

Playing the Violin

Minimum Viable Finger Pressure

by

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<https://bluerainier.com/violin/violin-mvp.pdf>

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Thanks for checking this out

I sincerely hope it makes as much of a
difference for you as it did for me!

Introduction

As an adult intermediate-level beginner student learning to play violin, it can get to be really frustrating and boring. The lack of progress can be downright discouraging. Blasting through a bunch of music some of which I do not even really like all that much can seem pointless.

Truthfully, I mostly want to sound good and to hear my friends and family say "ooh, ahh, that sounds really good" when I play something short and easy rather than see their eyes glaze over while waiting for me to finish and then hear them say "wow, that looked really difficult".

Minimum Viable Pressure (MVP) has helped me tremendously. Why is this not taught to all beginning students?

The basic idea of MVP is to find the absolute minimum amount you need to press with your fingers and to only use that amount. Ever.

Why work harder than you have to?

Intentionally using less pressure helps with reducing tension which has all kinds of benefits including making playing less tiring and hard on your body, as well as improving your ability to play fast. Shifting and vibrato will also become much easier. Maybe you can finally let go of that tension in your thumb.

Controlling finger pressure could actually help with playing in tune.

If you have not before, try varying the pressure a lot on a high position note. The exact note is unimportant, you just want some room between the string and fingerboard. Perhaps try bowing with third finger in third position on the D string, and see how the pitch "bends" as you gradually press all the way down to the fingerboard and then back up.

Guitarists do something similar, but unfortunately "they say" this does not count as vibrato on the violin!

Of course, what follows is just my particular collection of favorite ideas on the subject. There are no single right answers for everything and everyone. Never stop exploring and seeking advice from others!

To avoid being overwhelmed, I suggest spending some time on each step playing before progressing to the next.

Enjoy!

Step 1: Getting Started

In addition to how much a finger needs to be down while playing a note, how quickly and how hard a finger drops onto the string matters too.

It can take a little extra initial force to get a note to start cleanly and then a bit less to sustain it.

Keep in mind that putting a finger down should feel more like just dropping it down from the base knuckle rather than forcing it down.

Fully mastering MVP will take some time, but it pales in comparison to learning bowing, basic fingering, vibrato, etc. After the initial rush of excitement, working on it for a few minutes at the beginning of each practice session made playing slightly easier each day!

The first video explains MVP better than I can. Nathan Cole has some excellent videos about other things as well that are geared toward more advanced players.

Being a less advanced player, it was easier to start with just one note at a time, progressing to slow scales, and then working on speeding up more difficult things.

Maybe even start by concentrating on just one finger and play lagato with an open string before and after each note, repeat until it sounds and feels right and then move to the next finger.

Do whatever is comfortable for you...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SC4oO9l8P-8>

Professor William Fitzpatrick has some rather unique ideas. Some have really helped me and a few did not.

Combine his insight with that of the first video and you will be ready to really put it all together.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uYBlxzuqMF4>

Good luck!!

Step 2: A few More Details

Once you have the basic idea down. Incorporate the following and practice some more.

Professor Fitzpatrick's "ping" sound is not necessarily a goal, more like something to observe for now. Be careful, you are not trying to hammer in a nail. If you want to play martelé, that comes 100% from the bow.

Perhaps Nate should have added a "checkpoint" 5 which is just a bit more than 4. No need to ever go past 5 and no need to ever hold onto 5. Remember, 5 does not necessarily mean hitting the fingerboard, just the string stretching a little bit past 4 as it catches your finger.

Catch the finger on the way back up, not on the way down.

Be confident and just let drop. No need to "put on the brakes before impact".

As Nate mentions, the ability to "decouple" the right hand from everything else is very fundamental and important to get right, and is even worth working on separately.

Try playing an easy memorized piece at "checkpoint" 3, 2, or 1. Alternate between playing loud and soft keeping the finger pressure and sound the same.

If you have already conquered left hand tension then skip the next part.

Relax your left hand and hold it up in front of you with your fingers towards you and comfortably curled like you were playing. Try dropping all four fingers at once to really feel how easily they drop.

Practice this a few times. Lift and drop, not push and pull. Strive for that sensation every time a finger goes down while playing.

Try putting your right fingers against the left thumb and pull lightly while holding back with the thumb. Notice how dropping fingers now feels less natural and how they want to straighten out.

Now, try to never do that again, especially when playing.

While learning and practicing MVP, and even playing later, pay attention to how the fingers feel going down. If they feel stiff and bunched, then time to release tension in the thumb. Hopefully making one less thing to think about individually.

Practice, *practice*, **practice**...

Step 3: Really Driving It Home

Once you are used to playing like this, there is an additional exercise to help really master MVP and to keep you from drifting away into the world of tension again.

In addition to only playing finger pressures 0-5-4, do a few of 0-5-3, and then switch it up between the two.

After that, see if you can master 0-5-1, without stopping at 4 through 2. I am still working on that one, especially with fourth finger!

Maybe try 0-5-4-1 with only a brief visit to 4.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5CfTt7GhO-g>

Explore other patterns and see what works for you.

Consider adding your favorite variation permanently to your warm-up routine as a quick "recalibration" ... perhaps combined with a scale or something.

Do this early in your practice as once you start playing, slightly more pressure may be needed. Over time things will improve, of course.

Step 4: Additional Exploration (optional)

Playing fast can take even less pressure, so experiment with it. If this is true, then it is the opposite of tensing up while going faster, which could allow you to go even faster yet!

Is this similar to (and perhaps related to) how open strings are less noticeable when playing fast?

The "ping" that Prof Fitzpatrick talks about is a good starting point and gives real clear articulation, but it surely is not a sound that is always appropriate. Try backing off on the finger speed for a more smooth sound vs faster for more articulation.

The place for the "ping" is when you are playing legato yet want really defined articulation. When is that? Notice the ping in the next video. Is Anne also doing the "pizzicato finger lift" shown in the previous video?

Do you like this effect, or do you prefer something different? Are her bow changes sometimes smoother than her slurs?!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PCqXpgmkgkM>

Critical listening so so important! Find someone whose playing you admire and see if you can emulate it.

Does MVP change when shifting (glissando)? More, less, the same?

Is what Nate says in the first video about MVP being higher when playing forte true? If so, by how much?

Is MVP the same in higher positions? What about on different strings?

Does keeping multiple fingers down at the same time have any effect on MVP?

Enough tangents for now, time to practice!