changing fingers on the same note, but this time without any break in the sound. If you really do it correctly, the note should begin to sound the same, no matter whether you change fingers or play the note several times using the same finger. Please make each note very long, so that you can focus on the quality of the finger change. Please also alternate between down and up strokes, as indicated by the stroking signs. There are subtle reasons for practising this way, and the exercise will give you a greater sense of ease.

Ex. 2

This sign ∇ (note the dot in the middle of the stroke sign) means to sound only one string of the pair on the upstroke - make the sound deliberately very light, in contrast to the rich and full sound of the downstroke.

This sign (number 3 in circle) means to play all the notes within the long bracket on the 3rd string.

Example 3 gives you a chance to practise the first two notes of the tune without worrying about rhythm. Some things to be particularly careful of:

- Please play all the other examples from 1 to 10 on the 3rd string too. (Examples 11 and 12 deal with other strings as well.) Please be careful to play G with the 1st finger and A with the 3rd finger.
- Use alternate down and up strokes as indicated, and make sure that one note rings until the next note begins - utterly smooth, no break.
- **VERY IMPORTANT:** the 1st finger applies constant pressure throughout the whole exercise. The hand should also remain totally motionless; the 3rd finger is the only thing that moves.

Ex. 3

Please bear in mind that we are not yet playing the tune. Rather, we are making sure that the various physical skills we will need are readily available to us.

Example 4 explores one way of getting to the next new note in the tune. Please try it for fun, even if it's not the method you would usually use. Before you try the Example though, I'd like to emphasise a few things which I think are very important, and which you shouldn't overlook:

- Please be careful to use the stroking indicated.
- Please observe the caesura ("tram-tracks" - interruption to the sound) after the lower note. At this stage, we only want to change from G to E, not the other way around, so you should take your hands away from the mandolin here.
- The wiggly line is to remind you to drag the 1st finger slowly between the two notes, really enjoying hearing all the sounds in between (cf. Instalment 2). And please remember to keep pressing down the string before, after and during the shift - don't vary the pressure.
- The thumb is there to support what the fingers do. Loosen it when you slide, so it doesn't impede the change. (See *The Mandolin Game-GAME G* for detailed discussion of the thumb.)
- Repeat the exercise as often as you like, but please only in one direction, from G to E. Have a few seconds rest in between repetitions. A feeling of normality and control is important. BE THE BOSS! (And the boss takes his time...)

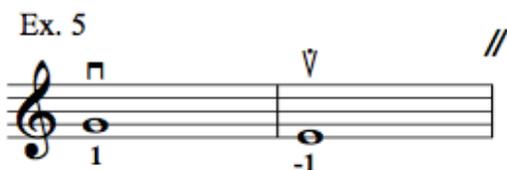
So now:



Make the up-stroke at the very moment your finger reaches E. Does your finger in fact "know" when it reaches the lower note? If it does, you're ready to try Example 5.

Please note:

- the only difference between Examples 4 and 5 is the speed at which the 1st finger moves.
- Please don't try to make the super-quick change all at once though. Rather, increase the speed of the shift gradually.
- **VERY IMPORTANT and SUBTLE:** The notes themselves remain very long. What changes, as you get better, is the speed with which the finger moves between the notes. The final goal is to sustain G until the precise moment you would like to hear E, and at that very moment, make the up-stroke and the shift simultaneously. At best, there should be utterly no break or interruption between the notes. The shift is a movement of the whole hand, not just of the finger. Please have a few seconds rest after each try.



Your result is perfect if G just keeps sounding, until it is interrupted by E.

Example 6 now combines the skills you have practised so far (especially those in Examples 3 and 5).

Please remember

- to keep a constant pressure on the 1st finger - both when you play A, and also during the shift down to E;
- to coordinate the stroke exactly with the finger.



Until now, we have been examining ways to make just the notes we need - very basic building blocks indeed! The next stage is to organise these sounds in a certain way, so that the tune is recognisable. So we are adding the factor of rhythm.

A peculiarity of this tune is that it is almost always written in 6/8 time in Europe, but in English speaking countries also sometimes in 3/4 time. Here it's in 3/4 time.

Example 7 deals with rhythm.

- Before you play it on the mandolin, please count and tap the rhythm - slowly and very exactly.
- I've used the open D-string here to focus attention on rhythm without other complications.
- Even if it seems unusual, please use an up-stroke where indicated. I've got my reasons...
- Please don't get the counting (written-out words) mixed up with the fingering (just numerals).



Things to watch out for in Example 8:

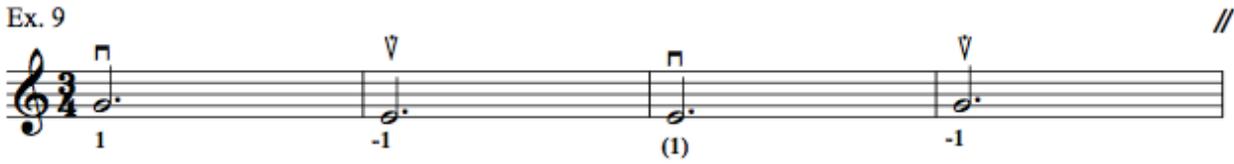
- Careful - the numerals in Example 8 indicate the fingering. The written-out counting in Example 7 is an aid to getting the rhythm right, so please don't confuse the purpose of the numbers.
- You have already practised playing the pitch (highness or lowness) of the notes you find in Example 8. They are exactly the same pitch as in Example 6.
- The additional thing to cope with here though is the rhythm (duration - how long or short the notes are), which you have also practised, in Example 7.
- Feel free to practise the change from G to E with the slow slide of Example 4 if you want to. As you get more sure of yourself, you can make the slide quicker and quicker, as in Examples 5 and 6.

Notice I have indicated a break after the change downwards. You should concentrate on making the change completely smooth - no break... After playing the long E, make the break, take a few seconds rest, and then play the two bars (with a break after E) again as often as you like.



When we play the whole tune though, of course we don't make a break after the note E. Rather, we hold the note for as long as you think the word night (song lyrics) should be held, and then move the finger inaudibly back to G.

Example 9 gives you a chance to practise just these pitches, without the additional complication of rhythm.



When you feel this is working and you can change in both directions with ease, try combining rhythm and pitch:



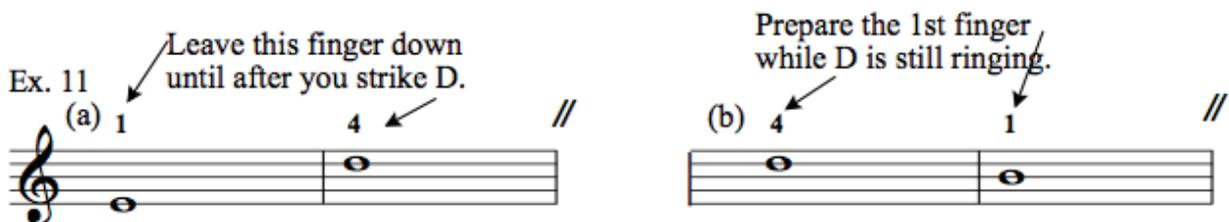
Both before and after the note E, you need to play the note G, both times with the same finger. Often, it's not a good idea to try to slide a finger in one direction and then immediately in the other, any more than you can change the direction of a car without first stopping for a while, in between changing from forwards to backwards. In the case of our tune though, the length that E sounds for is like keeping the car stationary for long enough for the inertia (remember the word from high school physics?) to dissipate.

The next two examples give you a chance to familiarise yourself with other techniques useful for the rest of the tune.

Example 11:

(a) After the low E comes a high D. This is very easy to play, but please be careful to leave the E-finger down until after you strike D. Please stop D with the pinkie. One reason (and not even the most important one!) is that it is much more relaxed than the traditional 3rd finger.

(b) The next note then, B, requires a smooth transition from the D. To make it smooth, you should press firmly with the 1st finger on B before you even think of releasing the pinkie.



Among other things, Example 12 reveals why the pinkie and not the unfortunately customary 3rd finger is the right finger for D. The reason is the subsequent F, of course, which is easy to reach from 4, but much harder from 3, the finger most books prescribe. An important principle which is usually overlooked, is that it's the 2nd finger which determines the spatial position of the hand. It should continue hovering over the 3rd fret, keeping the hand in place, regardless of what the 1st finger does. So when you finger F, the distance between the 1st and the 2nd fingers is greater than when you play B. There is no hand movement - lateral or otherwise - involved for these notes.

Ex. 12 4 This span is wider 1 than 4 this one, 1 and the difference should be not the distance 2-4, but rather 2-1.

Important: The 2nd finger, although it does not stop a note here, determines the spatial position of the hand. It continues hovering over the 3rd fret, keeping the hand from moving, regardless of what the other fingers do.

Okay, as promised, the two very different ways of approaching the whole tune

Silent Night, Holy Night
(Special Christmas techniques)

Non-standard (but very good!)

Silent Night, Holy Night
("The same procedure as every year, James!"
Do you know the wonderful TV sketch *Dinner for One*?)

The standard (and pretty bad) approach.

Which One to Use
A Series About Mandolin Technique
Instalment 14

(What) Do Composers Think About Instruments?

At the time of writing, I've just accepted an invitation to be Composer-in-Residence at the **Classical Mandolin Society of America's** 2014 Convention in Portland. I'm really excited about seeing many American friends I haven't seen for a long time, and of course it will also be great fun to watch Jim Bates (whom I've known, liked and admired for around three decades now) conducting some of my music. I had lots of positive feedback, by the way, on my *Three Miniatures* (commissioned by the **Australian Mandolin Music Association**), which were played at the 2012 **Federation of Australasian Mandolin Ensembles** gathering in Fremantle, Australia, conducted there by my long-time friend and colleague, Mark Davis, and shortly afterwards at that year's CMSA Convention, where they were in Jim's wonderful hands. I think the CMSA idea of having a person who makes a musical blueprint (a "composer") rubbing shoulders with the people who convert the marks on the paper into sound waves, is really great, because it makes the whole process of music-making more real and human.

I'm glad people generally seem to like playing things I've written. I think one reason is that I try to make all the instrument parts interesting - not just a melody on top and a boring accompaniment underneath. I know I'm also careful when I *compose* (a big word!), that what I write is playable for normal people who just don't have the time to practice four hours a day. I do expect them to do their best though! And of course my music also suits the instruments of a plucked string ensemble, which I claim to know extremely well.

People who have been following this series will know that lots of my views on mandolin (and guitar, for that matter) technique are, well, *non-standard*. This is particularly reflected in the technical suggestions (fingering, stroking...), which I often add to the written parts. In this series, I discuss various aspects of how I see the plucked string universe, and of course I look forward to talking about my views at the Portland Convention. For now though, here are some insights into a few things that go through my head when I write music.

This Instalment is mainly about two seconds or so of playing time of my *Diamantina Suite*, which was published by Vogt and Fritz of Schweinfurt in 2009. The first concert performance of these three movements was in Brisbane (Australia), when I conducted the orchestra at that year's FAME gathering, which coincided with anniversary celebrations in the state of Queensland. So many Australasian readers of this article will be familiar with the music.

Only recently, Bettina, one of my students in Germany, had an Internet session on *Leaving Patras*, the first movement of the *Diamantina Suite*. By telling you about that session, I can perhaps give you an idea of some of the things I think about when I write music. I certainly don't just write generic music; rather, I write for specific instruments and have a very clear notion of how I'd like it to sound - and also *how* to make it sound that way.

Bettina, a very alert and musical 23-year old student, has been working with me now for around two years, so she has a lot of background about why I recommend certain things. Often during a lesson, I just sit sipping tea, smiling at the computer screen and admiringly watch her applying principles we've talked about, giving a gentle virtual nudge from time to time. If (as admittedly happens pretty often) I recommend extremely non-standard solutions, I of course try to explain and justify my recommendations. Bettina examined first the very innocent-looking **motif** consisting of measure four, together with the *upbeat* at the end of measure three and the count of one in the fifth measure:

The connecting point between composer and player is usually the written music. Many composers go to a lot of trouble to express clearly what they'd like the player to do, and I certainly do! So please bear with me while I remind you of a few things about the written details of Figure 1.

Fig. 1

(Vivace)

upbeat, pickup, anacrusis...

1 3 4

(ff) measure 4

- i. As this example comes a few bars into the piece, there would of course usually be neither **time signature** nor the tempo word **Vivace** at this point, because they have already appeared at the beginning. That's why I put them in brackets; to understand this article, you really do need that information.
- ii. The dynamic sign for **very loud** in brackets really does appear in the printed music and not just in this article. In the published part though, it has also already appeared a few bars earlier, so really still applies until there is another differing indication. As the volume is important to me as the composer, however, and I suspect the player might have forgotten in the meantime, I take the risk of appearing patronising, and state it again as a reminder. This is a precaution, not a necessity, and hence the brackets.
- iii. The figure contains two different standard uses of Arabic numbers: the one in a circle means a string number - the 1st string (E); the numerals by themselves indicate my fingering suggestions. I think the composer can reasonably expect players to know these common conventions.
- iv. The curved line (a *slur*) here indicates that I'd like the tremolo technique - as I describe in detail in the written introduction to the score. The down-stroke sign over the note A indicates that the tremolo stops with a down-stroke at this note.

Here's an account of our session.

Right hand:

- We agreed to leave out the tremolo for the moment, just because there were enough other things to talk about without this special matter.
- We quickly agreed that alternate strokes are pretty standard for the two quavers of the pickup/lead-in/upbeat (*anacrusis* is a nice technical term).
- During the 20 minutes or so we spent working on Figure 1, as we didn't have to worry about tremolo, we could concentrate on other aspects like sound quality and articulation (here *legato* = smooth). I suggested for practice purposes playing the crotchets sometimes with alternate strokes and sometimes only with down-strokes. My reasons for this approach are much too complicated to elaborate on in this article, but perhaps you'd like to try practising with both

stroking methods, and see if you notice any interesting phenomena-especially in the area of left/right coordination.

Left hand:

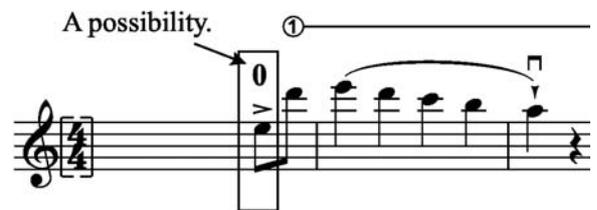
- The fingering numbers in the figure may perhaps seem obvious, which would also mean unnecessary, and of course one reason for writing them in was to save the player a bit of trouble.

It's not quite as simple as that though.

You see, it would also be *possible* to use the open string for the note E, as in Figure 2.

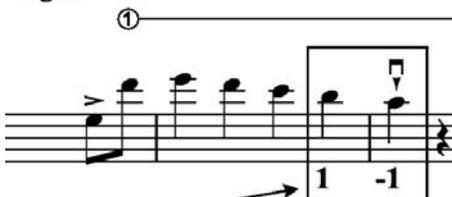
The sound of the open string however is different from the fingered note, so my suggestion in Figure 1 has importance for how I would like the sound to be (*not* open), and 1 is arguably the most convenient finger in view of the following notes.

Fig. 2



- The fingering in Figure 1 doesn't require any mental gymnastics, and it even accords with traditional position theory. In fact, instead of finger numbers, I could have written simply *fourth position*. If you know the previous articles in this series though, you might guess why I didn't do this.

Fig. 3



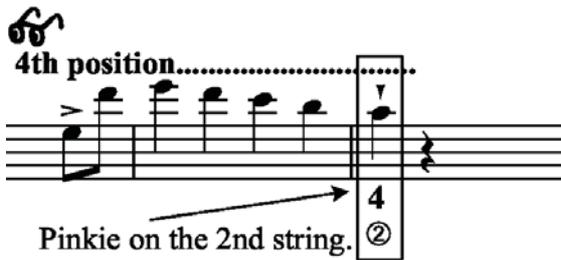
- Consider now the number in a circle: the straight line following indicates that I would like all the notes under the line - including the A - played on the E-string¹. This implies a shift of some sort just as clearly as fingering numbers would have done. By not making fingering suggestions, I leave it up to the player how to go about it. One simple solution, assuming you finger the note B with the 1st finger, could be just to move the first finger from B to A, as in Figure 3.

This fingering strategy would also not even contradict traditional position theory, and could be described in the language of that system either as a shift from the 4th to the 3rd position, or perhaps as an extension backwards, while staying in the 4th position.

- As mandolin players are often raised with a belief that shifts are risky and difficult (which is not true), whereas staying in one **position** is safe and easy (this is also by no means true), some might be tempted to finger the note A on the A-string (12th fret) with the pinkie. Such players might even feel virtuous for having obeyed the rules and stayed the whole time in the 4th position (see Figure 4). But please read footnote 1 again to see one of several reasons why I think that is an awful idea.

¹ The most obvious reason is pretty easy to understand: notes on the same string sound the same as each other, whereas notes on different strings sound different. I'd like the A to sound like the other notes it belongs with.

Fig. 4 - *A really bad idea...*



This fingering does in fact avoid changing position, which however would be an advantage exclusively for shiftophobics. Two reasons why non-phobics should not do it though:

- i. It's a lot harder (accident prone!) than practically any shift I can think of, and
- ii: Even if it sounded impeccable - in tune, "clean" etc. (which is highly unlikely), it would still sound different to a note of the same pitch on the E-string.

So far, of course, we have only talked about the notes before and after measure 4, but hardly about the measure itself.

Initially, Bettina opted for the standard fingering solution shown in Figure 5:

If you use the fingering indicated in this example, and most well-informed mandolin players on the planet would, many people would say you are playing in the 4th position (because the 1st finger is on the note B on the E-string and so on - see Instalment 6 for a detailed explanation). A more elaborate description might add that you are also using the 2nd *finger pattern*, a theoretical system based on the spacing between fingers.

Fig. 5 - A textbook solution.



(See again Instalment 6 - especially Figure 10ff. - for this related matter.)

Being curious and, contrary to what some people think, open-minded, I watched Bettina practising the notes for a while, and observed her reactions. I thought it just might work for her, as she is very skilful and also as the distance between frets is less, further up the fingerboard. In that case we wouldn't need to disturb any sleeping dogs. After playing the notes half a dozen times though, she began to look unhappy, so I thought we should discuss the situation. I pointed out that the distribution of fingers (remember: so-called 2nd finger pattern?) was anatomically not especially comfortable. I suggested another fingering much more in keeping with the way most hands are constructed:

Fig. 6



This fingering makes child's play of the motif, if you know what to do. The two most obvious trouble spots for the unwary or uninitiated:

- i. Different fingers for each of the two Ds.
- ii. The shift between C and B.

Bettina had already encountered the technical issues involved, but it nonetheless took five patient and concentrated minutes to begin applying these known principles consistently to these particular notes. If you happen to see the printed music, you'll notice that, unlike in Figure 6, in the final analysis I have left most of the fingering up to the player - of course hoping against hope that at some distant future time people might automatically use the fingering shown in Figure 6 - which is certainly what the composer, teacher and theorist in me hopes for. I'm also realistic though, and often avoid making suggestions which I know most people would find so bizarre that they

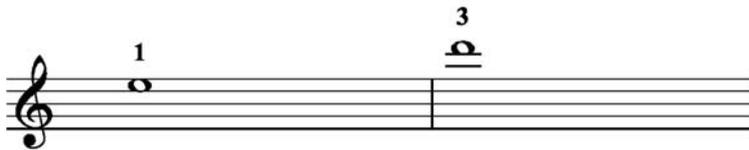
would never trust me again - except for my own students, of course, who follow even my most outlandish-looking suggestions with delight and complete trust. In most cases, after a while they have internalized the relevant principles to such an extent that they come up with exactly the same ideas even without my intervention, and I then have nothing else to do but say "congratulations!"

To conclude this Instalment, why don't you try the consciousness-raising exercises Bettina and I used to cope with at least the *first trouble spot* mentioned in Figure 6?

Please spend a couple of relaxed, concentrated and thoughtful minutes with each exercise - and follow my guidelines exactly. After all, you don't have to adopt my ideas later on if you don't want to, but you really should give them a fair chance before you dismiss them.

First preparatory exercise:

Fig. 7



Leave the 1st finger down until *after* you have actually struck the next note. The note E should keep sounding for a short time after D has begun to sound. So, for a short time, you should apply the correct pressure to *both* fingers. Then, carefully raise *only* the 1st finger, leaving the 3rd finger still on D.

Next one:

Fig. 8

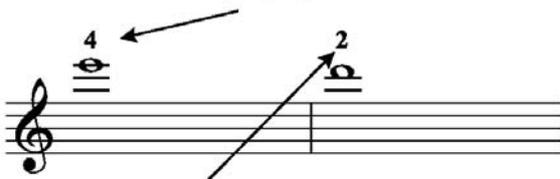
When you strike E, leave the 3rd finger on D. Continue pressing with both fingers for a few seconds, and then lift *only* the 3rd finger, leaving the pinkie on E, which keeps sounding.



Possibly the trickiest step:

Fig. 9

i. Initially, only the 4th finger and *not* the 2nd finger presses.



ii. Leave the pinkie in place and the note E ringing, and place the *2nd* finger on the D as well. Now, 4 and 2 are both applying the correct pressure.

iii. Play D by striking the string and simultaneously raising the pinkie.

Please be *extremely* conscientious and alert now! Remember the situation you were in at the end of Figure 8? Just to make sure: The note E is still sounding, because the pinkie is still fingering it. You have, however, *raised* your *3rd* finger, which until recently had been on D. Now, leaving the pinkie on E, allow the *2nd* finger to move towards the pinkie and finger the note D as well. At his moment, *both 4 and 2* are pressed down. When and only when you feel that the 2nd finger is doing its job properly, play D by raising the pinkie.

Then:

Fig. 10

This is analogous to Figure 9:
Make sure that the 2nd finger is still firmly on D, which therefore continues sounding, while you finger C with the 1st finger *as well*. At this moment, both 2 and 1 are pressing. When you feel the right moment has come, play C by making a stroke and *at the same time* raising the 2nd finger.
NB: The 1st finger is *already* in place!

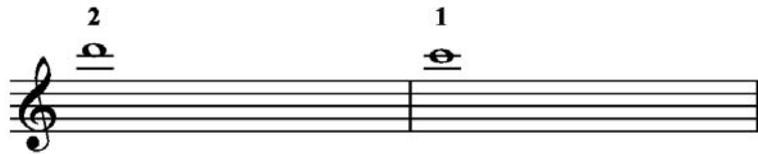
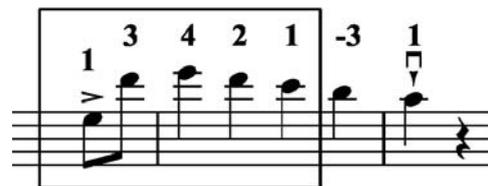


Fig. 11

This takes us without interruption this far:



If you are wondering now how to change with utterly no interruption from C with the 1st finger to B with the 3rd, see Instalment 2, where Example 12 illustrates exactly how to execute the required technical procedure.

Of course you should revise not simply Example 12, but **ALL** of Instalment 2, so that you don't miss any vital detail.

Keith Harris - exited Composer-in-Residence in Portland! - Marburg.

Which Finger: Instalment 15

Why O Why?

I first became aware of fingering (the strategy of which finger can best stop a given note) as a subject one should actively think about, when I took violin lessons for a while as a teenager. The music for the examination system then in Australia was published in special books containing the choice of acceptable pieces and advice on how to tackle them. I remember candidates being encouraged to think about "the important matter of fingering". It took me a long time, though, before I realized there was more to the subject than merely deciding whether to play something in the 3rd position or the 1st position, or even on the G or the D string. But even the idea that there are choices to be made by the player, and that everything is not pre-ordained, was an eye-opener.

Much of my present thinking on fingering arose by working with amateur plucked string ensembles. Almost every player of the mandolin (a plucked string, horizontally-held instrument) scrupulously follows an arbitrary and extremely normative system originally enunciated a few hundred years ago for the violin (a bowed-string instrument held under the chin, and bearing utterly no similarity with the mandolin) and which hasn't changed much since then. I noticed that there was a lot of regularity about which notes sounded bad, and began to trace a consistent and predictable pattern. Contrary to what some people seem to believe, the pattern has nothing to do with how fast or how high the notes are. This Instalment will discuss just a few of these many regularities. Some of them have to do with the left hand, some with the right, and some with both. Like many such matters, **Case no. 1** sounds so trivial as to be improbable.

The experiment:

If you play in a group, see if you can enlist your friends' aid for the following experiment: First, make it clear to the players that they only get one chance, and compensating after an initial mistake means falsifying the result. The experiment does require an element of surprise, and it also involves everybody doing something at the same time, so ask them to practise the game first by clapping their hands on "**one!**", only once, when you count out loud "one - two - three - four - **one!**" When you feel everybody understands the basic rules, change the handclap to making a single down-stroke on the A string. It's important that they shouldn't practise this fairly simple task; the aim of the experiment is to ascertain if they can do it accurately without any special preparation and a couple of false starts. After all, when they perform, they also only get one chance at getting it right.

Chances are, more than one or two people will strike a string other than the A string. If this is the case - and I assure you I often conduct the experiment and am seldom surprised - I think it's worth looking for the cause, and finding a solution.

There seem to be a number of possible causes, so in no particular order:

- i. Do you really think everybody in your group knows for sure which string is the A string? I wish I thought that - I used to...
- ii. Increase the challenge a little. Say "play the open **2nd** string", and see what happens.
- iii. As with hitting a baseball, golf ball or tennis ball, the preparation preceding the stroke determines the accuracy. Every sports coach knows this, but many mandolin teachers don't seem to have noticed. How did you say you prepare a stroke on a particular string?

The solutions seem obvious:

- Learn the standard basic terms, like the names of the notes and the numbers of the strings, for example. This is a really good idea, I think. It makes conversations a lot more meaningful.
- Don't take any technical matter at all for granted. There are good ways and not-so-good ways to do even things which seem easy. Good mandolin players, like good sportspeople, make hard things look easy. Try to get sensible information. (See for example [The Mandolin Game](#), Game C.)

Case no. 2 is also typical of numerous things which are overlooked for the very reason that they seem so unlikely:

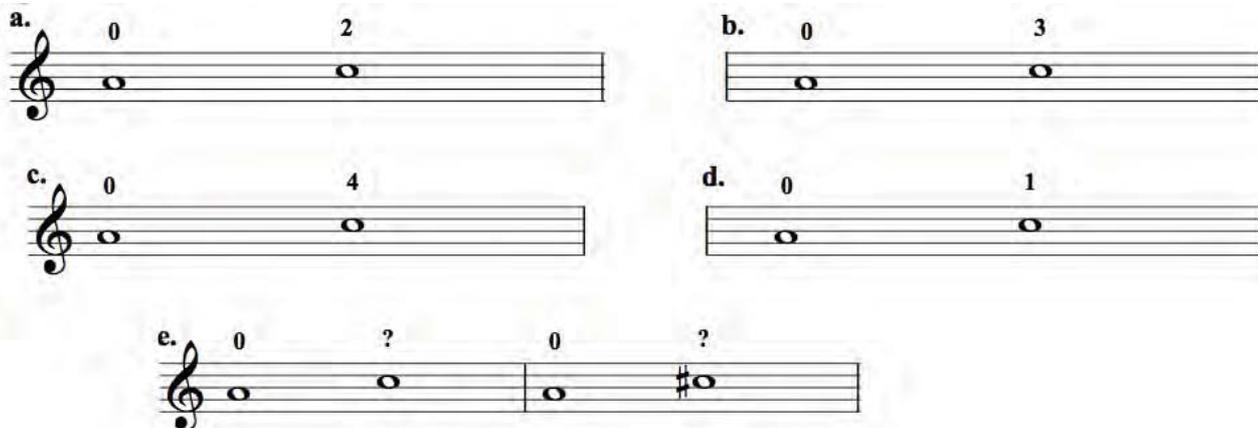
I maintain that, statistically, a stopped (fingered) note immediately after an open string is very often not good. Its "not-goodness" can take any conceivable form: it can be unclear, simply wrong (like F instead of F#), a combination of both, or something else - just not the way the player really intends it to be. It seems that players mentally put such events into the category of regrettable accidents that happen sometimes, but are an inevitable fact of life one has to live with. As a teacher and ensemble leader, I disagree vehemently.

Please try the situations in Figure 1. If you then still think my imagined observations are pedantic nonsense, then the world is as it should be and it's just my deluded problem. If there's some truth in what I say though, perhaps it's worth doing something about it.

Suggestions for how to proceed:

- It goes without saying that one should try each situation very slowly, observantly and honestly. Anything else would of course be self-deception.
- Please apply the following procedures in turn to each situation:
 - First stroke each note with a down-stroke.
 - After you've tried this for a few minutes, compare the results with alternate down and up-strokes.
 - Finally, sound the first note with a down-stroke and the next by a hammer-on.

Fig. 1



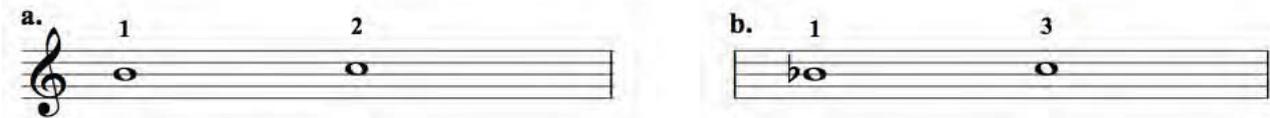
Considerations:

- i. In situations a - d, among other things you can examine if all fingers are equally effective. If properly trained, they should all be equally useful.
- ii. In situation e (two measures), try different fingers at each question mark to see if that variable makes a difference. It shouldn't.
- iii. If the order of notes in each situation is reversed - first a fingered note and then an open string - does that make a difference?
- iv. If you agree with my assertion (Case no. 2) that the fingered note after an open string is in fact disproportionately unreliable, please see if you agree with my possible

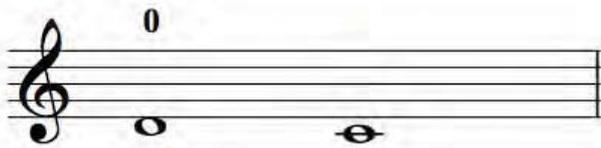
Explanation:

Playing an open string principally involves only the right (plectrum) hand. Playing a closed (fingered) note though demands many things of the left hand as well, every one of which must be done successfully. The details are treated exhaustively in [The Mandolin Game](#) (especially Games P and Q) but in a generalized sense, perhaps the most obvious different factor is that stopping a note requires a much higher level of force than an open string, which requires none whatever, at least from the stopping hand.

Compare situations a and b in Figure 2 with the corresponding examples (a and b) in Figure 1.

Fig. 2

Many people find the results of Figure 2, where both notes are stopped, meaning there is no big change of pressure requirements, dramatically better than in Figure 1, which involves a big change of state, from negligible pressure requirement for an open string to a lot more for the fingered note. As I said, there is more to it than what is discussed here. My object here is mainly to point out that there really is a technical issue in this context, and that the matter really should be addressed in teaching. [The Mandolin Game](#) does this. Figure 3 illustrates a rather special instance of the phenomenon.

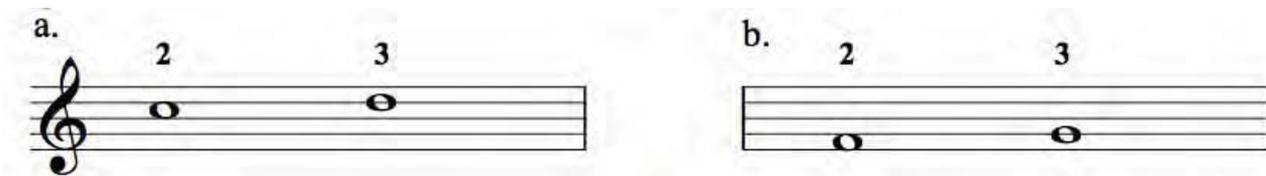
Fig. 3

If this situation happens very often - as of course it does - that very fact makes it special. I recall even many years ago describing the note C on the G-string as the most difficult note on the mandolin. In saying this, I intended the provocative claim to arouse interest and hopefully get people to take care. On the one hand, it's obviously not difficult, in the obvious sense that running a marathon or solving a complicated mathematical problem is difficult. On the other hand though, it was (and still is!) difficult, however, inasmuch as the note C often sounds awful. It takes special care to make it sound good, and I think that makes it "difficult" - not to be taken for granted.

Discussion:

- i. I do think that the sound is musically most convincing if the D preceding the C is the open string, and not the note stopped at the 7th fret on the 4th string.
- ii. That means that the C fulfils the general condition of Case no. 2 - a stopped note following an open string - with the attendant problems described above.
- iii. Not only that though, it also involves a change of string, really itself a special subject (see [TMG](#) - Game F).
- iv. The problem is made worse if the player tries to play the C with the pinkie - as ALL mandolin books prescribe. (The pinkie should of course be as reliable as its three companions, but...)
- v. So please take care!

Case no. 3 touches on an issue which frequently occurs in this series: the very basis of traditional fingering theory. I, my students and an increasing number of well-informed plucked string musicians, regard the situation shown in Figure 4 with dismay:

Fig. 4

Forgive me for asking a not-really-innocent question.

The question: Would you need the indicated finger numbers to help your fingering decision?

Answer: Most probably not. The fingering indication is to play the notes in the so-called 1st position, which is what would most readily suggest itself to most mandolin players anyway. If asked, many players could even name this position. Far fewer would recognize the 2nd **finger pattern** though, characterized by a whole step between the 2nd and 3rd fingers (please think about this statement).

My simple observation is that it seldom works - meaning that both notes are clean, in tune and connected. As with the other cases discussed so far, most mandolinists overlook this fact. After all, it's what the experts always (sorry, I know of awfully few exceptions!) prescribe, so why question it? It must be right, and therefore nothing can go wrong...

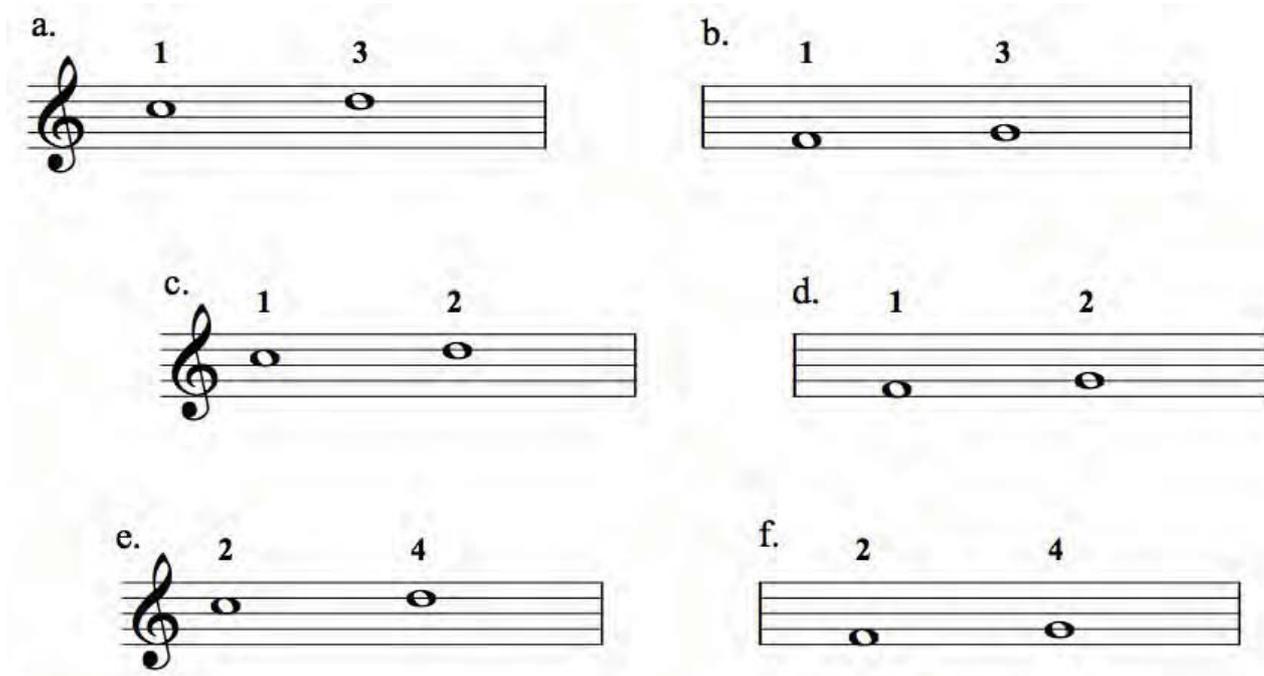
Please try it yourself. Remember that even most of these experts generally agree that the F-finger should continue stopping until after G has been sounded, and very many hands are either too small or not trained to do this. This principle is no different from on the guitar, lute or even bowed-string instruments. And please don't get me wrong: I know as well as anybody else that there are exceptions where one or even more of the parameters cleanness, in-tuneness and smoothness do work. They usually involve among others:

- i. people who practice a lot,
- ii. people with long fingers and, perhaps to a slightly lesser extent,
- iii. violin players.

Please try Figure 4, slowly, carefully and observantly, for a minute or so. If you don't observe these conditions, you will simply be falsifying your impressions and kidding yourself.

By way of comparison, try then the fingerings indicated in

Fig. 5



For what it's worth, I make three predictions:

- i. If you are conscientious, after a few minutes, any of the fingerings in Figure 5 will work better than Figure 4. (Practising helps – gee!)
- ii. At first, you will prefer c and d over the other possibilities. If you persevere longer, however, this preference might well change.
- iii. If you are first and foremost a good guitarist, have for some reason now started playing the mandolin, and use the fingering in Figure 4 only because somebody has told you that's what mandolin players do, a number of things will happen:
 - You will instantly prefer the fingerings 1-3 and 2-4 in Figure 5, which will seem as refreshing to you as the first draught of cool and clear water after hours of wandering through a hot and dry desert.
 - You will be able easily to use the fingering in Figure 4 c and d, but you won't want to anymore, because you now can't see any reason for it, when 1-3 or 2-4, among other possibilities, are simply physically easier.
 - You will perhaps wonder why anybody at all thinks Figure 4 is a good idea. Please don't be uncharitable though; there are historical reasons behind it, even if they are really not very rational and convincing.

The list of predictable and readily avoidable weaknesses goes on and on. They are most noticeable not with star professionals, who from a young age practice hours a day. Such people go to the trouble to make even inefficient things work - at least until arthritis or RSI or back pain put paid to their industriousness. I think the people who are currently poorly served by the expert opinion leaders are the serious amateurs, people who really want to play well but don't have as much time to practise, and rely on getting sound advice. I am convinced that there are sensible and practical solutions to many problems. But the solutions certainly won't become common knowledge as long as the problems themselves are not even recognised. The spouses of alcoholics don't have a monopoly on "denial"; it's much more rampant among mandolin teachers.

Keith Harris, Marburg.

Which Finger?

But Does It **SOUND** Good?

INSTALMENT 16

Before you spend the kids' inheritance on a Lloyd Loar, remember the three main factors in making a good sound. In this order:

- 1. The player.***
- 2. The plectrum.***
- 3. (a long way later) The instrument.***

Defining some terms: Tuning and Intonation

Tuning is part of how an instrument is “set up” to be played, and doesn’t even need to be done by the player. On a string instrument, it usually mainly means adjusting the tension of the strings to a certain ideal pitch.

Intonation then is to do with how well the player interacts with the instrument to make notes of the appropriate pitch.

It’s not really very controversial to say that making suitable sounds is a basic aspect of playing a musical instrument. How and even the extent to which the player can influence this aspect though vary widely between instruments. For example, on a harpsichord or a pipe organ, the only way the player can change the sound, is by changing the registration – pulling and pushing various knobs - and that can be done by another person too, who doesn’t even need to be a musician. There is even disagreement about what a pianist can do about the matter, although, as the full name *pianoforte* suggests, controlling levels of volume is one uncontroversial parameter. There’s certainly not much the player can do to influence the pitch (highness or lowness) of a given note on any of these instruments. So with these instruments, tuning is an issue but intonation usually isn’t.

By contrast, a trumpet or a violin can produce an enormous variety of sound, in terms of volume, timbre (“tone colour”) and pitch, among other things, depending on the skill and awareness of the player.

On the mandolin of course, it’s mainly the plectrum that imparts energy to the strings, making them vibrate in various ways, and producing sound, which can be put to musical use. And it’s the player who wields the plectrum, and can regulate volume by regulating the amount of energy imparted to the string – hitting it harder or softer. Perhaps oddly, considering the hours, days, months and years serious players of most other instruments spend working on the area of sound, it’s pretty sadly neglected by many mandolin players. Enough of that though - this series is mainly about the *stopping* hand.¹

¹ The left hand, if you are right-handed. If you are left-handed though, like for example President Obama, Paul McCartney, Leonardo da Vinci or Anna Magdalena Bach, don’t be intimidated by bullying, insensitive and ill-informed right-handed teachers who tell you it doesn’t matter which way round you hold the instrument. It does!

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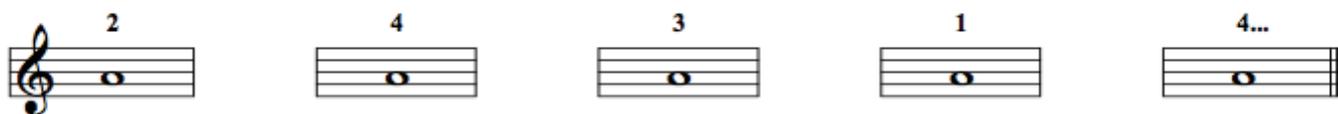
Flawed stopping technique leads to a number of undesirable results on the mandolin². Buzzing and uncleanness are frequent among the unwary. People who practise a lot often manage to keep these more obvious evils down to a minimum. Even these, though, often play with faulty *intonation*, even though the instrument may be perfectly *tuned*. For various reasons, they apply more tension than is appropriate to the string, making the note produced somewhat higher than it should be.

- Cause 1 (the most common): usually without even noticing it – some people pull the string a little out of the straight line it should make between bridge and nut – *bending* it inadvertently. See “bend/guitar” on your search machine to get explanations of this technique, which is of course perfectly respectable if used at the right time. Please try some of the on-line examples, and search your conscience as to whether you sometimes *bend* the string unintentionally.
- Cause 2 (a lot less common): there are also players (ironically, usually well-trained ones) who do press the string in exactly the right direction, but simply push harder than is necessary, which also subjects the string to too much tension. (TMG-GAME N, Step 2)

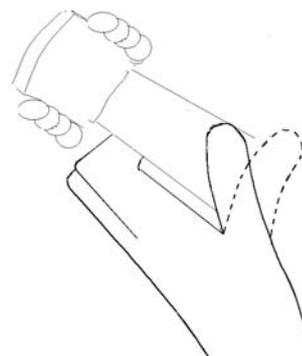
One good way to become aware of both these pitfalls is to spend as much time with GAME G of TMG as you need to really internalize the principles. If you don’t have access to TMG though, you can make interesting discoveries about yourself by trying the following:

- Stop the note A at the 7th fret on the D string, using in turn each of the left-hand fingers individually - several times and varying the order – and comparing the results. If they are either inconsistent, less than lovely in quality, or sound different in any respect depending on which finger, you’re doing something wrong.

Fig. 1



- Play each note singly, with a few seconds break in between. Let each note ring for as long as you can. Mix up the order of the fingers (like I suggest in Figure 1), and take your hand right away from the instrument between notes. The aim here is not to join notes, but rather to examine how efficient each individual finger is. Make sure the thumb is placed optimally to support the respective stopping finger. Can you ease the thumb pressure and still make a clear and lovely note? Can you even take it off the neck completely, so that the only point of contact between the instrument and your left hand is the tip of the respective finger?



Most often of course, we don’t play merely one single note. Rather, we want to play several notes successively, which means that at least at the moment we change from one note to another, at least two fingers are pressing.

² For a more detailed discussion of many things that follow, see *The Mandolin Game* (TB 2010), here abbreviated to “TMG”.

Continued...

Many earlier articles in this series have dealt with what the stopping hand can do to have a deliberate effect on the sound of the mandolin. The most obvious theme has been efficiency (mainly ease and fluency really) and intonation – whether the notes are acceptably in tune. I’ve tried to point out that widely-held views on fingering (strategically at least adopted from the violin, which, unlike the mandolin, is a single- string, fretless instrument, held under chin and played with a bow - which a surprisingly large number of people who see similarities with the mandolin don’t seem to have noticed...), just aren’t very good when it comes to getting pitch right – among lots of other weaknesses in the system. And, far from being merely negative or destructive, my criticism has always been balanced by really good alternatives.

My students of course regard this non-standard approach to fingering neither as an “alternative” nor as eccentric and willful craziness, but rather as simply common sense. In fact, when I sometimes invite them to try out a “conventional” fingering, they usually just refuse to do things which they are convinced make about as much sense as hiking through a desert on ice skates. (This even happened with Jenny at a seminar last week.) After all, they don’t do much at all without being convinced there is a good reason, and neither they should!

You might care to try the following experiment. The music is the first measure of the best known of all music involving the Neapolitan mandolin, the serenade from Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*.

Fig. 1(a) Just the notes.

1(b) 3rd position The most common fingering.

1(c) The way my students see the world. (All within the first 5 frets, utterly no hand shifting required)

Comments:

- i. There must be many theoretically possible ways to play the notes in Figure 1(a), but most of them (e.g. using the pinkie for every note), would be so silly you rightly wouldn’t even consider them.
- ii. Almost every well-brought-up mandolin player on the planet would choose the solution in 1(b) – and I certainly used to. Notice the use of the term “3rd position”, (a standard term in the universe of traditional technique): of course, this very term *means* the fingering indicated, so if the printed music has a sign indicating the 3rd position, traditionally trained players would apply the fingering in 1(b) anyway. Having fingering numbers in addition to a position sign is redundant, because for those who think the violin system is a good idea, “position” is a concise way of prescribing which finger to use with which note.
- iii. You might notice that in 1(c) the term “position” doesn’t occur. There are two reasons for this omission: one is that my students don’t think in such categories, so the term is simply not part of their everyday vocabulary, and another is that the overall scheme of fingering suggested in 1(c) can’t be described in conventional position terms anyway, although each individual note/finger relationship could be. So

Continued...

iv. if you fancy the mental exercise, consider how to designate the “position” the first five 16th notes in 1(c): D with the pinkie is in the so-called ½ position, the open E string is in no position at all, both F# and G are in the 1st position, and A again in the ½ position. So in terms of position theory, the solution in 1(c) would indicate irrationally excessive position changing. In the everyday sense of the word though, utterly no change of spatial position of the hand is required by. So violin fingering theory can’t cope with the very sensible allocation of fingers to notes in 1(c). And do you seriously suggest using the hand in a contorted way to fit in with a certain prescriptive sort of analysis? Not with *my* hand, thank you!

Please practice first 1(b) – the conventional solution – slowly and conscientiously, for a few minutes, or as long as you need to start to get a good and reliable result. Then take a few minutes break, to allow the various intellectual and sensory impressions to settle a bit. When you feel refreshed again, do the same thing with 1(c).

Be careful though: it’s certain to feel simply weird for a while, because the fingering scheme is at odds with everything you’ve ever done - unless perhaps you play the classical guitar, lute or violoncello.

And be fair: work at it for as long as you need to get an optimal result, otherwise you can’t legitimately claim an opinion on the matter. (My students don’t refuse to try conventional solutions because these are strange to them, but rather because they quickly spot the dogmatic prescriptiveness of the solutions demanded.)

You might try the measure with both respective fingering strategies for the next week or so, whenever you pick up a mandolin. That way, both systems should hopefully start to feel normal. When you have reached that stage, you can compare the results, both in terms of ease and sound. This examination illustrates that there are usually several possible technical solutions for a given musical situation, depending on the aesthetic result you want to achieve. The easiest solution (physically speaking) usually also produces the best result, but this doesn’t always need to be the case: if you really have to choose between comfort and a desired result, you may just have to practice an uncomfortable solution more if it’s the only way to get the result you want. Unlike the arbitrariness and contradictions of conventional fingering theory, the genuinely rational approach illustrated by 1(c) really does place the issue of sound where it belongs – at the head of the list of priorities.

Keith Harris