

“GEMINIANI GRIP”: ENDURING LEGACY AND PRACTICAL APPLICATION

By Dijana Ihas 

In 1751, Italian violinist, composer, teacher, and author Francesco Geminiani (1687–1762) published a treatise called *The Art of Playing on the Violin*. In it, he proposed an exercise for establishing a proper left-hand shape in first position on the violin, now known as the Geminiani Chord or Geminiani Grip (hereafter Geminiani Grip). Many historical and modern violin pedagogues—from Leopold Mozart to Simon Fischer—have admired the effectiveness of Geminiani Grip and used it in their teaching. However, despite its firm place in historically informed pedagogy, the underlying reasons for its pertinence and its use in everyday teaching are not widely understood. This article aims to explain the historical context and summarize the content of Geminiani’s treatise, trace the development of Geminiani Grip to the present, and offer a sequence of rote exercises aimed at preparing the left hand for the use of Geminiani Grip in daily teaching and practice.

Historical Context

In the early 1700s, master teachers were largely responsible for instructing professional musicians, and therefore early violin treatises were primarily aimed at amateur players (Boyden 1965, 357). However, between 1751 and 1761, three historically consequential treatises intended for use by professional violinists emerged: Geminiani’s *The Art of Playing on the Violin*, published in English in 1751; Leopold Mozart’s *A Treatise on the Fundamental Principles of Violin Playing*, published in German in 1756; and L’Abbé le fils’s (J. Saint-Sévin) *Principes du violon*, published in French in 1761 (still not translated). These three treatises became a model for those written in later centuries and are thus often termed “prototype treatises” (Boyden 1965, 364; L’Abbé le fils [1761] 1961).

Summary of Geminiani’s Treatise

Geminiani’s treatise reflects the Italian origin and influence of his teacher Arcangelo Corelli (1653–1713) and of several other Italian virtuosi violinist-composers including Pietro Locatelli (1695–1764) and Francisco Maria Veracini (1690–1768). It also reveals aesthetic and technical differences between the Italian and French schools (Boyden 1965, Introduction).

The Art of Playing on the Violin is divided into a section consisting of twenty-four notated exercises, called “Examples,” with textual explanations on how to practice them, and another with twelve free-standing compositions in various styles. Both sections contain a basso continuo that a violoncello or harp could play. Geminiani’s ([1751] 1952,

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Preface) interest in the role of emotional expression in music is captured in the first sentence of his book, “The intention of music is not only to please the ear, but to express sentiments, strike the imagination, affect the mind, and command the passions.” Among the pedagogical practices addressed are the instrument and bow hold, scales, orders (positions), arpeggios, and various ornaments including vibrato (close shake), double stops, and bowing variations.

While some of Geminiani’s pedagogical practices belong to the past, many are forward-thinking and have stood the test of time. Among practices used very rarely in modern-day teaching is the “fingerboard for learners” (Geminiani [1751] 1952, Example 1A), which involves marking all whole and half steps on the fingerboard in accordance with a three-octave diatonic scale to facilitate playing in tune. One enduring recommendation is to vibrate on short notes to make them more pleasing, often described as a precursor to continuous vibrato (Boyden 1965, vi). Another is Geminiani’s innovative approach to fingering chromatic scales: “Instead of . . . the sliding of the fingers . . . Geminiani was the first to introduce a fingering in which all fingers are used consecutively in a contracted position” (Yampol’sky 1977, 4). However, no other pedagogical practice proposed in *The Art of Playing on the Violin* has endured as the Geminiani Grip exercise has (Stowell 1996, 123).

Development of Geminiani Grip from Its Inception to Today

Original Description of Geminiani Grip

In Example 1B of his treatise, Geminiani provided step-by-step instructions for “perfect” left-hand setup in first position,

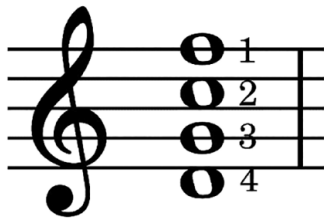


Figure 1. Geminiani Grip.

to be practiced silently without the bow. Each finger is placed on a different string, one after another, in a specific order:

[P]lace the first finger on the first string upon F; the second finger on the second string upon C; the third finger on the third string upon G; and the fourth finger on the fourth string upon D. This must be done without raising any of the fingers, till all four have been set down; but after that, they are to be raised but a little distance from the string they touched; and by so doing the position is perfect (see Figure 1).

Geminiani Grip in Historical Treatises

Leopold Mozart. While there is no mention of the Geminiani Grip in the first edition of L. Mozart's ([1756] 2010) seminal *A Treatise of the Fundamental Principles of Violin Playing*, in its second and third editions (1787 and 1806), he described an exercise for setting up proper left-hand shape that is identical to Geminiani Grip (without mentioning Geminiani): "Place the first finger on the F of the E string, the second on the C of the A string, the third on the G of the D string, and the fourth or little finger on the D of the G string" (p. 57). However, L. Mozart introduced further detail for the achievement of a proper left-hand setup by explaining that players should hold the neck of the violin between the upper part of the thumb joint and the ball of the base of the index finger (p. 57). Moreover, L. Mozart

added an innovative twist to Geminiani's instruction: "[after all four fingers] lie simultaneously on the right spot . . . try to lift first the index-finger, then the third; soon the second, and then the fourth [and then let the fingers] fall again at once" (p. 57). L. Mozart concluded his discussion of the proper left-hand setup enthusiastically, describing this exercise as "the shortest way to acquire a true position of the hand" (p. 58).

Bartolomeo Campagnoli (1751–1827). Campagnoli's ([1797] 1899) treatise *A New and Progressive Method on the Mechanism of Violin Playing* contains textual explanations and notated exercises for "132 progressive lessons for two violins and 118 studies for one violin only" (title page) and includes exercises for establishing desirable left-hand shape in first position (p. 3). Campagnoli advanced instruction on proper left-hand setup by articulating a specific placement of the left thumb in relation to the other fingers: "The thumb should be placed opposite the B of the G string" (p. 3). Notated exercises no. 3 and 4 show the left-hand fingers placed in the Geminiani Grip position (p. 3). Like L. Mozart, Campagnoli did not credit Geminiani for the origins of the exercise.

Campagnoli's approach included playing Geminiani Grip exercises with the bow and having individual fingers perform rhythmic vertical movements while the other fingers stay on the string (see Figure 2). This was the beginning of pedagogical practice used in the "Dounis System" (will be discussed later) in which the Geminiani Grip served as a framework for the development of left-hand finger independence.

Pierre Baillot (1771–1842). A member of the Paris Violin School, Baillot ([1835] 1991) wrote *The Art of the Violin*, which is considered to be the most comprehensive and significant violin treatise of the nineteenth century. In it, Baillot provided guidance on every technique used in violin music of his time through an innovative three-step approach: He first explained the technique; next, he provided exercises for mastering it; and finally, he provided an example from the violin repertoire

Geminiani Chord with Campagnoli's Exercise for Finger Independency

Campagnoli

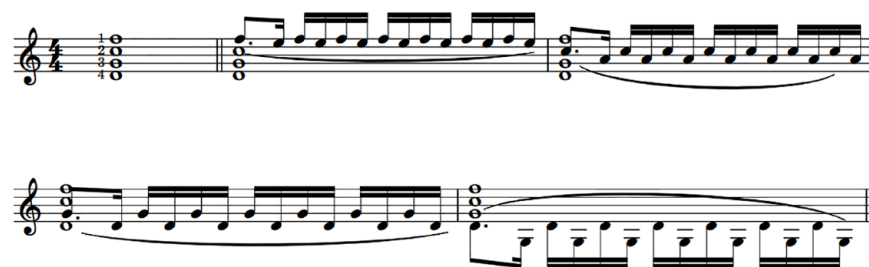


Figure 2. Campagnoli's exercise.

Dounis's Easy and Difficult Settings

D. C. Dounis

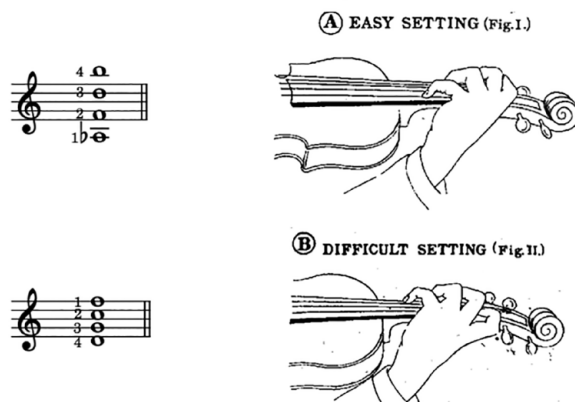


Figure 3. Dounis's two left-hand settings.

showing its application. In the chapter titled “The Principles of Techniques,” Baillot proposed using Geminiani Grip to establish proper left-hand shape and for the left elbow to find its optimal position “vertically below the middle of the violin” (p. 20). Baillot viewed that left-elbow placement as the most desirable on all strings, except on the G string in high positions, where the left elbow “must be brought forward as far as necessary” (p. 20). *The Art of the Violin* was the first treatise to clearly attribute Geminiani Grip to Geminiani.

Joachim's School. Geminiani Grip as an effective exercise for proper left-hand setup has not been without its critics. Among them, and particularly doubtful of its usefulness for beginning violin students, were Joseph Joachim's (1831–1907) students, Karl Courvoisier (1846–1908) and Andreas Moser (1859–1925). In Courvoisier's ([1880] 2006) short yet valuable treatise, *The Technique of Violin Playing: The Joachim Method*, he described Geminiani Grip as “a torture to the beginner and an inconvenience to the schooled player” (p. 10). He explained that teachers of beginners never start instruction on left-hand setup with four-note chords and argued that Geminiani Grip prevents proper placement of the left-hand fingers, particularly on the E string. In Joachim and Moser's (1905) three-volume *Violin School*, Moser cited yet another reason not to use Geminiani Grip: When Geminiani proposed his “grip,” the violin neck was about two to three centimeters shorter than the modern neck, making Geminiani Grip originally much less strenuous on the left hand and fingers (p. 10).

Demetres Dounis (1886–1954). Dounis was a Greek-American medical doctor and an avid violin, viola, and mandolin player. He developed a teaching system known as the “Dounis System,” which combined his medical knowledge of human physiology and psychology with insights gained

through his own playing and teaching. The system emphasizes purposeful movement and economy of effort through short targeted studies designed for students to master specific right- and/or left-hand technique as quickly as possible, such as his silent exercises for left-hand training described in his method book *Violin Players' Daily Dozen*.

In these exercises, Dounis (1925) introduced “two fundamental settings of the left-hand fingers” labeled “easy” and “difficult” (p. 4). In the “easy” setting, students place the first finger on the lowest string and the other fingers on the upper strings in reverse Geminiani Grip order (the first finger on the G string, the second on the D string, the third on the A string, and the fourth on the E string). Dounis's “difficult” setting is basically the original “Geminiani Grip” (see Figure 3).

Dounis's contribution to Geminiani Grip is largely a continuation of Campagnoli's take on grip; both authors used Geminiani Grip as a framework for developing left-hand finger independence by practicing vertical finger movements in various orders and combinations while keeping other fingers on the string in the Geminiani Grip shape.

Samuel Applebaum (1904–1986). A student of Leopold Auer (1845–1930), graduate of Juilliard School of Music, and United States violinist, violin teacher, and author, Applebaum was known for his passionate interest in discovering and understanding the underlying principles of string techniques. This curiosity prompted him to interview and observe the playing and teaching of leading concert artists and teachers of his time. He then combined those insights with his own performing and teaching experiences in over 400 study books and numerous other publications dedicated to teaching violin and strings. Applebaum also recorded a long-playing record *The String Bowings LP1*, Applebaum (2013) that is still available on YouTube.

Geminiani Chord in Two Settings by Applebaum

Adapted from S. Applebaum



Figure 4. Applebaum’s two left-hand settings.

In his book *The Art and Science of String Performance*, Applebaum (1986) provided explanations and numerous rote exercises for establishing “healthy” foundations in violin playing from the outset of instruction. Several of these exercises are based on Geminiani Grip. Like Dounis, Applebaum presented Geminiani Grip in two settings: one with first finger on the G string, and one with low first finger on the E string (see Figure 4).

Applebaum also used Geminiani Grip as a framework for several rote exercises aimed at developing left-hand finger strength, finger-pressure sensitivity, finger speed, and finger coordination in double stops and chords (pp. 161–162).

Simon Fischer. Fischer’s ability to synthesize his vast knowledge of historical and modern pedagogical practices in a way that is relevant to players at all levels and on all bowed string instruments has provided this Australian-British violinist, artist-teacher, and author with a distinct place in modern string pedagogy. He has written seven books and hundreds of articles and produced two DVDs, one dedicated to tone production and other to warm-up exercises. This rich, comprehensive output makes him into one of the most prolific authors on string pedagogy of all time.

In *The Violin Lesson: A Manual for Teaching and Self-Teaching the Violin*, Fischer (2013) discussed “the 18th-century approach” (p. 140) or “Geminiani chord” as a strategy for left-hand setup in first position. He explained that building the “Geminiani chord” from the first finger on the E string, as suggested by Geminiani and L. Mozart, is not the best approach because it may inadvertently lead to incorrect left-hand shape. Instead, Fischer suggested building the Geminiani Grip from the fourth finger on the G string, adding the third finger on the D string, second on A, and low first on E—all fingers one step apart. The fourth finger needs to remain as curved as possible. He also proposed an easier variation on Geminiani Grip: placing all four fingers on one string, again starting from the fourth finger, with a half step between the first and second fingers. After a few moments in this position, the student lifts the second, third, and fourth fingers just above the string while keeping the first finger down. For more advanced students, Fischer suggested that practicing thirds, broken sixths, and perfect fourths is beneficial for left-hand setup.

Discussion

Analyzing Geminiani’s instruction on how to set up a “true” left-hand position reveals his insights into three important components of proper left-hand setup: (1) All four left-hand fingers should be actively engaged in playing from the outset of instruction; (2) there should be open space of about a whole step between fingers, with first finger reaching backward (toward the nut) and fourth finger reaching forward (toward the bridge); and (3) fingers that are not stopping the string at a given moment should stay close to the string, hovering above it. L. Mozart’s instructions on setting up the left hand added another important component: “double contact” between the violin’s neck and the player’s left hand. Centuries later, in his *Principles of Violin Playing & Teaching*, Ivan Galamian (1985) explained that maintaining double contact in lower positions is an important physical prerequisite for good intonation (p. 21). L. Mozart also added a new and useful twist to Geminiani Grip by suggesting that after fingers are set on the string, instead of lifting them all off at once, the player should lift them one by one in a specific order: first, third, second, then fourth. Once off the string, fingers should be kept slightly above it in the Geminiani Grip shape for a short period of time to strengthen the left-hand muscles responsible for holding fingers in the proper shape for extended periods of time. By regularly practicing these steps, the hand muscles become stronger, and keeping fingers above the string in the Geminiani Grip shape becomes easier.

Campagnoli’s addition to the original Geminiani Grip was the use of the bow and utilizing Geminiani Grip as a framework for finger-independence exercises. Baillot was the first author to attribute the exercise to Geminiani and to point out the correct placement of the left elbow under the violin as resulting from finger placement in Geminiani Grip. Although Dounis did not refer to his exercises as the Geminiani Grip, he inherently understood the value of setting up the left hand in “easy” and “difficult” forms of Geminiani Grip as a starting point for developing left-hand shape and practicing finger independence.

It is not surprising that Applebaum, with his keen perception of underlying principles of playing techniques, recognized the merits of Geminiani Grip and used it as a starting point to address multiple aspects of developing the left-hand technique, including hand shape, finger

independence, strength, and finger coordination. Among modern violin pedagogues, Fischer recognized and cemented the long legacy of the Geminiani Grip by labeling it “the 18th-century approach.” Fisher contributed to making Geminiani Grip more applicable to today’s teaching by suggesting players build Geminiani Grip from the fourth, rather than the first, finger. This supports the curved shape of the fourth finger, which represents a challenge for players at all stages of development. For less-experienced players, Fischer suggested using a simplified version of the grip in which all four fingers are placed on the same string.

The purpose of this article was to shed light on the historical context and content of Geminiani’s treatise and to trace the development of Geminiani Grip from its inception to the present. In the following section of the article, I provide a

set of sequential rote exercises based on Geminiani Grip principles that can be used when teaching or remediating left-hand setup.

Application of the Geminiani Grip to Modern-Day Teaching: Preparatory Rote Exercises

The intention of rote exercises is to establish habits that will prepare the left hand for Geminiani Grip in later stages of learning. Proposed exercises are adapted from the pedagogical approaches of several renowned string pedagogues, including Applebaum, Paul Rolland (1911–1978), Galamian, and Fischer. Exercises are organized into two categories: preparatory exercises and Geminiani chord exercises.

Preparatory Exercises

Make a Stop Sign Just Like This!

Objective: Establishing proper left-hand shape

Traditional
Arr. Dijana Ihas

Sing while making appropriate movements

Make a stop sign just like this. Move your el - bow with the twist.
Left hand on violin neck in "stop sign" shape facing student. *Left elbow and hand rotate inwards.*

Ho - ver fin - gers nice and rou - nd, op - en fin - gers with - out sound.
Left-hand fingers curled above the string. *Left-hand fingers spread apart above the string. Student checks on: (a) placement of the thumb across first finger; (b) "no squeezing"; and (c) fourth finger remaining above the string.*

STAY IN THIS LEFT-HAND SHAPE UNTIL THE COUNT OF 10.

REPEAT ALL STEPS 2-4 TIMES.

Each and Every Ant

Paul Rolland/
Mimi Zweig Tradition

Objective: Strengthening fourth finger and reinforcing left-hand shape

Pluck with 4th finger Sing Pluck with 4th finger Sing etc...

E E E Go-ing to the A A A Go-ing to the D D D All the way to
 G G G Fin - al - ly to C C C

Lightly Row Una Corda

Objective: To reinforce strength of 4th finger and left-hand shape

Traditional
Fingering by Dijana Ihas

4 2 2 3 1 1 0 1 2 3 4 4 2 3 1 0 2 4 2

1 1 2 3 2 2 3 4 4 2 3 1 0 2 4 2

To be practiced on all four strings

Twinkle Theme in D maj (Unison Variation)

Objective: To reinforce round shape of 4th finger and playing in tune

Traditional
Fingering by Dijana Ihas

0 0 0 0 1 0 3 2 1 0 0 0 3 2 1

4 4 4 4

0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 3 2 1 0

4 4 3 2 1 4 4 4 4 1 4 3 2 1 4

When moving 4th finger between two adjacent strings, finger should "hop" to the next string rather than "roll."

Twinkle Theme in D maj (Harmonic Variation)

Objective: To reinforce the sense of touch in 4th finger and prepare hand and arm for shifting

Traditional
Fingering by Dijana Ihas

1 3 2 1 3 2 1

3 2 1 1 3 2 1

Play harmonics in third position.
Play all other notes in first position.

Geminiani Chord Exercise

Fischer's version of Geminiani chord exercise with steps for practicing.



Steps for practicing:

1. Build Geminiani chord from fourth finger up. Adjust placement of the thumb to support the round shape of the fourth finger as needed.
2. Hold fingers on the string with only enough pressure needed until the count of five.
3. Lift up the fourth finger, then second, then third, and then first. Keep fingers above the string in a round shape until the count of ten.
4. Relax hand and repeat the whole process two–four times.

Summary

In every regard, Geminiani Grip is one of the most enduring pedagogical practices in the history of violin teaching. While the original intention of Geminiani Grip was to develop what Geminiani called “true” left-hand setup, over time, violin pedagogues have also found it useful for: (1) engaging all four fingers from the outset of instruction; (2) training fingers to hover over the string when not in use; (3) maintaining left-hand double contact with the instrument’s neck without gripping; (4) establishing the left elbow’s natural placement under the instrument; (5) promoting finger independence; and (6) supporting coordination between fingers when playing double stops and chords. All of this makes Geminiani Grip an indispensable left-hand teaching strategy for use by teachers and students at all levels.

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