# Violin

## Maximum Return — Using All of Carl Flesch's *Scale System*

by Sally O'Reilly

In a recent conversation with my former Curtis classmate Charles Avsharian (president of Shar Music and violin professor at Michigan State University), he said, while he finds our teacher Ivan Galamian's scale book valuable, "Let's face it. Carl Flesch is the Bible!" And I couldn't agree more.

Most violinists own the Flesch *Scale System* and many actually use it. How effectively it is used is another matter, and because it begins at an advanced intermediate level of difficulty, it needs to be preceded with scales and double-stops that bring the student up to that level. The two books I prefer for this purpose are Hrimaly *Scales*, which I use through the set of one octave scales and broken thirds approximately halfway through the book. Sevcik *Opus 9* is a splendid choice as a preparatory double-stop book. It addresses every interval but fifths and sevenths in a logical and incremental manner.

Flesch begins the study of each key with a one-octave scale on each string. My teacher, Marjorie Fulton Harrell, advocated her teacher Emanuel Zetlin's application of Numbers 1 through 4. These are practiced non-vibrato at 50 to the eighth note, a quarter note's worth of notes per bow. I use the same bowings in every key because I believe it is better to introduce bowing patterns after a foundation has been laid for the left hand. (I am not a great fan of trying to address two problems simultaneously.) The triplet arpeggios are also played one per tick. This allows the violinist to prepare and scrutinize every shift for accuracy and legato left hand motion. All shifts are anticipated, i.e., shifting is on the old finger. I assign younger students the scales that begin no higher than third position. When we have completed the final one-octave scale in E minor, we return to C Major and tackle the scales on the D and E Strings. They begin in sixth and fifth positions respectively. It may be tempting to skip scales in upper positions on the lower three strings, but please don't do that. You may be depriving yourself or your students of the opportunity to find out what is really up there before you are confronted with an isolated passage in a piece that makes you play perilously close to your left nostril!

After playing the ultra-high scales in a key, we proceed to Number 5, the three-octave scale, arpeggios, broken thirds, and chromatic scale. I insist that everything in Flesch be practiced with the metronome. Goals for younger students are usually a quarter note at 100 for scales and at 80 for arpeggios. For advanced students the minimum speeds are scales at 120 and arpeggios at 100. Once a student is fluent and accurate in a key, I encourage curiosity about personal maximum speeds. It is inspiring for a student to discover the ability to play a scale at 160 or higher. After all, if we never know our limits, we are doomed to underachieve and we have no hope of expanding those limits outward.

Josef Gingold urged his students to memorize all twenty-four three-octave scales and their basic arpeggios (C Major scale-C Major arpeggio) and go through them daily. "That way you've played something in every key every day," he explained.

Because thirds are more difficult than sixths, I go to Number 7 next. Sixths are geographically the way they sound. A major sixth is a whole-step and a minor sixth is a half-step. I ask my students to mark the minor sixths as visual reinforcement of finger distance. Over time I have concluded that taking the student through all of the major keys, postponing the minor keys and their very different finger patterns, solidifies a student's concept of scales and broken thirds in sixths. After studying twelve major keys, minor sixths are easier to cope with.

In Number 6, the same is especially true in the study of thirds, which are *not* geographically the way they sound. They are the reverse. Major thirds sound large and are close. Minor thirds sound small and are far. Thirds must be learned with the brain, *not* the ear. I have students label each third either far or close, large or small. Then I have them mark half-steps between the upper and lower notes of the thirds. In the study of all double-stops, it is important to stress accuracy over speed. The student must be encouraged to let his brain get there before his fingers do.

Number 8, octaves, should be practiced initially at a very slow speed with separate bows. Releasing finger pressure from one octave to the next is essential if the frame of the octave is to be preserved. It helps the student to think of using arm weight to carry the fingers into the fingerboard. When octaves are practiced two or four per bow, the release can be heard. Octaves can be studied in major-minor key order.

Fingered octaves (Number 9) are not for everyone. The decision to do them should be predicated on the flexibility of the student's left hand. I have students play the scales first, returning to the arpeggios at a later date.

Tenths (Number 10) may not become a person's favorite interval to play, but most people can negotiate them if one rule is strictly observed. The thumb *must* be in the same position as the fourth finger, allowing the first finger to extend back. I demonstrate the difference in flexibility by having the student play an octave B-flat in first position on the A and E strings. I have him move the fourth finger up a half-step at a time. If he makes it to C, a major ninth, it's a miracle. Then I have him play an octave D in third position and extend the first finger back one note at a time. Usually a major tenth can be achieved.

Flesch's exploration of harmonics and double harmonics (Numbers 11 and 12) is a simple introductory gesture, but it is well worth the time and effort to familiarize oneself with them thoroughly.

We are incredibly fortunate that Carl Flesch, a great violinist and pedagogue, took the time to organize something so comprehensive for us. If we use it well, our students are the winners.

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**Originally published in MNSOTA's *String Notes* — Spring 2006 (Vol. 8, No. 3)**