

EYLEM ARICA*Yildiz Technical University, Istanbul, Turkey*
ORCID: 0000-0002-7834-9961, eylemarica@hotmail.com

A Brief Narrative of the Third Position as the Initial Position for Beginning-Level Violin Instruction

The necessities of education and human nature call for different pedagogical approaches, schools and methods to be used in beginning-level violin instruction. The choice of the initial position for beginning-level instruction of playing string instruments holds an important place among these differences, and the first position is generally used at the initial stage of traditional violin instruction. It is, however, only one of the chosen methods, which also include the technique of third position for beginning instruction. The focus of this study is to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the technique of beginning with the third position and studies related to its which have extended from the early 20th century to the present day while placing it within its historical context as much as possible. The study aims to reveal the technique's historical process so as to contribute to its development and diffusion. As a result, it can aid in the increase of awareness of the technique as well as production of material related to it for the benefit of both educators and students. The use of third position for beginning instruction began to attract interest in the early 20th century, which is when its benefits began to be mentioned. Some pedagogues have, in fact, written method books which make use of this technique, applied it in their classrooms and shared the positive results which they experienced. Despite the ongoing debates between educators and performers in the 21st century regarding its advantages and disadvantages, the technique of beginning with the third position has not received much interest as an academic topic, nor has it been adequately studied. An important conclusion from the examination of its historical process and an evaluation of views expressed is that the lack of relevant material creates an obstacle to the use of the technique. As such, there is a need for studies based on the use this technique which also produce related material.

Keywords: violin, third position, initial position, string pedagogy, music education, beginning-level violin education.

For citation / Для цитирования: Arica Eylem. A Brief Narrative of the Third Position as the Initial Position for Beginning-Level Violin Instruction // Проблемы музыкальной науки. 2019. № 4. С. 65–72. DOI: 10.17674/1997-0854.2019.4.065-072.

ЭЙЛЕМ АРИКА*Технический университет Йылдыз, г. Стамбул, Турция*
ORCID: 0000-0002-7834-9961, eylemarica@hotmail.com

О третьей позиции как базовой для начального обучения игре на скрипке

Насущные потребности образования и человеческой природы требуют различных педагогических подходов, школ и методов для начального обучения игре на скрипке и альте. Выбор базовой позиции для обучения игре на струнных инструментах имеет

важное значение, и обычно на начальной стадии традиционного обучения используют первую позицию. Однако это представляет собой лишь один из возможных методов, среди которых также существует и техника использования третьей позиции для начинающих. Исследование, проведенное автором статьи, нацелено на рассмотрение как преимуществ, так и неудобств техники применения третьей позиции для начального обучения игре на скрипке. Обучение, связанное с ней, продолжается с начала XX века до наших дней, тем не менее, автор статьи, насколько это возможно, помещает вопрос в рамки исторического контекста. Данное исследование стремится выявить исторический аспект, чтобы внести свой вклад в развитие и распространение техники. Оно может способствовать дальнейшему совершенствованию техники и созданию учебного материала, применимого к ней, быть полезным для преподавателей и студентов. Использование третьей позиции для начального обучения привлекло внимание в первые десятилетия XX века, и именно тогда стали упоминаться преимущества подобного подхода. Некоторыми педагогами уже созданы труды, показывающие пути применения техники на занятиях. В них раскрываются позитивные результаты, которых удалось добиться. Несмотря на продолжающиеся в XXI веке дискуссии между преподавателями и исполнителями по поводу пригодности и непригодности подобной техники, способ начала обучения с третьей позиции до сих пор не вызвал большого интереса как академическая тема, а также не был достаточно изучен. При рассмотрении исторического процесса и оценке различных суждений становится очевидным, что препятствием для использования указанной техники является нехватка материала. Иначе говоря, существует потребность в изучении данной проблемы, создании необходимого учебного материала для использования этой техники.

Ключевые слова: скрипка, третья позиция, начальная позиция, обучение игре на струнных инструментах, музыкальное образование, начальное обучение по классу скрипки.

Introduction

Beginning violin instruction is endowed with a number of different pedagogical approaches, and choosing the initial position for beginning-level musical education holds an important place among them. Whereas first position is generally used at the initial stage of traditional violin instruction, it presents merely one method among many, another of which is the use of third position for beginning instruction. A review of the literature on the subject reveals of the insufficient amount of academic studies on the third position beginning technique, despite the fact that violin pedagogues have employed it, and positive results have been received. In addition to this, the opinions found that that there is an insufficient

amount of available material concerning this technique. This article discusses the disputes from the early 20th century to the present day concerning the advantages and disadvantages of the third position beginning technique, as well as the studies carried out of the technique, while placing it as much as possible within its historical context. It aims to enhance further academic studies to help bridge the gap in the musical literature, as well as to increase the awareness of the technique and the available materials about it. Thus, it will be possible for educators and students to gain access to more resources on this technique, from which they can greatly benefit.

This study directly concerns the fields of performance, musical education and pedagogy of string instruments. Cooperation



between these three areas of expertise is of great importance in high-quality instruction of playing string instruments, particularly at the early stages. Lesniak [7] argues that the gap between the fields of musical education and performance in universities is caused by a lack of communication between them, understanding of and support for each other, and that this situation has the potential of harming students, as well as the entire profession of performance of string instruments, from education through to performance. This view becomes ever more important, in particular, in regard to beginning instruction, since music teachers and experts on performance and pedagogy of string instruments in different institutions have applied beginning violin training with varying objectives. Indeed, this is why collaboration between the fields of musical education, performance and pedagogy of string instruments is important for instruction of string instruments. This article makes its contribution to these three areas of expertise.

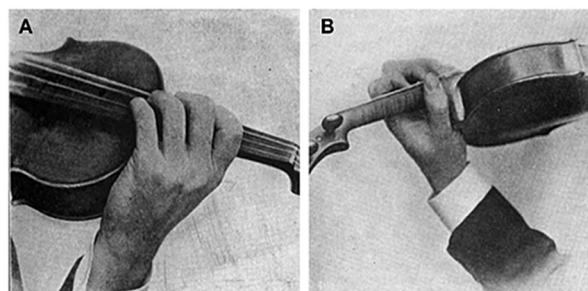
An attitude of openness to alternative methods of research on different techniques, undoubtedly, contributes to the general field of musical instrumental instruction. As violin pedagogue Neumann¹ mentions in the first chapter of his dissertation, “Is There Only One Right Way of Playing the Violin?”, in which he examines violin instruction, that if there existed only one proven correct educational method determined by scholarly study, in all probability, the differences between the respective methods would be reduced. However, if we set off with the understanding that there exists no certainty in scholarship, then it also becomes impossible to accept one single method or pedagogical approach in musical instruction of playing an instrument. However, the existence of these differences also arises from the needs of human nature, as well as the nature of education. When viewed from

this aspect, studies on alternative methods of beginning violin instruction and the ways they are shared between each other become very important. The third position beginning technique presents only one of the diverse options.

Why Third Position?

The main reason why third position is considered to be advantageous at the initial stage of instruction and in some technical studies is that the fleshy heel of the left thumb comes into contact with the right rib of the violin. This point of contact will be referred to as the right-rib-rest. Similar to many other pedagogues, Gruenberg includes a description of the hand coming into contact with the right rib of the violin in the basic third-position grip.

In the third position the hand is brought into contact with the violin's front rib, the lowest edge of which must be close to the wrist, the neck remaining between thumb and forefinger; as is the case in the first position; the thumb approaching the violin's body.



Third Position from left and right²

The major advantage of the right-rib-rest in initial violin instruction is that, as Altimari³ explains, it naturally allows the left hand to take the ideal shape. As a matter of fact, there are those, such as Cavallaro⁴, who considered first position to be an unnatural position for beginners and preferred third position because of the right-rib rest.

Apart from initial training, there are pedagogues who consider the right-rib-rest

as an advantage for studying or learning some basic violin techniques. Galamian⁵ also recommends third position for elementary vibrato exercises because of the right-rib-rest. The right-rib-rest is also the reason why Applebaum [2, p. 34] argues it is advantageous for students to learn third position after first position, as opposed to second position. Yankelevich [6, p. 44] relates that some important pedagogues and virtuosos of the 18th and 19th centuries considered the right-rib-rest as an advantage for transitioning between positions as well as intonation. Alapinar [1] argues that studies of transition from first position should happen between the first and third positions precisely because of the right-rib rest.

Debates on its Advantages and Disadvantages

The advantages of beginning violin instruction with making use of the high positions began to be advocated in the 1930s⁶. One reason for this was that some educators, such as Altimari, considered holding the violin in first position to be both uncomfortable and unnatural. Rotili⁷ states that some educators consider it advantageous to move to first position after instruction in third position in order for the left hand to learn the correct shape during initial violin training. Violin pedagogue and virtuoso Yehudi Menuhin [8] considered that first position requires the most difficult posture, and hence, employed third position for the initial technique when training his students. Menuhin stated that tension in the muscles increases as a result of the left elbow and hand being farther away from the body and control becomes more difficult as the weight of the violin is felt more.

Cowden, who examined the views of pedagogues and researchers, such as Altimari, Koutzen, Angus, Rolland, Rotili and Cavallaro, in his dissertation on the

advantages of third position for beginning violin instruction, later collected the following ideas together in an article:

a) the half steps and whole steps lie closer together; b) the fourth finger is used immediately, c) much of fatigue resulting from holding the instrument in the first position is circumvented, d) the body of the violin serves as a reminder when the heel of the left hand is getting out of position, e) it is possible to test intonation by placing the first finger on all strings except G, because the first finger in this position is one octave higher than the next lower open string, f) the instrument can be held more easily, g) the tonic of the key falls on the first finger, and h) some useful rote playing tricks are made possible because the fingers and the tones of the key are called by the same number [4, p. 505].

The disadvantages of the third position beginning technique were also voiced in the 20th century, as Rolland did concerning this technique. The five items below in which Rolland collected his views on its disadvantages generally reflect the views of other educators concerning its drawbacks:

1) tone production is more difficult because of reduced string length; 2) the combination of open strings and stopped notes is more difficult; 3) a rigid left hand may develop; 4) the thumb, which must support the downward pressure of the strings, would be inclined to pass this over to the wrist; and 5) a lack of materials⁸.

However, there also are some pedagogues who deny the very existence of the right-rib-rest. This presents a pedagogical disagreement in a fundamental sense, beyond the discussions of the advantages or disadvantages of the third position beginning technique for initial training. Yankelevich [6] argues that the pedagogical approaches that implement the right-rib-rest provide a common misconception, and that



the left hand naturally contacts the violin in fourth position rather than third. He describes some of the problems the right-hand rest in third position might lead to from a technical aspect:

The underestimation by many pedagogues of the consequences of leaning the left hand against the body of the violin in third position results in a variety of problems that affect the function of the left hand. These include a change in the shape of the wrist, which causes a change in the shape of the fingers and consequently changes the angle at which they drop in third position. This affects not only finger mobility but also intonation. Indeed, this is often the reason for faulty intonation in third position. Furthermore, this technique makes shifting from third position to a higher position more difficult since a preliminary movement of the wrist away from the body of the violin is now required. If the palm is not pressed against the body of the violin, then the shift may be executed without this extra unnecessary movement [6, p. 44].

Even though these views expressed throughout the 20th century on the advantages and disadvantages of third position for beginning violin instruction have lost their fervor, some performers and educators have perpetuated them into the 21st century. According to Mishra [9], the advantages of third position include the natural shaping of the left hand and the shorter distance between the fingers, which allows a more comfortable start for children due to their small hands. Krakenberger [5, p. 69] argues that the position of the elbow and arm close to the body in third position helps to maintain the shape of the left wrist, especially for children who tire from the weight of the violin.

Discussions in the 21st century on the third position beginning technique have also occurred in internet forums. One of the forums discussed in this study was launched

by Jim Hastings on 3 March 2011, and I initiated the second on 12 June 2016 on www.violinist.com⁹ with a call for a survey. I found the same arguments regarding the advantages and disadvantages of the third position beginning technique as voiced in the 20th century in these forums, which serve the purpose of discussing the use of third position as a home position. These forums also provide evidence of continued interest in the subject. However, as will be considered later, despite this interest, the number of academic studies on the topic remain quite few.

Academic Studies

The first academic work on the topic was Altimari's thesis, "A new approach to violin teaching". Unlike the prior traditional methods, Altimari proposes a new method in order to maintain the interest of the students, makes the learning process enjoyable and makes it easier to teach and apply certain techniques. He recommends in his new method that because first position, as is preferred in traditional methods, is neither natural nor comfortable, third position should be the initial position, as he considers it to be the most natural position for the left hand and arm for beginners while also facilitating the training process.

The first empirical study concerning the topic was in Cowden's dissertation, "A Comparison of the Effectiveness of First and Third Position Approaches to Violin Instruction". For the study, 37 fourth graders were divided into two groups and each group received 16 weeks of beginning violin instruction. One group received instruction in first position for 11 weeks before moving on to third position, while the other group began with third position before moving to first over the same time frame. The study concluded that there was no significant difference between the group which started in first position and the other which started in third.

In her dissertation, Sievers [10] conducted “A survey of string teachers’ opinions regarding the teaching of violin/viola shifting,” which included 39 questions and 229 participants. While the survey determines the views concerning transitions between the positions of various violin and viola teachers at private studios, K-12 string educators, and violin and viola professors at colleges and universities, it only had two questions about the use of third position in beginning instruction. Seventy-five percent of participants did not agree with the statement that “third position should be taught before first position,” while 84 percent agreed with the statement, “third position should be taught after first position is mastered.”

In his thesis, “Insight and Self-Discovery: A Qualitative Study of Beginner Violin Students Exploring the Third-Position Approach”, Baker [3] conducted a single case study with five students aged 7 to 11, who received 12, 30-minute lessons over the course of six months, in order to compare the techniques of using third and first position in beginning violin instruction. Unlike Cowden, Baker also asked the students of their views concerning the two positions. His results led him to determine that every student should receive unique training, as they showed that different starting positions were better for different students.

Four Pedagogues – Four Methodology Books

From 1933 to 1959 four pedagogues wrote violin methodology books which utilized third position in beginning instruction and applied them with the technique in their own classrooms. Hence, what they specify as advantages can be accepted as a type of evidence that the technique, tested and applied, can be employed.

The first, Lillian Shattuck, used third position as the initial position in her

methodological book from 1933, *Preliminary Hand Training for Violinists*. She says she made this choice in consideration of young children who will begin playing violin. She also recognizes the right-rib-rest as an advantage:

By starting with the third position instead of the first, use is made of the shape of the neck of the violin which holds the hand easily in the proper position instead of leaving it with no guide¹⁰.

Another, Armand Massau¹¹, also used third position as the initial position in the first volume of the violin methodological series, *Méthode de Violin*, from 1934. The new system utilizes the advantages of third position in order to avoid the hindrances which could arise from beginning instruction in first position, as had been used in traditional methods. Massau emphasizes that the left hand and fingers are positioned naturally and conveniently in third position and, therefore, the fourth finger in particular can be used without the need to raise the left hand as in first position. He also considers the left elbow being closer to the body in third position than in first as an advantage since it delays pupils’ fatigue at the beginning stage.

Boris Koutzen’s methodological book from 1951¹², *Foundation of Violin Playing*, also employs the use of third position for beginning instruction. Koutzen opted for this technique so that students develop a natural left-hand grip with minimum effort. As such, the fingers take the necessary shape to obtain correct intonation. In addition, the left arm, which is less tensed in third position than in first, also takes the correct shape with less effort.

Finally, Walter Angus¹³ mentions the positive effects of Shattuck’s method books and, in 1959, he applied third position for beginning instruction in his method book, *From Third to First*. Angus used this



technique for the same reasons the other three pedagogues suggest, such as that the left hand can easily form a natural shape, the fingers are not stretched because the spaces between notes are smaller than in first position, the ease of use of the fourth finger and that the first studies are in the key of C. He asserts that since students who begin instruction with third position improve faster, fewer people who are taught with this technique give up learning violin.

Conclusion

Interest in employing third position for beginning instruction, which began in the early 20th century, has continued up to the present day. However, despite the interest shown and the pedagogues who have used the technique and shared their positive results, sufficient academic research on the topic has not been conducted, which constitutes a great obstacle to the spread of the technique and production of material. Further, although pedagogues have opted to use third position as the home position

in order to avoid the drawbacks of first position, and while much research has been conducted on first position, third position has not received the same interest in academic studies. It is evident that studies on alternative methods would contribute to the string profession in general, considering the principle that all students are unique and so should be their instruction.

Future empirical studies on third position can be designed both for beginning instruction and for the rehabilitation of established bad habits resulting from improper introductory training. For children with slow or poor motor skills development studies can be conducted to try beginning instruction in third position. Research in which educators and students' opinions on the technique are examined from different perspectives would also contribute to the generation of ideas for new, varied studies. It is clear there is a need for further research on the production, testing and dissemination of material which employs this technique.

NOTES

¹ Neumann F. C. *Survey Of The Basic Doctrines Of Violin Left Hand Technique (including The Position Of The Body)*. 1952. 306 p. (Order No. 0004225). Retrieved from: <https://search.proquest.com/docview/301972227?accountid=17384>

² The quote and the photo were taken from: Gruenberg E. *Violin Teaching and Violin Study*, Carl. New York: Fisher Book Company, 1919, pp. 35, 36, 37.

³ Altamari W. G. *A New Approach to Violin Teaching*. (Master's Thesis, Unpublished). University of Kansas: Kansas, 1937. 74 p.

⁴ See: Cavallaro A. Factors in Successful String Teaching. *Music Educators Journal*. 1950. Vol. 36, pp. 52–54.

⁵ Galamian I. *Principles of Violin Playing and Teaching*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962. 128 p.

⁶ Cowden R. L. *A Comparison of the Effectiveness of First and Third Position Approaches to Violin Instruction*. (Doctor of Philosophy Dissertation, Unpublished). Ohio State University: Ohio, 1969. 189 p.

⁷ Rotili E. D. *A Study of the Public School String Problems*. (Master's Thesis, Unpublished). Duquesne University, 1950. 127 p.

⁸ The quote was taken from: Rolland P. Begin in Third Position. *The American String Teacher*. 1952, pp. 2, 7.

⁹ <http://www.violinist.com/discussion/archive/19741/>

<http://www.violinist.com/discussion/archive/28077/>

¹⁰ The quote was taken from: Shattuck L. *Preliminary Hand Training for Violinists*. Boston: The Boston Music Co, 1933, p. 1.

¹¹ Massau A. *Méthode de violon conçue sue une Nase Nouvelle, Vol. 1*. Paris, France: Editions Combre, 1934. 52 p.

¹² Koutzen B. *Foundation of Violin Playing*. New York, NY: Mercury Music Corporation, 1951. 32 p.

¹³ Angus W. *From Third to First*. New York, NY: Carl Fischer Inc., 1959. 32 p.

REFERENCES

1. Alapınar H. *Keman için pozisyon çalışmaları ve etütler*. Levent Müzik Evi: İzmir, Turkey, 2005. 39 p.
2. Applebaum S., with Lindsay T. *The Art and Science of String Performance*. Van Nuys, CA: Zentrum Verlagsgesellschaft, 1986. 240 p.
3. Baker A. C. *Insight and Self-Discovery: A Qualitative Study of Beginner Violin Students Exploring the Third-Position Approach*. (Master of Philosophy Thesis, Unpublished). Australian National University: Canberra, 2014. 213 p.
4. Cowden R. L. A comparison of first and third position approaches to violin instruction. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 1972. No. 20 (4), pp. 505–509.
5. Krakenberger J. Ask the teacher (interview). *The Strad*. 2010. No. 121, p. 69.
6. Lankovsky M. *The Russian Violin School: The Legacy of Yuri Yankelevich*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. 288 p.
7. Lesniak M. A. *Attitudes Towards String Education Among Collegiate String Faculty*. 2005. (Order No. 3168701). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (305417537). Retrieved from: <https://search.proquest.com/docview/305417537?accountid=17384>.
8. Menuhin Y. *Unfinished Journey*. London, UK: Macdonald and Jane's, 1977. 393 p.
9. Mishra J. Questions and answers: Research related to the teaching of string technique *Journal of String Research*. 2000. No. 1, pp. 9–36.
10. Sievers B. A. *A Survey of String Teachers' Opinions Regarding the Teaching of Violin/Viola Shifting*. Doctoral Dissertation. University of Oklahoma, 2005. 277 p.

About the author:

Eylem Arica, Proficiency in Art, Associate Professor at the Faculty of Art and Design, Yildiz Technical University (34349, Istanbul, Turkey),
ORCID: 0000-0002-7834-9961, eylemarica@hotmail.com

Об авторе:

Арика Эйлем, мастер искусств, доцент факультета искусств и дизайна, Технический университет Йылдыз (34349, г. Стамбул, Турция),
ORCID: 0000-0002-7834-9961, eylemarica@hotmail.com

