



# VIOLA

## Shifting

by Annette Caruthers

I really do not enjoy the Whistler shifting books. There. It's out! Probably the most controversial statement I've made in these pages, ever. But it's not enough to make such a statement unless I can follow it up with good alternatives. So here goes:

When students first begin playing, a bit of motion in the left hand and arm needs to be encouraged, so they don't squeeze the neck of the instrument. Simple shifting motions and some left hand pizzicato can really help students free up the left hand, and make the process of learning to shift accurately much easier. Mimi Zweig uses a "high dot" on the fingerboard at the position of the octave harmonic, and has early beginners reaching up for their "high dot" and back to a note in first position for this. Very small stickers are good for marking this spot on the fingerboard. Essentially, we are encouraging the student to free up the left hand and teaching the future shifting motion at the same time — a really useful way to start, which can head off future problems before they begin.

When a student can play with good intonation and facility, around the middle of book 2 in the Suzuki series or at that level if you're not using that series, they can usually begin some shifting practice. Most students have experimented with sliding and making odd sounds on their instruments, and the idea of moving their hand is not new. But to refine this and actually land accurately in the position needed takes careful repetition. I start with simple first finger slides. Practicing the shift from E to G on the D string, on a slur so they can hear when to stop moving, is a good first

step. Then adding shifts from the first finger E to second finger A, and so on, usually give a great beginning. I am careful to have students listen for the ringing of the open string G and A as each is played, so they can be sure it's really "on target." Sometimes I call this "Target practice."

The Suzuki *Shifting Studies* are excellent, but don't really teach the mental shift needed to read in the new positions. I really love using *Tune A Day* book 3 for the reading skills. In the middle of the book are a number of systematic studies that make the process of shifting very clear, followed by simple songs and interesting etudes that help with reading skills. I've found I cannot skip this step, ever. It takes patience and perseverance. But it can be supplemented with shifts added to simple Suzuki repertoire, and/or pieces from the Neil Mackay shifting books. It only takes a moment to review an old Suzuki piece like *Lightly Row* with shifts added, and the student really makes the mental connections needed.

Pitfalls I've found come mainly with students who have not really learned the names of the notes and are instead relying on finger numbers (they get really confused! But having them say the names of the notes as they play slowly can help with this), and students who are gripping the neck of the instruments in spite of all efforts on my part. Shifting with the thumb not quite touching the neck can help the second issue. If the student is unwilling to let go of the neck, it may mean they need a different chin rest to help them hold the instrument up better. As they grow, we do have to keep checking their basic set-up, or issues will develop.

What we really want is an *arm* motion! Concentrating more on this instead of the fingers so much seems to help. I also sometimes tell students, "If I could, I would take your thumb off and put it in your back pocket. It doesn't really have a job to do here." Keeping the lesson lighter can pay huge dividends.

Working on shifting and reading the new fingerings takes enough time that I often delay beginning Suzuki book 4 and substitute other materials for a short time. But it really pays off. We get a more intensive effort and better reading skills, which both work to make the next book easier to master.

As students advance to positions higher than 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup>, I find many need to be reminded to bring their left arm toward the center of their body as they move higher. This is something I am always watching for and working on with scales and arpeggios. As with everything we do, teaching the best position possible as early as possible really is important and makes for easier learning with faster progress. Students really love that!

Do you have comments or suggestions? Please do contact me [bratschel@earthlink.net](mailto:bratschel@earthlink.net). I do not often hear from readers, but you're all teaching, right? You must have your own ideas...

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