



VIOLA

Double Trouble

by Annette Caruthers

Double stops are often overlooked until they turn up in a piece, often with a looming recital deadline; or a piece with a few double stops comes up before we've quite gotten to that in lessons. I've found that double stops really don't have to be as scary as they seem at first. If students listen as they play, and have good finger independence, they are usually surprised how easily they learn to play double and triple stops.

I work very early on to have independent fingering. In early pieces whenever there is a third finger note that is played before other fingers are needed on that string, I work to have students place the finger alone. As we all know, beginning students usually find high second fingers easy to play because the second and third fingers work well together. As soon as low second fingers are introduced, I work on finger independence by having them keep the second finger off the string whenever they play the third finger unless the passage goes immediately from second to third finger. Ex: For 4-3-1-2 I have students keep the second finger off until needed, and have the third finger go on without the second. It does take some practice, but usually results in better intonation.

I use the same process if I see that the

third and fourth fingers work together too often, and don't have the needed ability to work alone. Most students work on finger "patterns" whenever I notice they're having difficulty with independent motions. Ex: 4-3-1-2, 4-2-3-1, etc. They often enjoy making these up for themselves, and I encourage that.

When double stops arrive on the scene, I have students first try to pick out the melody line and play it several times so they hear the artistic goal of the passage. Then we work on playing just the bottom line; (exception: octaves, which because of the first finger's need to reach back, are better approached from the top). When they can play the lower line well with the fingering they will need when playing both notes together, we work on playing the bottom line again, but with the top line being fingered as well. The bow still just plays the bottom line, and we listen to see if intonation changes when the other notes are also fingered.

Another step is to play both lines together, but bow the bottom note first and then add the top note on the same bow stroke. This comes out as "bottom, both" resulting in a single note and then the double stop. The students and I also look

for connections: fingers that stay down from one double stop to the next, and half-steps that can be felt in the hand, as they are great guides for feeling one's way around while playing. Half-steps that can be felt across strings are especially helpful.

As you've no doubt noticed, these are steps for students to work on. I also help with the listening and correction process by playing the bottom line with the students, so they have something solid to count on as they work. Most of my students have told me this is the most helpful thing I can do! For very high notes, I play one octave below them. Experience has shown this is very effective, giving them a bass to listen for. Then we come back to the melody line, bringing it out with the bow as we play.

These steps make for a really rewarding practice session, and students leave the studio feeling they have a solid plan for improving the troublesome passages.

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