

L A K E R M U S I C

# Tricky Fingers

A FIRST BOOK FOR BEGINNER STRINGS

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Teacher Reference Manual

(2021 update)

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## **Introduction**

*Tricky Fingers* comes after many years of writing and developing teaching material for beginner string players. My initial inspiration came after attending a Colour Strings conference in Helsinki, Finland, in 2008 where I saw how a unique approach to teaching beginners (and older string players) could produce amazing results. I returned home to Brisbane keen to try and adapt some of the concepts into the context of my own teaching of heterogeneous string groups. The material I wrote gradually developed into a sequenced method for teaching first year string players. Personally I have found this approach to be rewarding and beneficial to my students, and hope that other teachers will find it so as well.

## **Pedagogical Philosophy**

Written primarily with heterogeneous group lessons in mind (although not limited to these), *Tricky Fingers* approaches the first year of learning with a deliberate focus on developing good set-up or playing posture on the instrument while developing the beginnings of a free and relaxed technique. A 'go-slow' approach is taken in order to allow time for this to happen, meaning the priority is not on having students playing tunes with the bow after a few lessons. This doesn't mean you have to move through the material in the book slowly, rather that the structure of the material allows time to establish good playing posture and technique. The idea here is that in the long run there will be a benefit from doing this. It embodies a long term vision that aims to provide each student with a foundation that will enable them to progress to the best of their ability in the future. In our current 'instant-everything' society, this can sometimes feel like swimming against the current. Comparative analogies can be found with slow food vs. fast food, instant vs. delayed gratification etc. Learning a string instrument is a long term process, and as teachers we benefit from thinking long term when starting students on their musical journeys.

## **String Playing Posture & Technique**

String playing incorporates a lot of different physical movements and fine motor skills, which is part of what makes learning a string instrument challenging. In order for these physical movements to function as efficiently as possible, good playing posture needs to be established. How we stand or sit when we play is an important aspect of playing posture, but should not be the sole focus. Good playing posture is determined mainly by how we shape or position the body (especially the fingers, hands and arms) in relation to the instrument.

Good playing posture is the necessary foundation for developing good technique on a string instrument. *Tricky Fingers* uses concepts such as left hand pizzicato and harmonics to help students develop both good playing posture and introduce what might be termed 'advanced technique' in the context of a beginner book. Left hand pizzicato develops finger independence and dexterity, and activates the fourth finger from the first lesson. It also helps set up a good left hand shape and promotes the correct positioning of instruments up on the left shoulder (violins and violas). Likewise, harmonics help set up good playing posture, and can be used to develop a mobile left hand with what is essentially an early form of shifting. Harmonics also promote good bowing skills, as they require a certain bow speed to 'speak' clearly.

The whole approach lends itself to what can be termed 'soft hands', the basis of a technique that is free and devoid of unnecessary tension. Using both left hand pizz. and harmonics means students are not locked into a 1st position mentality for the first few years of learning. Right from the beginning students are exposed to what are effectively higher positions (e.g. 4th position) on their instruments. When the time comes to learn how to shift to actual stopped notes, this seems to be grasped a lot more quickly and comfortably due to the preparatory work done in the first year. The same goes for using a stopped fourth finger.

### **Practical Considerations in the Material**

The overall structure of *Tricky Fingers* aims to break down and sequence learning into manageable elements that move logically from one step to the next. 'Time' is also built into the structure of many of the pieces. This comes in the form of rests, short phrases and repeated notes, all designed to help students manage new skills and to allow them time to position / shape their hands and fingers. Of course, the material itself doesn't guarantee perfectly set-up and technically dazzling string players, but aims to help teachers work towards that goal (within the context of each student's ability and the circumstances in which the teacher works). String teaching by nature requires a 'hands-on' approach, and *Tricky Fingers* is no different. Teachers need to be constantly adjusting, correcting, shaping and modelling good playing posture and technique.

In the book, only the bare essentials of technical details are included. There are no bowings, time signatures, key signatures, or dynamics. Many music theory concepts are quite abstract and difficult to grasp (even by older students) so the idea is not to 'bog down' young students with information that is not crucial to playing their instruments at this early stage.

### **The CD (or backing track downloads from 2021)**

**These are now available on the Laker Music website: [lakermusic.com.au](http://lakermusic.com.au)**

Recorded piano accompaniments are provided for all the pieces. These are for students to play along with at home, as well as for the teacher to use in lessons and performances if needed.

Most pieces in the book have two accompaniment speed options. For those who will rely on the backing tracks for performances, software is readily available on the internet that allows for speeding up or slowing down music if a suitable speed cannot be found for a particular piece.

The two speeds that most pieces have are not necessarily practice and performance speeds. Sometimes the slower speed may be more suited to a performance or a certain group of students.

## Piano Accompaniments

The accompaniments have primarily been written to provide an aural and rhythmic framework to help students learn the pieces by reflecting/supporting what is in the string parts. Due to the non-melodic nature of much of the material early in the book, the accompaniments also provide an important musical context for each piece.

All the pieces have introductions (which, for layout purposes, are not written out in the book). Nearly all of the introductions are two bars long. The exceptions are:

- Hot Cross Buns - 1 bar
- See-Saw - 4 bars
- Curtain Raiser - 4 bars
- Jingle Bells - 4 bars

Some pieces have a piano interlude before they are repeated. This is indicated by the small box seen below:

Wait for the piano before repeating!
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The use of the box (rather than writing out rest bars) is also for practical layout purposes, i.e. to minimise bars and staves on each page. Students learn very quickly to recognise the introduction or interlude aurally after hearing them a few times, but they can be taught to count them as well.

## The Double Bass

In writing accompaniments for a heterogeneous method (indeed the method itself), the double bass presents some interesting challenges. The bass's E string is especially problematic, and almost always sounds muddy (even if technically it belongs to the chord of C major!). Even when the bass is playing melodically, the low register of its pitch tends to clash with some of the accompaniments. In most situations, this shouldn't present a huge problem as small basses played by young players tend not to make a 'booming' sound and there is rarely more than one or two in a group (if any).

For most of the book, the bass part is treated the same as the other parts in order to maintain a unity of approach, but at times it incorporates different notes out of necessity. These are pointed out in this reference book.

## Note Detective Sheets

Worksheets have been included in *Tricky Fingers* to review and reinforce note learning and other music theory concepts. They also help establish the expectation of completed homework as part of learning an instrument, the main form of which, of course, is practice. The Note Detective sheets should be completed as they are encountered in the course of the book.

## Suggested Timeline for Tricky Fingers

As progress will depend on individual circumstances and the ability of the students being taught, the timeline below is only a guide to completing the book in a year (for students learning in heterogeneous groups). If the book cannot be comfortably completed in a year without compromising the overall pedagogical aims, then it should not be the goal. The repertoire at the end of the book is useful for teaching or revising at the beginning of the second year before moving on.

Term 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• learning about the instrument</li><li>• understanding crotchets and crotchet rests</li><li>• learning the open strings and how to hold the instrument correctly through a focus on left hand pizz.</li><li>• gradual introduction to the bow and bow hold</li><li>• first attempts at bowing (by rote, modelled by teacher)</li></ul>
Term 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• bowing open strings and their halfway harmonics</li><li>• combining bowing and left hand pizz.</li><li>• learning quavers and minims</li><li>• string crossing / bow arm levels</li><li>• combining all different elements learnt so far</li></ul>
Term 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• setting up the left hand with diamond harmonics</li><li>• introduction of stopped notes G, F# &amp; E in 1st position</li><li>• simple three-note tunes</li></ul>
Term 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• diamond harmonic A (fourth finger for violins / violas, shifting into 4th position for cellos / basses)</li><li>• five note tunes</li><li>• Introduction of B on the A string (G string for basses)</li><li>• six note tunes</li></ul>

## The Preliminary Pages

Every teacher has their own way of structuring the first few lessons. Often these can be characterised by lots of distractions such as practical organisation, paperwork, checking instruments, setting up shoulder rests etc. Sometimes students don't actually have instruments to start using yet, which can make things difficult. The first few pages of *Tricky Fingers* provide some written and practical exercises that can be done without instruments should the circumstance arise.

## Page 2 - For Parents

If parents are made aware of this page, it should hopefully make our roles as teachers easier. It stresses the long term nature of learning a string instrument. It also mentions the importance of the parents' role in supporting and encouraging students, and ensuring that practice takes place. The final paragraph explains why 'Hot Cross Buns' isn't being played in the first few weeks, and the 'go-slow' nature of the learning process in *Tricky Fingers*.

### **Page 3 - Practice Schedule**

The aim here is to emphasise to both students and parents the importance of establishing a weekly practice routine. By actually recording it down on paper, the hope is that some thought has gone into setting aside time for practice to take place. It is worth teaching students right from the start that it is more beneficial to spread practice sessions throughout the week rather than cram them into one day or just the weekend.

### **Practice Records (last four pages of the book)**

A practice record for each term is provided in the book. Each practice record is a sheet of thermometers, with each thermometer representing one week of practice. Students should colour in one thermometer per week indicating how much practice they have done, with each segment representing one session. They should aim to be in the 'healthy zone' of 4 - 7 practice sessions a week, with 3 as the hoped for minimum. Anything less is considered to be in the 'unhealthy zone'. A place is provided for parents to sign off on the practice.

This type of practice record has a certain concrete, visual appeal, and at the term's end should clearly indicate if the student has carried out sufficient practice. Colouring the thermometers in red pencil is the obvious choice, but some students like to be creative and use a different colour for each segment, making 'rainbow thermometers'. Students are often proud of their thermometers and like to compare each other's records, sometimes leading to a bit of healthy competition!

#### **Colouring in and writing answers:**

*Tricky Fingers* contains a lot of written exercises and some colouring tasks. These should only be carried out in pencil (coloured and lead), not felt pens or Textas so as not to bleed through the pages.

### **Page 4 - Parts of the Instrument**

Learning the parts of the instrument is a good option for the first lesson, and it allows a homework requirement to be established straight away, even if students have not yet acquired an instrument. It is important for students to know what the main parts of the instrument are called. In mixed group lessons, it is a good idea to compare and contrast any differences between the instruments, e.g. end button and end pin.

Some students like to name their instrument, so a space has been provided for a name!

The bow is not introduced at this point (except to say that the bow belongs to the instrument and will be talked about later on). Even though the temptation for students is to "have a go with the bow", I recommend not allowing it and would consider 'confiscating' bows for a period of time (only if they belong to the school - if they belong to the students, stressing the importance of not using them at home will be necessary). The reason for this is that bad habits with bow

holds are picked up quickly and are hard to undo later on. The introduction to the bow is on page 17 in the book, although in practice, teaching about the bow and bow hold should be a gradual process that starts well before that point.

### Page 5 - Open Strings and Left Hand Fingers

This page is used to help prepare students for numbered left hand pizzicato. Numbered left hand pizz. is where each finger of the left hand plucks one of the four strings. i.e. the 4th finger plucks the highest pitched string, and then in order to the lowest pitched string which is plucked by the 1st finger. This is the same for all instruments, which of course means that the string order for basses is opposite to violins.

A visual representation of the different thicknesses of each string is given on this page, as well as the fingers of the left hand. Teach the students the names of their open strings and their order. It is also important that they learn to number the fingers of the left hand correctly. Numbers can be written in the tips of each finger for the exercise. Ensure students have a clear understanding of which finger plucks which string (each finger lines up with the string it plucks in the picture). Below is a table of each instrument and the order of fingers and strings from highest to lowest in pitch.

Violin		Viola		Cello		Bass	
String	Finger	String	Finger	String	Finger	String	Finger
E	4	A	4	A	4	G	4
A	3	D	3	D	3	D	3
D	2	G	2	G	2	A	2
G	1	C	1	C	1	E	1

### Page 6 - Ta and Za

This page is to confirm that students understand what crotchets (tas) and crotchet rests (zas) are. Crotchets are presented with their stems both up and down, as children are inevitably curious as to why they look different! This page makes it clear that notes can have stems going in both directions. No further details are necessary at this point (e.g. the point where the change takes place).

By clapping and saying aloud the exercises in 'Ta and Za', the concept of keeping a steady beat can be reinforced. The importance of rests (silence) in music should be taught, as well as maintaining the beat during rests. This page establishes right from the beginning the importance of reading music. It should be covered before starting My Open Strings.

**Clapping:** Another way of clapping rhythms is to move hands vertically instead of horizontally. The emphasis is not on the sound of the clapping, but on the proportional indication of note length by 'stretching' the hands apart i.e. when clapping quavers, the hands are not stretched very far apart; for crotchets the hands will be twice as far apart, and so on. The lower hand remains static while the upper hand moves and gently taps the lower hand. The benefit of this style of clapping is that it simulates bow divisions when playing the instrument. It also reinforces note lengths in a visual way.

## Page 7 - Musical Road Signs

This page contains a few basic elements of music notation/theory that students will encounter in *Tricky Fingers*. It has been kept as simple as possible so as not to overwhelm young students with too much theoretical information. It is not absolutely necessary to cover these terms in the first lesson(s). Perhaps a good time to refer to them is when students become curious and ask what a certain symbol / marking means, or as they are encountered in the pieces.

## Page 8 - My Open Strings

The open strings notes on the staff for each instrument are introduced here. Again, it is probably not worth getting into too much detail here about "Every Good Boy Deserves Fruit" etc. Rather, learning to locate each string and pluck it in time with the correct finger while reading the corresponding note is the goal. This gives the students a first 'taste' of music making. In mixed groups, it also provides an opportunity to listen to and compare the differences in pitch of the various instruments. (There are no backing tracks or accompaniments to My Open Strings).

**Left Hand Pizzicato:** For all instruments, left hand pizzicato should be carried out in what is approximately 4th position (where the pad of the thumb sits in the bend of the neck is a practical guide). This will help violin and viola players position their instruments correctly up on their left shoulders. It also helps them create a good left arm/elbow position. Carrying out left hand pizzicato in this 4th position means there is more space between the strings, making it easier to pluck them. For cellos and basses, it is important that students understand the correct position of the left arm/elbow i.e. up and out to the side, not collapsed down by the player's body.

For all instruments, fingers must be nicely rounded and a good left hand shape maintained. Don't let the students 'snap' the string with the finger - make sure they pluck with a rounded action. Also, don't allow students to just strum the strings - this is not conducive of a good pizzicato action or a good left hand shape.

Whether or not to dampen notes in rests (to stop them ringing) is left to the discretion of the teacher. On little violins/violas it probably won't be an issue. On cellos and basses it may be worth mentioning if the students can manage it.

## Page 9 - Note Detective 1

This page provides practical steps in learning to identify the open string notes and confirming that students understand which finger plucks each note/string.

## Page 10 - Cool Crotchets

Left hand pizzicato of single strings. The repeat sign is introduced (for use with the accompaniment) and should be explained to the students at this point. The four bar rhythms vary in each piece, making it necessary for students to read the music. In No.1 'Easy E, Cool C',

when violins and basses play their E string, cellos and violas play their C string. Students should be encouraged to feel a pulse in the rests, either by saying "za" or "rest", moving subtly (some students do this naturally) or perhaps by blowing gently.

'Cool Crotchets' can be played with the bow later on.

### **Page 11 - Note Detective 2**

Q.1 - Confirming students know what a crotchet and crotchet rest are. Their task as note detectives is to find the answer from an earlier page in the book (page 6).

Q.2 - More note recognition.

Q.3 - By copying and then reproducing the notes, students need to really have a good look at them, i.e. which side the stem is on, whether it goes up or down, and where the notehead sits. Young students may not be able to make perfect reproductions, but that is ok at this stage.

### **Page 12 - String Checker**

Left hand pizz. with adjacent pairs of strings. In No.1 'Up High, Down Low' the violins and basses pluck their highest and lowest string pair respectively while the violas and cellos are plucking their highest and lowest strings (C& A) in accompaniment. In No.2 'Low Riders' the roles are reversed. Nos. 3 & 4 'Everyone Has D 'n A' and 'Ghostly G & Spooky D' are played in unison as the strings are common to all instruments.

'Ghostly G & Spooky D' is a favourite of students and is a good early performance option, although it works better as a bowed version learnt later on (the pizz. volume tends to be on the soft side, especially if you perform in a large hall). In the bowed version, at the end students can be taught a basic tremolo on an open G to complement that played by the piano. Consider asking students to add in ghostly sounds (vocalisations) in the piano introduction and interlude for an enhanced 'spooky feeling'!

While 'Ghostly G & Spooky D' is a fun piece, it also is useful for getting students to feel the pulse of the two rests in the first half of bars 2 - 4.

### **Page 13 - Note Detective 3**

More note recognition (you can't do too much!) and review of left hand pizz. numbering.

### **A note about the bow....**

At this point the teacher should be preparing to start introducing the bow. See the information about the bow on page 9.

### **Page 14 - Triple Treat**

Three string left hand pizz. No.1 'The D-A-G Song' provides a nice performance piece, either plucked, or bowed later on. No.2 'Power Play' is essentially an expanded version of No.1. Due to first beat rests and less repeated notes, No.3 'String Hop' tends to be quite challenging for many students, hence slightly slower accompaniment speeds. On this page, the quantity of printed

finger numbers is reduced, although throughout the book some remain in most pieces as reminders (the goal after all is not to become brilliant left hand pizz. specialists but rather to have the flexibility, dexterity, soft-hands and good playing posture that it helps develop).

#### **Page 15 - Note Detective 4**

Another review of fingering leading up to the last major page of left hand pizz. Questions 2 - 4 review drawing notes and the crotchet rest. Q.5 introduces a bit of creativity for students. Even though their open string pieces may not sound like much, students get a buzz out of hearing them played (either by the teacher or the student themselves)!

#### **Page 16 - Autumn Moods**

The title reflects the time of year this page is likely to be encountered - early autumn. (I have literally been teaching this page and looked outside with the students to see falling leaves, autumn rain etc.). Here we use all four fingers of the left hand for pizzicato - not an insignificant achievement for young players! It is a good idea to build up to this and make it a short term goal or incentive. No.1 'Falling Leaves' is a nice performance piece. No.2 'Raindrops' is an early introduction to ensemble playing (for mixed groups), where learning to count rests is important - only the violins and basses play the first two bars while only the violas and cellos play the last two. No.3 'Temple Mount' is the pizz. version of the same piece which reappears in 'Crazy Mix-Ups' on page 29.

#### **Page 17 - The Bow**

As mentioned earlier, it is advisable to start introducing the bow before reaching this page. I would recommend spending 5 to 10 minutes in each lesson from around the time you work on 'Triple Treat' (or earlier) to gradually prepare students to use the bow. By the time you finish 'Autumn Moods', the students should be almost ready to start bowing. If bows have been taken from students, then a pencil or drinking straw is a good substitute for practising the bow hold at home and in lessons.

Sequence of the bow introduction:

- Parts of the bow
- Function of the adjusting screw
- When to tighten the hair and how much, when to loosen
- Rosining (why?, how much, how often)
- The bow hold

Teachers tend to have their own preferred way of teaching the bow hold and I don't wish to impose a particular way of doing it. In keeping with the soft hands and minimum of tension philosophy, however, I will mention that for a number of years I have been teaching the beginner bow hold near (just behind) the balance point. This makes for a more relaxed hold as well as ease and lightness of bowing for a beginner. It also provides the possibility of turning the bow over easily in order to "examine the thumb" - checking that it is correctly curved. The bow hold I teach is the conventional hold - I don't start with easy or modified versions as they can be hard

to change later on. In regard to moving the hold from near the balance point to the normal position above the frog, I find that after or towards the end of the first year students tend to start asking if they can hold it there (usually by now having seen where the older students hold it). That's usually a good time to make the move!

## Page 18 - Halfway Harmonics

This page introduces each open string and its corresponding halfway harmonic.

**Playing Harmonics:** Harmonics can be a source of confusion for string players depending on how they have been notated and what pitch they are meant to sound. In *Tricky Fingers*, two types of natural harmonics are used:

1. Halfway harmonics - these are more commonly known as octave harmonics (due to being played at the octave position on a string and sounding an octave higher than that open string). I have called them 'halfway harmonics' because it is a much easier concept for young players to grasp. Students should be shown visually that the harmonic is played at the halfway point of the string (between the nut and the bridge). A marker of some sort (tape stripe, whiteout mark) here is essential to allow ease of locating the harmonics.

In the book, the halfway harmonics are always marked with a  $\frac{3}{0}$  or  $\frac{4}{0}$  above the note indicating that it is a harmonic and what finger to play it with. Normally, they can be played with any finger, but in order to develop the 4th finger and keep it active, I have marked all the violin and viola halfway harmonics with the  $\frac{4}{0}$ . If violin or viola students are having trouble reaching the G or C string harmonic, then substituting the 3rd finger is fine. The same goes for cello and bass students - 2nd finger might need to be substituted for 3rd on the C and E strings if reaching is difficult. The theory behind these halfway harmonics is that they should sound at the pitch of the written note.

2. Diamond harmonics - these are notated with diamond shaped noteheads that are played at the position of the written note (using specified fingers if marked). For violins and violas, these are in 1st position, for cellos and basses the positions are indicated on the relevant pages. Again, mark the appropriate diamond harmonic positions with dots or small stickers when they are encountered in the book. Diamond harmonics do not necessarily sound at the pitch of the written note.

The hand position for playing halfway harmonics is very similar to that of left hand pizz. i.e. pad of the thumb in the bend of the neck in approximately 4th position. Basses will probably find it hard to reach the harmonic so the thumb may need to move around to the side of the neck. It is important to ensure that all students keep their harmonic fingers from becoming rigid or straight.

A note has been added on this page about ledger lines, as some of the harmonics sit quite high above the staff.

## Page 19 - Note Detective 5

This page can be done after or before the 'Bowing Moves' pages i.e. it can be used to teach the harmonics or review them.

## Page 20 & 21 - Bowing Moves on G & D, Bowing Moves on A & E/C

Bowing the open string followed by its halfway harmonic. These should be learnt individually at first, but in the recorded accompaniment, the harmonic version follows on immediately from the open string version.

Bowing is introduced one string at a time, and is experienced on all four strings. The rhythms are designed to require reading from students (there are a few traps to catch those not watching the music!).

Now that bows are in use, teachers need to monitor students' bow holds regularly to try and prevent bad habits creeping in. Students should also be encouraged to critique each other's bow holds (nicely, of course!). In fact, before my students can gain a 'bow license'<sup>1</sup> they need to be able to *teach me* how to hold the bow. By doing this, I find students become much more aware of the desired shape of the hand and position of the fingers on the bow. I also don't give the students a bow license too quickly or easily, as they need to understand the importance of trying to get the bow hold as good as possible.

**Bow Direction:** The concept of up and down bows is not introduced in this book, nor are bow lifts/retakes. Pieces are bowed to work out starting on a down bow, and 'backwards' bowing is left in intentionally. This is good for students to experience at this point. The teacher should feel free to introduce down and up bows as well as bow lifts if they think they will be beneficial or appropriate in a certain place.

I teach the students to start each piece in the down bow position (at the heel), but don't call it that. I simply model it and say something along the lines of "start with the (bow) hand near the strings". I also teach students to stop the bow and let it remain on the string for the duration of the rest, and then bow in the opposite direction. Here again, the idea is to minimise technical detail and avoid getting into lengthy explanations, which for young string players can be confusing. When eventually teaching the terminology and symbols for up and down bows, the terms 'push bow' (up) and 'pull bow' (down) are helpful in clarifying which is which.

To be clear sounding, harmonics need to be played in the exact spot on a string (finger lightly touching the surface) and require a certain amount of vigour in the bow stroke. Bows also need to be rosined properly. Harmonics are useful for developing full strokes and good bow speed. When playing the open string versions of the pieces in 'Bowing Moves', the left hand should be

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<sup>1</sup> The 'bow license' is a small card I print which says something like "Congratulations, you now have a license to bow! Make sure you check your bow hold regularly." There is a space for the student's name and my signature. They are not particularly fancy, but students really like them and look forward to getting one!

positioned in approx. 4th position with the fingers hovering above the strings until needed to play the harmonic. This idea of the finger hovering above the string is to be used in all similar situations throughout the book. It helps maintain good left hand / instrument posture and ensures preparedness to play harmonics when required.

In Nos. 3 & 4 on page 21, the bass's E string doesn't go well with the C and E sounded by the other instruments. It is used for the sake of uniformity and to cover the string, but if you were to perform this one, you might consider getting the basses to use their G string instead, as it harmonises a little better.

After playing the Bowing Moves pages, students should go back and try the Cool Crotchets page with the bow for extra practice.

### **Page 22 - Bowin' and a Pluckin'**

Mixing up arco and left hand pizz. for independence of hands. Violins, violas and cellos bow their lowest string and pluck their highest. To harmonise with them, the bass does the opposite - bowing the highest string and plucking the lowest. The pieces on this page become progressively more challenging, both physically and mentally. Plucking and bowing simultaneously is good for coordination (a bit like rubbing your stomach while patting your head)! Students enjoy the challenge of combining the two skills and are usually excited when they can achieve it.

**Expression:** Even though there are no expressive markings or dynamics in the book, this is not to mean that they can't or shouldn't be included by the teacher. Basic dynamics can potentially be added into or taught by rote in certain pieces. Simple phrasing can also be taught at the discretion and taste of the teacher.

### **Page 23 - Quirky Quavers**

Quavers are introduced in both duple and quadruple groupings because students inevitably try and argue that a quadruple grouping is a 'ti-ka-ti-ka' i.e. semi-quavers. A quick word about single and double beams will normally convince all but the most ardent 'semi-quaverist'! Warm up by saying and clapping the rhythms (and also the rhythms of the actual pieces prior to playing them). Perhaps the best way to try and teach the proportional difference in length between a quaver and crotchet is to use the proportional method of vertical clapping mentioned earlier on. Air bowing the rhythms would be another good prelude to playing them.

Different crotchet and quaver patterns are played on all four strings. Different backing track speeds emphasise that quavers are not necessarily always played fast. In order to keep halfway harmonics 'on the boil', it is worth playing the repeat as harmonics. This will also mean that students need to be hovering in 4th position and thereby more likely to maintain good playing posture. If performing No.1 'E-C Beat', substituting the G string for bass might harmonize better.

### **Page 24 - Note Detective 6**

Reviewing quaver rhythms and the musical road signs from page 7.

## **Page 25 - Crossing Strings**

This is the first time in the book that students change string levels within the same piece. They don't seem to find this very difficult, partly because they have already experienced playing extensively on each individual string level. When crossing strings, students sometimes try and string two down or up bows together, so a word might be necessary to remind them about changing bow direction for each note. No. 2 'Over the Sand Dunes' is a good performance piece, as is No.3 'Russian March', which is a favourite of both students and audiences. The students really like playing this one with gusto, and the marching adds a nice theatrical touch. Marching in time is the real challenge of the piece, and is very effective if everyone comes to a definite stop on the rest at the end of the second line. A big shout of "hey!" at the end with bows up in the air finishes it off nicely. A piece like this, while easy and only using three notes, has lots of value in 'selling' your program to the parents/audience, and making students excited about performing.

There is a teacher/advanced student part for 'Russian March' that can be played in the repeat of the A section. The music for this can be found on pages 21 - 23 in this book. Something which might be worth considering (even though it hasn't been taught yet) is having the bass player pizz. their part with the right hand rather than playing arco. 'Russian March' is another piece in which the bass has some different notes to the other instruments.

After completing this page, extra bowing practice with string crossings can be had by playing the 'String Checker' and 'Triple Treat' pages. If students feel adventurous with their string crossings, they might also like to try 'Autumn Moods'!

## **Page 26 - Smooth Groove**

No.1 'Smooth Sailing' is a review of halfway harmonics so that students don't forget what they look like. It also uses them in the context of string level changes - a good opportunity to talk about and highlight different bow arm levels if it hasn't already been done earlier. This is another 'quasi-ensemble' piece, in that the cellos and violas finish by themselves.

No.2 'Harmonic Rock' is another easy but effective performance piece. It also serves the purpose of pre-learning the piece in preparation for the 'tricky version' which comes later on. Playing on the G string and using the halfway harmonic should mean all violins and violas have their instruments positioned nicely up on their left shoulders.

## **Page 27 - Measuring Minims**

Prepare here by clapping and saying the different note lengths and/or air bowing. It may be worth talking about the minim as being played by a 'slow bow'.

No.1 'Longer and Longer' aims to create a feel of lengthening notes, and also puts the minim into the context of other notes. No.3 'Softly the Snow' teaches the minim rest (za-a). In both lines the two beat rest is first shown as two individual crotchet rests, then as a minim rest. The idea is that you can point them out and say they are of equal value.

Don't forget the hovering harmonic fingers in all pieces on this page!

### **Page 28 - Note Detective 7**

The focus here is on minims and minim rests, as well as giving students a chance to actually try drawing them. Q. 3 is a little line joining quiz to revise other notes and rests as well.

### **Page 29 - Crazy Mix-Ups**

A fun page of multi-skilling that will have young minds working hard! Each piece is based on combining open string arco notes, left hand pizz. and harmonics, sometimes simultaneously. The focus is on bowing the lowest string and plucking the highest, except for the bass, which is opposite and occasionally has a different note in order to harmonise with the other instruments.

### **Page 30 - Diamond Harmonics**

This page is designed to prepare the left hand to play stopped notes in 1st position. Violins and violas play these exercises in 1st position while cellos are in 2nd position and basses in 3rd. This is so that the pitches of the harmonics will match. Even though the cellos and basses are not in first position, the hand shape can be prepared just as effectively.

This page needs some preparation by marking not only the harmonic positions onto the fingerboard, but also the contact point of the thumb (onto the side of the neck for violins and violas; under the neck for cellos and basses). Small stickers are useful to do this. A reminder that these diamond harmonics are played exactly where written.

For violins and violas the contact points of the thumb pad and base knuckle of the first finger are very important in setting up a good hand shape in first position. Maintaining these contact points should be done without gripping, and the fingers of the left hand should have a nicely arched shape. Some students will find spreading the third and fourth fingers a whole step apart a little difficult at first, but generally get used to it after practising it for a while. A useful order for setting up the hand is first positioning the thumb pad and base knuckle of the first finger, then reaching up and placing the third and fourth fingers. If these four contact points are in place with fingers rounded and thumb essentially upright, it is almost impossible to have a 'collapsed hand' i.e. poor hand shape. Students quickly learn that all of this is easiest when the instrument is correctly positioned up on the left shoulder!

For cellos and basses, positioning the thumb behind/under the second finger will give a nicely balanced hand. Watch out for thumbs that want to wrap right around the neck! Care should be taken to ensure fingers are nicely rounded within a good overall hand shape. Special attention always needs to be paid to the position of the left elbow and arm.

For all players, the left hand should be relaxed between each piece so as not to retain tension.

'Mr Sun' is the first two note piece in the book (not based on open strings). Singing first is a good idea! Singing in sol-fa is an option for those familiar with it.

It is recommended to spend a few weeks (perhaps not exclusively) on this page to give the hand position time to settle. It requires a little bit of diligence and hands-on guidance, and the harmonics may not always sound fantastic. It's worth remembering that the goal of this page is

not to become an expert harmonic player; rather, it is an effective way to prepare a good left hand shape in readiness for playing in 1st position.

### **Page 31 - Note Detective 8**

The aim here is to distinguish between and understand the two different types of harmonics.

### **Page 32 - New Note G**

By now students should be ready to move on to playing stopped notes in 1st position on the D string. Violins and violas start with 3rd finger G while cellos start with 4th finger G. In order to give the basses something more interesting than open string G, they practise playing a G on the D string in 2nd position. If this is problematic for the player, open G is always an option, but with a mark for the finger it shouldn't be too difficult.

Marking the new note G should be done prior to starting this page. It will be a tiny bit under the diamond harmonic G mark on the D string. Use a distinguishable mark from the harmonic mark. You may want to consider marking the F# and 1st finger E notes at the same time (especially for cellos).

In the exercises on this page, students first sound the halfway harmonic on the G string before playing the new note G on the D string. This serves two purposes - one is to hear the pitch of the harmonic so they can pitch-match the stopped note (an aural reference) and the other is to do with playing posture. The postural idea here is to move the left hand from the halfway harmonic position (c. 4th position) to 1st position while maintaining the same essential hand shape. The starting point in 4th position should ensure a good hand shape (and the instrument should be sitting well up on the shoulders of violin and viola players). Key things to remember / emphasise while teaching this are:

- shifting is indicated by a generic 'star' symbol for every instrument (arrows are problematic especially for cellos and basses - young students think geographically rather than in terms of pitch direction, causing the whole "up is down" problem). The star reminds them that they need to shift or change position, and there are only two alternatives at this point.
- silent shifting without the bow should be done first to teach the movement
- everything in the hand must move as a 'unit', i.e. no part gets left behind (especially the thumb - this needs to be monitored carefully)
- maintain contact with the neck and edge of the fingerboard while shifting (no 'leaping' or 'jumping' into the new position)
- the hand shape we want to end up with in 1st position is essentially the same as what we were trying to achieve on the Diamond Harmonics page
- emphasise listening and pitch-matching even though students have a mark for their finger

### **One finger or the whole pattern?**

Here it is worth thinking about whether you want students to play the new note G with a single finger or having all fingers down in the basic pattern. For cellos, all four fingers down in the basic pattern should be the norm, so that a solid, balanced hand shape can be set up. For the bass, the second finger alone should feel quite balanced, but a supporting first finger might be considered. For violins and violas there seem to be different views depending on the context you teach in. Many tutor books that cater for teaching groups (often large) advocate placing all three fingers down in the basic D major pattern E F#G (1 23). There is a certain 'safety' in doing this and can make the teacher's job a bit easier, but the downside is that it lends itself towards tightness and a sense of 'clamping' or 'locking' down the hand.

While it may require more hands-on work and diligence in monitoring hand shapes by the teacher, by only stopping the third finger of violin and viola students, they should benefit from a more relaxed hand and potentially more resonance in the sound of the note (although on a 1/4 size violin this might be negligible!) It also sets them up for an easier transition to vibrato later on, when there can only be one finger stopping a note at a given time. This is not to say that there are no times when we press multiple fingers at one time or place down block patterns when it will clearly be beneficial, but the underlying aim is to try and aim for a relaxed hand and freedom in technique.

After only using harmonics and left hand pizz. (the soft hands approach), it may take students a little time getting used to actually pressing the finger(s) to the fingerboard.

In the first exercise on this page, plenty of time is given for the changing of position/shifting. By No.3 'Harmonic Rock' (tricky version), however, there is only one beat. Start slowly when teaching this page as it takes the students a while to get comfortable with the required shifting. 'Harmonic Rock' should be a longer term goal e.g. end of year performance, so after some time on it initially, I would move on with the intent of revisiting the piece regularly.

### **Page 33 - Note Detective 9**

Reinforcing new note G, and reviewing the difference between playing a harmonic and a stopped note.

### **Page 34 - F Sharp (F#)**

The same approach is used as in the previous page - pitch-matching the new note G from the harmonic and moving into 1st position with a good hand shape. Here basses play open G rather than in 2nd position for convenience.

For violins and violas the placement of the F# is easily taught as it is the 'best buddy' of G, i.e. the fingers are close together, lightly touching/brushing each other. After the five stopped Gs have been played in the first line of No.1 'Best Buddies', the second finger should be placed down next

to the third. The third finger is then lifted out of the way during the rests. Half way through the second line when the G is played again, the second finger F# should be left down in support of the third.

For cellos, the third finger F# will already be in its place as part of the full finger pattern, so it is a matter of just lifting off the fourth finger while playing the F# and then replacing it again for the G.

For basses, this is where you set up the basic left hand shape in 1st position, with first finger on E, second on F natural with the third next to it, and the fourth finger on F#. Check that the pad of the thumb is at the back of the neck roughly behind the second finger. It should be in the natural position of a relaxed hand, not contorted or upright, and not wrapping around the neck like a guitarist's thumb! F# can be a tough note for little hands to play in tune and sound with resonance, so this will take time. Students should think about letting their arm weight pull the fingers into the fingerboard, rather than pressing the string down. Markers for the E and F# should be placed on the fingerboard if it hasn't already been done.

Continue paying attention to the left arm/elbow position and thumb location of cello and bass players. With violins and violas, the contact points (thumb pad and base knuckle of the first finger) need to be checked regularly, as well as the direction of the thumb (more vertical than horizontal) so as not to lead to a collapsed wrist.

No.2 'Mad Hatter's Dance' is the longest piece in the book to this point, so I have included what is termed a 'finger drop'. This is simply a matter of lifting and replacing the finger(s) in order to release any tension in the hand (not something to get too hung up on). 'Mad Hatter' is a useful performance piece, and can be used creatively e.g. in the third line a student might play the first two bars as a 'question', which is answered by the rest of the group in the third and fourth bar. Alternatively, on pages 24 & 25 I have included a more elaborate 'question' that can be played by the teacher.

No.3 'Sleep Song' provides a mid-piece shifting opportunity (bar 6), which also gives a nice change of timbre to the sound. This piece tends to be an audience favourite, especially if at the end when the piano is finishing the students tilt their heads, close their eyes and pretend to sleep. Very cute!

### **Page 35 - Note Detective 10**

This page covers some theory behind the sharp sign. With no key signatures being used in the book, sharp signs are used where required. They haven't been placed on every single note as that would clog up the music layout too much. I have followed convention by only marking the first one in each bar. The convention is explained on this page, although it may not be the easiest concept for some students to grasp. Even if students don't fully understand the concept, it doesn't stop them from playing an F#, as no other alternative has been taught for that particular note(head).

### **Page 36 - New Note E**

Completing the basic pattern on the D string. New note E is first finger for everyone - easy to teach! This page introduces some well known children's three-note songs. Singing before playing is a good idea, even if D major isn't the best key for them! Again, sol-fa is an option.

### **Page 37 - Note Detective 11**

Reviewing the new note E. Also targeting recognition of notes that look similar due to being on adjacent lines/spaces.

### **Page 38 - Diamond Harmonic A (and New Note A - basses)**

This is a very useful page for extending the D string pattern to include the fourth finger (violins and violas) as a harmonic and to introduce shifting to the same harmonic in 4th position for cellos and basses. The use of the fourth finger helps further develop a good hand shape for violins and violas (similar to the Diamond Harmonics page). Shifting continues developing mobility of the left hand for cellos and basses. There's something inspiring and rewarding about seeing young players shifting confidently into 4th position so early on!

For cellos and basses, the same star symbol used earlier in the book is used here to indicate shifting, only this time into 4th position. The shift into 4th position is very manageable even for young players, as it occurs at the place where the thumb reaches the bend of the neck, which acts as a natural 'stopper' for the shift. If the hand is moved as a 'unit', then the first finger should end up on the A harmonic on the D string. A good left hand shape should always be stressed both in 1st and 4th positions. Time is always given by the use of rests during which the students can execute the shift. In Nos. 3 'Dragons' and 4 'See-Saw', basses learn the stopped first finger A on the G string.

For violins and violas, instead of introducing the fourth finger as a stopped note it is first used as a harmonic. The advantage of this is that students can know they have located the position of the note accurately (i.e. are playing in tune) when the harmonic speaks clearly. It also provides an intermediate step to playing the stopped note, making it easier to manage when it is time to press it down. With the fourth finger, it is vital to remind students (often!) that when they reach up to play it as a harmonic (i.e. it is the only finger touching the string) that they do not release the contact points of the thumb and the base of first finger. There should be no 'shifting' that takes place when the fourth finger is being played, nor should the hand shape collapse. This is vital in order to get the sought-after benefit of a good left hand shape from this page.

### **Page 39 - Note Detective 12**

Reviews the notes on the D string. In Q.3, the diamond symbol means that students should draw a diamond harmonic A note. Q.4 provides for more creativity - no matter what notes/rests students write (although starting and finishing on D helps), with a bit of expressive playing and artistic license, you can make these little 'tunes' sound great! Students love hearing their own piece played. Worth doing!

### **Page 40 - Curtain Raiser**

This is a reworked version of the same piece published in *Four Little Pieces* some years ago. More notes have been included as well as the diamond harmonic A. It reintroduces left hand pizz. which hasn't been used for some pages at this point in the book. (If you have time, it is worth going back every now and then to revise a few of the early left hand pizz. pieces so students don't forget the skill or the finger-note relationships. It also helps keep the left hand relaxed). 'Curtain Raiser' is another good performance piece. It also introduces 1st and 2nd endings.

### **Page 41 - Six Note Songs**

Expanding the note range to include first finger B on the A string (fourth finger B on the G string for basses).

No. 1 'Twinkle Twinkle' is an old favourite, and is played in a standard fashion for cellos and basses. Violins and violas use the diamond harmonic A in the second line to continue developing the fourth finger. If for a performance this was thought to sound too 'exotic', it could be replaced with an open A.

No.2 'Old MacDonald' is used to revise shifting to and from the halfway harmonic, thereby helping with the pitch-matching of the new note G. This is a good piece for left hand mobility, and by using the halfway harmonic G, it reinforces good playing posture (remind students that they can't play it properly unless their violin or viola is positioned correctly up on the left shoulder). There is something rewarding about watching young players move to and from what is essentially 4th position so early on!

( Old MacDonald only uses five notes unless you count the harmonic G, but the range is still from D to B).

### **Page 42 - Note Detective 13**

Reviewing the note B. Distinguishing between G and B. Thinking ahead to completing the notes on the A string and offering an opportunity to talk about which letters of the alphabet are used in music notation. Reviewing 1st and 2nd endings.

### **Page 43 - Celebrate!**

If the students have reached this page, and particularly if they are well on the way to developing good playing posture and the beginnings of a free and relaxed technique, then there is cause to celebrate! A good foundation for future development will have been laid.

No.1 'Graduation Day' is a final challenge, using broken thirds and also working string crossings between the A and D strings.

No.2 'Jingle Bells' is appropriate if finishing the book at the end of the year, and gives the students a holiday project if they haven't quite made it. The open string has been used for all but one A (instead of the diamond harmonic A, which doesn't sound quite right for such a well known song!).

## **Page 44 - Note Detective 14**

Some musical maths problems for students to solve, thereby getting them to think about note values. This can be completed at this point in the book, or alternatively it could be done any time after quavers and minims have been introduced.

### **After Tricky Fingers - A First Book.....**

Hopefully at some point soon, *Tricky Fingers - A Second Book....* This would move on from here while still incorporating some of the same elements such as left hand pizz. and harmonics to try and ensure students keep developing supple hands and freedom in technique.

### **Transition into Essential Elements**

For teachers who wish to transition students into *Essential Elements Book 1* after completing *Tricky Fingers*, No 58 on page 18 is the place to continue on from in order to finish learning the D major scale. Having said that, a lot of what follows in the next few pages has already been learnt, and you should be able to move on fairly quickly. The stopped fourth finger on page 23 will be the next new concept encountered.

### **Transition into String Ensemble in 2nd Year**

If your circumstances allow for a dedicated 2nd year students' ensemble, then that is the ideal context to start developing their ensemble skills. If you only have one rehearsal to accommodate your entire string program, then I would suggest delaying the entry of 2nd year students for at least 6 months, i.e. they would only join in Semester 2. This gives them more time to learn additional notes and other knowledge required for ensemble playing. Depending on the skill level of your older players, even then you might consider running a split rehearsal (all combined for the first half, senior/advanced players for the second half). This helps cater for all players without overwhelming younger students while ensuring older students still get challenged.

#### **Update on Tricky Fingers 2**

As of early 2021, TF2 is beginning to near completion! I have already been using the material for a number of years and am trying to finalise it into book form. It will align quite closely with the new Instrumental Music Curriculum in Education Qld.

If you are interested in finding out more and/or being on an email list to be alerted of its publication, please email me at:

[info@lakermusic.com.au](mailto:info@lakermusic.com.au)

# Russian March

Teacher Violin

Timo Jarvela

2

*energy!*

Marching

*soli*

**Hey!**

# Russian March

2

Musical notation for the first staff of 'Russian March', starting with a double bar line and a fermata. The key signature is one flat (Bb) and the time signature is 4/4. The notation includes a double bar line, a fermata, and a sequence of notes: a quarter note G4, a quarter rest, a quarter note A4, a quarter rest, a quarter note Bb4, a quarter note C5, a quarter rest, a quarter note Bb4, a quarter note A4, a quarter rest, a quarter note G4, a quarter note F4, a quarter note E4, and a quarter rest.

*energy!*

Marching

Musical notation for the second staff of 'Russian March', continuing the melody from the first staff. It ends with a double bar line and four 'x' marks on the staff.

Musical notation for the third staff of 'Russian March', consisting of four measures of rests, each marked with an 'x' on the staff.

Musical notation for the fourth staff of 'Russian March', starting with four measures of rests marked with 'x'. It then features a melodic line with the instruction *soli* above it. The notes are G4, A4, Bb4, C5, Bb4, A4, G4, F4, E4, and a quarter rest. A fourth measure contains a four-measure rest marked with '4' over '0'.

Musical notation for the fifth staff of 'Russian March', continuing the melodic line with notes G4, A4, Bb4, C5, Bb4, A4, G4, F4, E4, and a quarter rest. It concludes with a treble clef and a double bar line.

Musical notation for the sixth staff of 'Russian March', starting with an asterisk (\*) and a quarter note G4. It continues with notes A4, Bb4, C5, Bb4, A4, G4, F4, E4, and a quarter rest. A fourth measure contains a four-measure rest marked with '4' over '0'. The staff ends with the word **Hey!** and a double bar line.

Musical notation for the seventh staff of 'Russian March', starting with a four-measure rest marked with '4' over '0'. It continues with notes G4, A4, Bb4, C5, Bb4, A4, G4, F4, E4, and a quarter rest. The staff ends with the word **Hey!** and a double bar line.

\* alternative ending



Teacher Violin

# Mad Hatter's Dance

Timo Jarvela

Violin score for Mad Hatter's Dance. The piece is in 4/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The score consists of five staves. The first staff begins with a whole rest, followed by a repeat sign and a quarter note G4. The second staff continues with a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, and a quarter note C5, with a 'finger drop' instruction below. The third staff features a first ending (1.) and a second ending (2.) with a 'soli' instruction above. The fourth and fifth staves contain various melodic lines with slurs and accents.

Teacher Viola

Viola score for Mad Hatter's Dance. The piece is in 4/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The score consists of five staves. The first staff begins with a whole rest, followed by a repeat sign and a quarter note G3. The second staff continues with a quarter note A3, a quarter note B3, and a quarter note C4, with a 'finger drop' instruction below. The third staff features a first ending (1.) and a second ending (2.) with a 'soli' instruction above. The fourth and fifth staves contain various melodic lines with slurs and accents.

# Mad Hatter's Dance

Teacher Cello (Bass)

Timo Jarvela

The musical score is written for Cello (Bass) in 4/4 time, with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It consists of five staves of music. The first staff begins with a repeat sign and a fermata, followed by a sequence of eighth notes and a triplet of eighth notes marked with a '3' and the instruction 'finger drop'. The second staff continues with a triplet of eighth notes marked with a '4' and 'finger drop', followed by a repeat sign and a sequence of eighth notes. The third staff features a first ending bracket labeled '1.' and a second ending bracket labeled '2.' with the instruction 'soli' above it. The fourth and fifth staves contain various melodic lines with slurs and accents, ending with a double bar line.

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