

Violin Scales in Every Mode

By Kristin Baird, TFO Teaching Artist

I admit, this can seem like a weird way to practice your scales, so I thought I would write a little about what motivated me to start practicing this way.

As I've practiced my scales over the years, I always felt there were places on the fingerboard that were more unfamiliar than I wanted. In addition, I was unconvinced by my scale routine's ability to address these holes. Practicing isolated finger patterns in an etude book helped, but it felt so far removed and out of context. In addition, I was not satisfied with my general intonation. Logically speaking if I couldn't play in tune in fourth position just playing across the strings without shifting, how was I going to play in tune when I added shifting back into the mix?

So, I started practicing my scales in modes while staying in one position—meaning I would start on the lowest finger in first position (A, first finger on the G string) and then play to the highest note while staying in first position (B, fourth finger on the E string). I started by placing the notes in the key of C major.

A B C D, E F G A, B C D E, F G A B (and then back down)

I stopped and thought, "Ok, well those are all the notes in first position. But what about all the notes in first position that don't fall within the key of C major? So, I kept playing the same starting and ending notes (first finger on the G string up to fourth finger on the E string and back down) but this time I added F#.

A B C D, E F# G A, B C D E, F# G A B (and then back down)

I continued to add sharps until I had added F# C# G# D# A# E#. At that point I was almost enharmonically in second position. So, I repeated the process with second position starting in C major and adding sharps one repetition at a time.

A few of my own edits that are in the music:

Slurs, bowing variations: I like to do the bowing as found in the first scale to warm up my bow arm both at the frog and the tip, however you can add whatever bowing variation you might be working on at the time.

Open Strings going up, 4's on the way down: While in first position I like to use open strings on the way up in order to get my instrument resonating. However, on the way down the scale I use fourth fingers to work on opening up my hand frame and getting a consistent stretch in my pinky.

Time signatures: In order to avoid a double down at the end of every cycle, I typically leave out the last note at the bottom of the scale so that every four measures the time signature is 3/4. This allows me to continue from one key signature to the next without interruption.

Leaving out open G after the first four measure: I leave out open G after the first four measure so that my string crossings are not grouped by every four notes. The string crossings are instead off by one eighth note and do not line up perfectly on the beat.

This scale routine can be adapted to fit different playing levels. For example, if you have only learned first position, only practice the first 28 measures. If you're learning fifth position for the first time, only practice the fifth position section. Practicing the arpeggios and broken third that fall within each scale can also be a great exercise.

To play through both the sharp and flat keys at quarter note=60 takes about 30 minutes.