
MASTERCLASS



ABOVE Blues fiddler Papa John Creach liked to add tremolo to some of his slides

The slide:

Notation

Blues and jazz slides

The Klezmer 'bend'

East Indian slides

Improving technique

There are two distinct approaches to the art of initiating and finalising pitches within each musical phrase. In classical music, emphasis is placed on using the left hand to place the pitch precisely on target, departing from it intact. In many other styles, such as Gypsy, Klezmer, blues, jazz and East Indian – to name a few – there is considerable fanfare around how the left hand initiates and departs from the pitch.

While it is just as common to use left-hand textures (such as trills) and melodic ornaments (such as grace notes and turns) to help colour phrases in alternative styles, here we will focus on the art of the slide. This refers to a technique in which the player places his or her finger below or above the intended note and then glides that finger into the desired pitch. The timing of the slide usually anticipates the beat and the moving finger then lands on the pitch in time for a down-beat or up-beat.

Variations in distance, speed of motion and bow pressure help to create different-sounding slides. For example, you can travel an eighth-tone, quarter-tone, whole tone and on up to an octave or beyond, depending on the effect you wish to create. You can vary the sound

Julie Lyonn Lieberman demystifies the art of the slide, from oozing your way in true blues style to the Klezmer 'bend'

of the slide by travelling from one discriminate pitch to another, or start the slide with lighter bow pressure so that the pitch is indiscernible and the effect is highlighted through a gradual intensification in bow pressure. If you glide your finger slowly versus quickly you can vary the sound even more. These techniques are more effective if vibrato is only added once you land on the desired pitch (if the style calls for vibrato).

SLIDE NOTATION

Slides can be as simple or complex as you want to make them. In notation, we generally use a straight line to indicate the slide (example 1) and assume that the finger used to initiate the pitch will be the same one that slides up to the next notated pitch, unless indicated otherwise.

Slide notation is rather vague when it comes to representing the speed of the moving finger and does not indicate bow pressure, which can change the characteristics of the slide considerably (example 2). The player has to calculate these based on the rhythmic content of the melodic line or the requirements of the genre, and then the tempo of the slide will fall naturally into place. For instance, in this example the slide will move quickly.

We can assume that the player would move more slowly if that same slide is notated as in example 3. Try playing this with a light touch and then with increased bow pressure to compare the sound possibilities.

BLUES AND JAZZ SLIDES

Blues fiddler Papa John Creach liked to add tremolo to some of his slides. Example 4 illustrates the vagaries of slide notation. When presented with this phrase, a player unfamiliar with Creach's style might assume that this measure requires a held pitch followed by a quick, light slide. In fact, you can use the full three beats to ooze your way up. Since slides can be found in styles that invite individual interpretation, slide notation should be interpreted as a general map unless you are trying to emulate a specific player's sound: in this case, study recorded examples.

Rock and blues fiddler Don 'Sugarcane' Harris would spice up his solos with a trill on minor thirds, which he would slide up and down the fingerboard (example 5).

Example 1



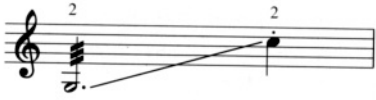
Example 2



Example 3



Example 4



Example 5



Example 6



Example 7



Example 8



Example 9



Example 10



IN STYLES SUCH AS BLUES, JAZZ, KLEZMER AND EAST INDIAN, THERE IS CONSIDERABLE FANFARE AROUND HOW THE LEFT HAND INITIATES AND DEPARTS FROM THE PITCH

When reading a jazz string chart you will sometimes come across an 'x' followed by a line leading to a notated pitch (example 6). This indicates an indiscernible start-point used to initiate the shift. It means that the slide will start in that general pitch vicinity with a light touch in both the left and right hands, followed by a gradual deepening of pressure as the slide moves to the desired pitch. You can hear this technique used in Gypsy fiddling as well.

In blues fiddling, heavy bow pressure coordinated with a slow ooze out of or up into pitch can be found throughout the genre. Example 7 is from fiddler Lonnie Johnson. He was also known to lean his finger back and up again. Try the passage from this example both ways. First, slide a half step below and back on each figure, and then try leaning back and up. Repeat each approach with an increase in bow speed and pressure coordinated with the lower pitch within each slide or lean.

THE KLEZMER 'BEND'

In Klezmer fiddling, a lean backwards is called a 'bend'. The bend (indicated by a 'B') accompanied by a *krechtz* (a grace note articulated with the pinky indicated by a 'K') as the finger returns to pitch helps to create a delicious wailing sound. Example 8 is from the tune *L'Hu Neroneno* as taught to me by Klezmer fiddler Alicia Svigals.

In addition to the scoop and the bend, you can slide down out of a note or spill down out of it by using an intermediary finger (example 9).

EAST INDIAN SLIDES

There are also numerous variations of sweeping, zig-zagging slides found in the East Indian violin style (part of a series of left-hand ornaments too numerous to count, known as *gamakas*). Almost impossible to notate, they are taught by ear. Example 10 is a general map of the technique. ▶

IMPROVING TECHNIQUE

Many string players, when first beginning to experiment with slides, tend to default to a medium tempo, medium length slide up into the pitch on the downbeat, usually on the first beat of the measure, again and again without variation. Overjoyed to discover a new sound – one that is associated with alternative string playing – they often do not notice the repetitious aspect of how they are applying this technique. Once you have practised the slide techniques outlined above, make sure you vary timing, distance and placement within the rhythmic phrase.

There is yet another method you can use to produce a wider range of sounds. The brain's right motor cortex, which governs muscle movements in the left side of the body, is connected via a gate called the *corpus callosum* to the left motor cortex. This means that if you lighten the pressure of the moving finger, your bow arm will automatically lighten as well – unless you direct it otherwise. If you pay attention to this brain default system, you can use it or consciously fight it. Variations in left- or right-hand pressure can add a completely new spectrum of sound possibilities. To explore these possibilities, choose a finger and experiment with creating first equal pressure in both hands as you slide, and then opposite activity: press with the bow while the left hand is light and vice versa.

Even if you are not interested in alternative string styles, practising slides will enable you to develop additional technical skills. Any new activity we pursue on the instrument forces the brain to wake up and focus on developing a new line of communication via our nervous system. This, in turn, activates additional variations in muscle response. The brain actually has to build new brain cells in order to handle new tasks.

Additionally, slide technique forces us to recognise each note on our fingerboard as a tangible physical location that can be recorded spatially like a map instead of relying solely on left-hand finger placement. In other words, if you rely on a specific finger placement (kinesthetic memory through touch) to place pitch, then practising slides will enable you to fine-tune your spatial map of the fingerboard, thereby using the right brain, which is in charge of images and maps. You will learn how to activate spatial images in order to be able to slide up into a given pitch with any one of your left-hand fingers. This, in turn, will open the door to a more fluid command over substitute fingerings.

Practising shifting techniques will also heighten control over finger pressure. In general, many players use far more pressure than they need. You won't be able to budge if you are busy drilling a hole into your fingerboard! The advantage of learning how to modify finger pressure whenever and however you wish can have an enormous impact on agility for speed and even freedom of motion for vibrato. The very act of lightening finger pressure will facilitate a release in your thumb muscle as well. ■



Stéphane Grappelli took the art of jazz violin to new heights: to emulate the stylistic slides of a particular player, study recordings

DON'T USE TOO MUCH PRESSURE. YOU WON'T BUDGE IF YOU ARE DRILLING A HOLE INTO YOUR FINGERBOARD

SUGGESTED LISTENING

Blues fiddle 'Peg Leg' Howell: *Moanin' and Groanin' Blues* from *Folks, He Sure Do Pull Some Bow!* Old Hat CD-1003

Papa John Creach: *Papa Blues* Bee Bump Records BB CD03

Don 'Sugarcane' Harris: *Crying* from *John Mayall's USA Union* Polydor 31452 74582

Klezmer Alicia Svigals: *L'Hu Neroneno* from *Fidl* Traditional Crossroads CD4286

Irish Eileen Ivers: *Maudabawn Chapel* from *Wild Blue* Green Linnet GLCD 1166

Jazz Ray Perry: *Sweet Georgia Brown* from *The Complete 1944 C.W. French and 1945 Rosenkrantz Apartment*

Transcriptions AB Fable ABCD1-006

World L. Subramaniam: *Jai Hanuman* from *Global Fusion* Elektra 25495