

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE

The Violin *Handbook*



Everything a new player needs in one place — the fingerboard, reading music, rhythm, dynamics and a glossary of the terms you'll meet on the page.

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SECTION 01

Strings & Fingerboard

The violin has four strings. Every note below is colour-coded to the string you play it on, and numbered for the finger you use.



G

Blue notes



D

Orange notes



A

Green notes



E

Purple notes

Every note below is printed in its string's colour — play a blue note on the G string, an orange note on the D string, and so on. The strings run G, D, A, E from lowest to highest.

0 open string

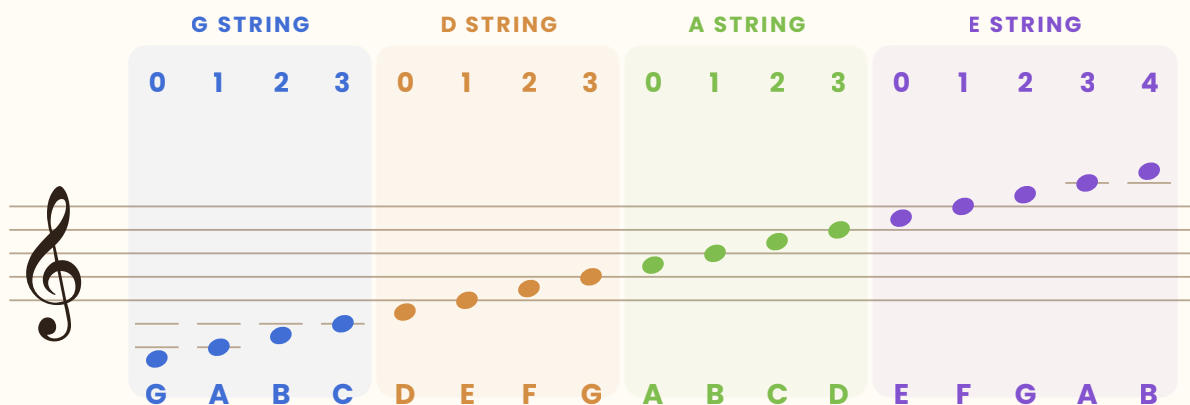
1 1st finger

2 2nd finger

3 3rd finger

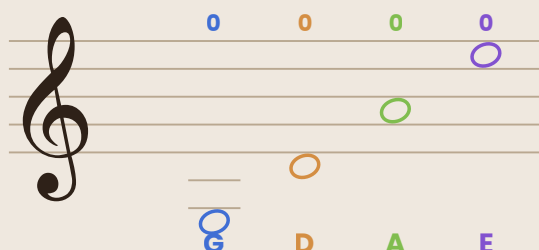
4 4th finger

FINGERBOARD CHART



Finger numbers above the staff · note names below

The four open strings



Played with no fingers down — finger number 0.

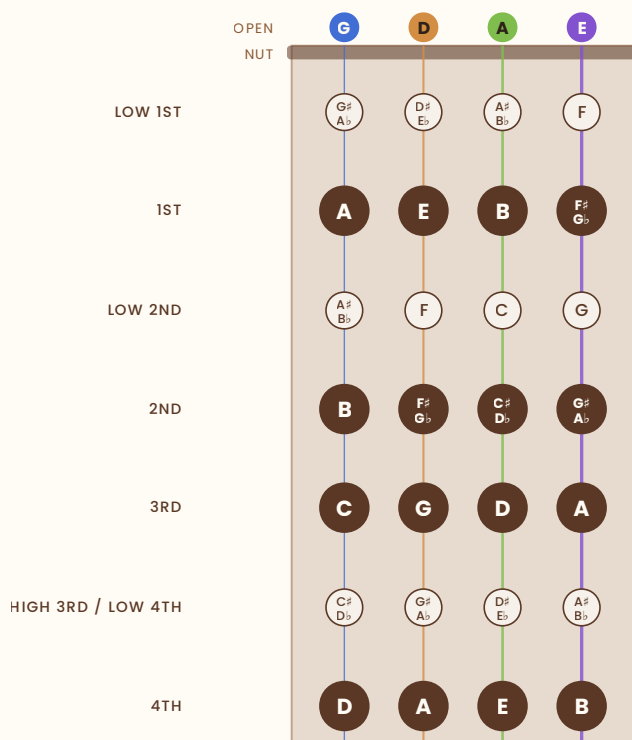
How the chart works

Each string covers four notes in a row: open, then first, second and third finger. The E string adds a fourth finger, giving the top note B.

Where two strings can play the same letter name, the colour tells you which string the music intends — for example the G on the D string (3rd finger) versus the G on the E string (2nd finger).

Violin Fingering Chart

The same four strings seen down the neck. Filled circles are the standard finger positions; outlined circles are the lower and higher variants that give you the notes in between.



How to read it

The four vertical lines are the strings, shown left to right as you look down at the fingerboard: **G D A E**. Reading downward means moving your hand away from the scroll and up in pitch.

Filled circles

The regular 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th finger positions.

Outlined circles

Low 1st, low 2nd and high 3rd / low 4th — the same fingers placed a half step lower or higher. These give you the sharps and flats.

Enharmonics

Two names, one sound. G $\sharp$ and A $\flat$ are the same pitch — which name is used depends on the key.

Violin Care

How to look after your violin and bow — eleven habits that keep the instrument sounding and looking its best.

Bow — before you play

- 1 Tighten the bow by gently turning the tension screw. Don't make the hairs too taut — the gap between the stick and the hair should be about the width of a pencil.
- 2 Try not to touch the bow hairs with your fingers or hand.
- 3 Add a small amount of rosin before playing: hold the rosin in your left hand, lay the bow hairs flat against it and slowly draw the bow back and forth. Rosin gives the hair the friction it needs to make a sound when it is pulled across the strings.
- 4 Too little rosin and the bow slides across the string with very little or no sound. Too much produces a raspy, scratching tone.

After playing

- 5 Gently clean the violin with a soft, clean, lint-free cloth to remove rosin build-up from the strings and any dust, oil or sweat on the violin — including the chin rest.
- 6 If you use a shoulder rest or pad, always take it off before the violin goes back in its case.

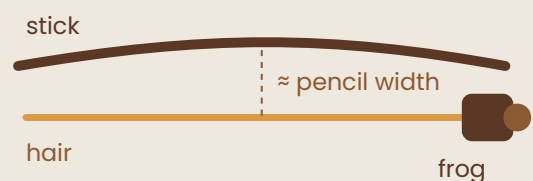
Storing & carrying

- 7 When you aren't using the violin or bow, always put them in the case. Left on a chair or any other surface — even for a moment — they can easily fall and be damaged.
- 8 Securely close every zipper and latch before you pick the case up.
- 9 Never store the violin somewhere extremely hot or cold, and never leave it in direct sunlight or in your car on a warm day.

Repairs

- 10 If the violin ever cracks or the seams begin to open, take it to a music store or violin maker to be professionally repaired. Never use commercial glue — instrument makers use a special glue for violin seams and repairs.
- 11 If the bridge ever needs adjusting, it's important to know that it is held in place by pressure and correct placement, not glue: the tension of the strings holds it there.

Bow tension at a glance



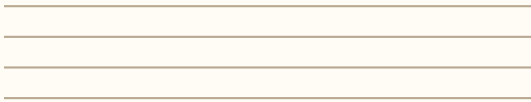
Tighten with the screw until the gap between stick and hair is about a pencil's width — no more.

Reading Music

Music is written with just seven letters — A B C D E F G — placed on and between five parallel lines.

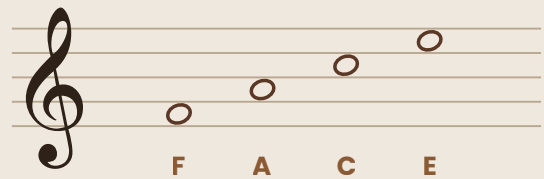
The staff

Musical notes are written on and between five parallel lines called a **staff**.



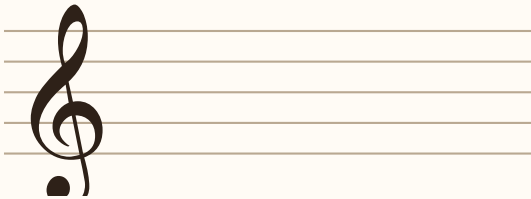
Notes in the spaces

Reading upward: **F A C E** — it spells **FACE**



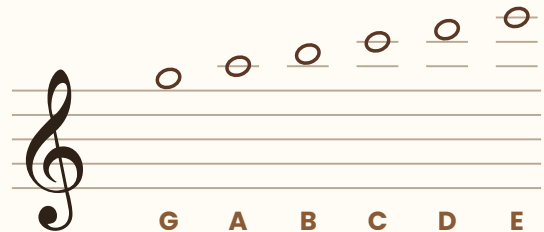
The treble clef

The treble clef, or **G clef**, is used for violin music. The viola and cello also use it when their notes sit in a higher range than the bass clef.



Notes above the staff

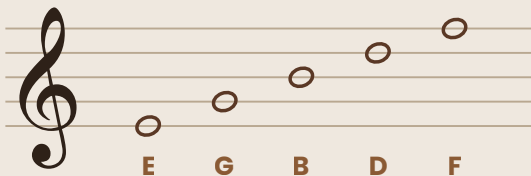
Notes that extend above the staff are written on **ledger lines & spaces**.



Notes on the lines

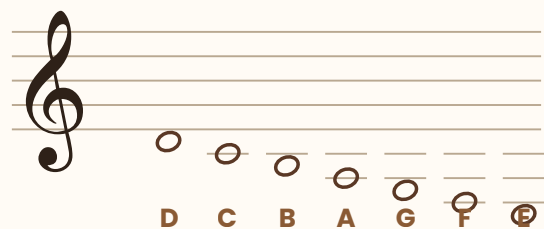
Reading upward: **E G B D F** —

Every Good Boy Does Fine



Notes below the staff

Notes that extend below the staff are also written on **ledger lines & spaces**.



Measures & Repeats

Bar lines divide the staff into measures, and repeat signs tell you which measures to play again.

Measures

Staffs are divided by bar lines into **measures**.



Time signature

The **top number** shows how many beats are in each measure. The **bottom number** shows what type of note gets each beat. A time signature of 3/4 means each measure contains three quarter notes.



Repeat marks

A double bar with two dots is a **repeat mark**: play the music between the repeat signs again.



If there is only **one** repeat sign, with the dots facing left, go back to the beginning and play the entire section again.



First & second endings



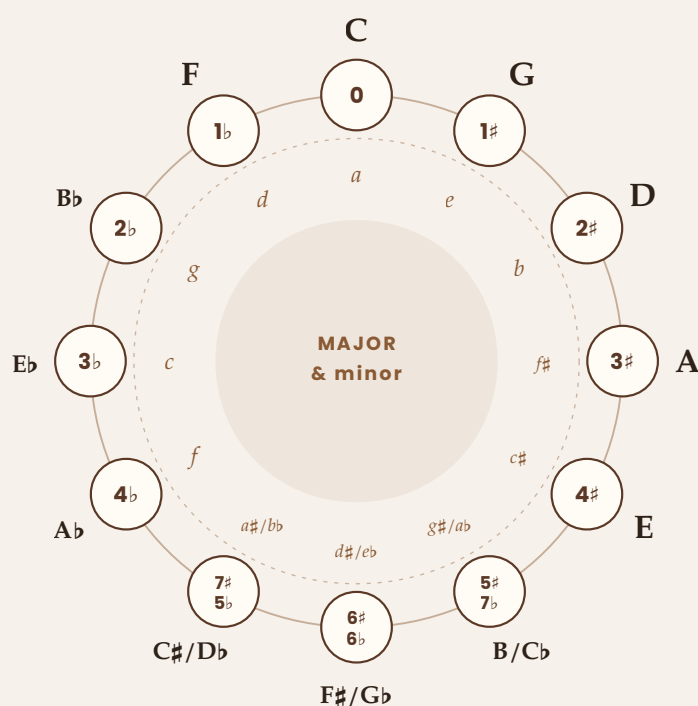
Play the **first ending** the first time through, repeat to the beginning of the section, then skip over the first ending and play the **second ending**.

Key Signatures

Sharps, flats and naturals raise, lower and restore the pitch of a note by a half step.

SIGN	NAME	WHAT IT DOES
#	Sharp	A sharp set before a note raises its pitch a half step, and stays in effect for the rest of the measure.
b	Flat	A flat set before a note lowers its pitch a half step, and stays in effect for the rest of the measure.
♮	Natural	Restores the natural pitch of a note. Often used after a flat or a sharp.
#=b	Enharmonic notes	Two notes that sound the same but are spelled differently — for example D# and Eb, or F# and Gb.

THE CIRCLE OF FIFTHS



A circle of fifths is an arrangement of keys by **ascending fifths**. It shows how many sharps or flats are in each key.

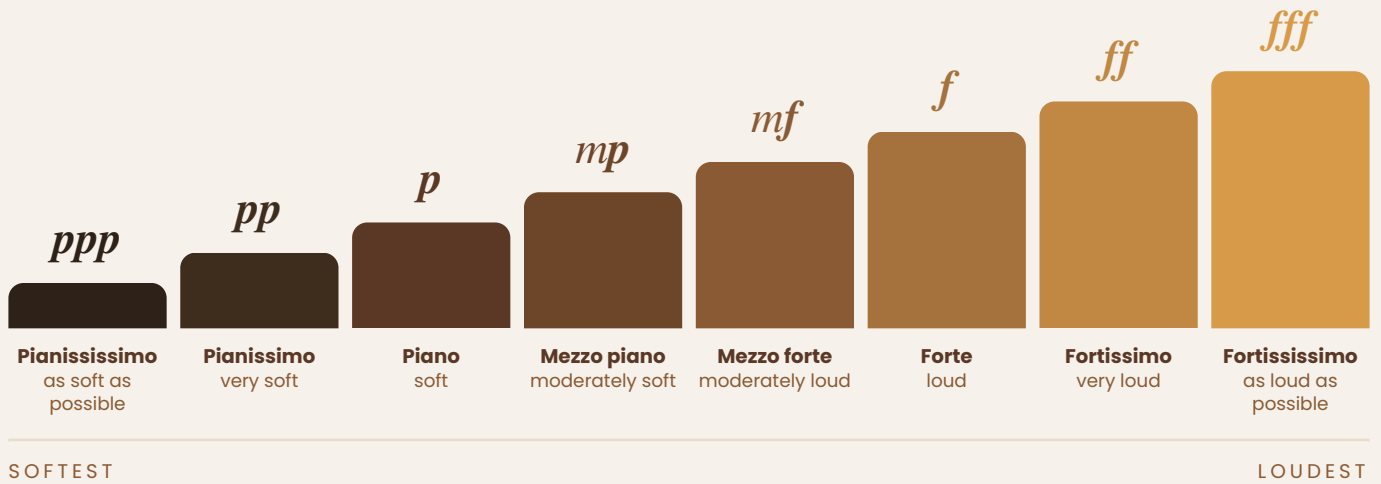
Major keys are in capital letters on the outer part of the circle (C, G and so on).

Minor keys are in lower case on the inner part of the circle (a, e and so on).

Moving **clockwise** from C adds one sharp at a time; moving **anticlockwise** adds one flat at a time. At the bottom of the circle the two directions meet, which is why those keys have two names.

Dynamics & Expression

Dynamics indicate the degree of loudness or softness in music. Here they are from softest to loudest.



Dynamics softer than *ppp* or louder than *fff* are theoretically possible, but in practice are rarely used.

ADDITIONAL MARKINGS



Crescendo

cresc.

Gradually become **louder**.



Accent

Emphasize the note by playing it **forcefully**.



Diminuendo

dim.

Gradually become **softer**. The term *decrescendo* (decresc. or decr.) means the same thing.

sfz Sforzando

Play **loudly with a sudden, forced emphasis**.

Adding “*issimo*” to a dynamic term means **very, extremely** or **as much as possible**. Changing the dynamic level instantaneously is called **terraced** (or changed) dynamics — popular during the Baroque period.

Rhythm & Meter

Meter is the grouping of beats into stressed and unstressed patterns; the time signature tells you which grouping to expect.

Meter

A waltz generally uses a pattern of three beats with the first accented — **ONE** two three, **ONE** two three. That is **triple meter**. The most common meters are **double** (two beats), **triple** (three beats) and **quadruple** (four beats).

Double



Triple



Quadruple



Time signatures

Also known as meter signatures, they are a sign or fraction placed at the beginning of a piece to indicate its meter. They show how the beats are grouped in each measure and what the duration of each note is.

The **top number** indicates how many beats there are in a measure; the **bottom number** indicates the note value that represents one beat. So 3/4 means each measure contains three quarter notes — and because each measure is grouped into three beats, 3/4 is in triple meter.

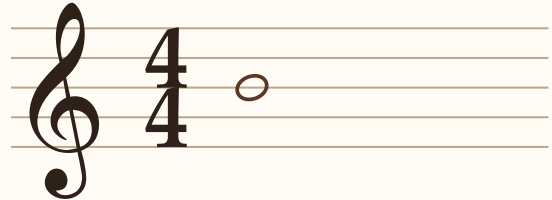
SAMPLE TIME SIGNATURES



2/4



3/4



4/4 — the letter "C" for *common time* is often used instead



6/8 — the eighth notes are grouped into two groups of three

Note Values

How long each note lasts, the rest that matches it, and how they all fit together.

RHYTHMIC VALUE CHART

NAME	NOTE	BEATS	REST
Whole note		4 beats	
Dotted half note		3 beats	
Half note		2 beats	
Quarter note		1 beat	
Eighth note		$\frac{1}{2}$ beat	
Sixteenth note		$\frac{1}{4}$ beat	

A dot increases the value of a note by one half. A half note (2 beats) plus a dot (half of 2 = 1 beat) makes a dotted half note of 3 beats.

What a dot does

A dot increases the value of a note by one half.



Reading the chart below

Every row fills the same total length — four beats. The pale dividers mark those four beats, so you can see at a glance how many of each note value fit into a single beat.

EQUIVALENT NOTE CHART

Whole note		
Half notes		
Quarter notes		
Eighth notes		
Eighth triplets		
Sixteenth notes		

A triplet is a group of three notes played in the time of two notes of the same value.

Glossary

Tempo, expressive and technical terms you'll meet in violin music, A to Z.

A tempo — In tempo. Used after some variation in the tempo, it means return to the original tempo or speed.

Accent — An accent placed over or under a note means the note should be emphasized by playing it forcefully. Indicated by the sign >.

Accidentals — A sign indicating a momentary departure from the key signature, using a flat, sharp or natural to temporarily alter the pitch of a note by a half step. Accidentals apply to the note immediately following the symbol and remain in effect throughout the measure in which they appear.

Adagio — A slow, leisurely tempo — slower than andante, but not quite as slow as largo. Slow movements of a piece are sometimes titled Adagio.

Allegretto — A lively and moderately fast tempo. Often considered slower than allegro but faster than andante.

Allegro — A quick, lively and fast tempo (not quite as fast as presto).

Andante — A moderately slow tempo. Often considered to be a walking speed.

Andantino — A slightly slower tempo than andante.

Arco — Italian for bow. After a pizzicato (plucked) section, arco indicates the next passage should be played with the bow.

Articulation — Describes the manner of providing definition and shape to individual notes or phrases. For string players this involves both the right and left hand. The main markings are a dot . (shorten the note), a line _ or slur (play smoothly), and an accent > (add a forceful emphasis). These markings are often combined, and mean many different things to different musicians.

Crescendo — Crescendo (cresc.) means to gradually become louder.

Da capo — D.C. repeats from the beginning.

Da segno — D.S. repeats from the sign.

D.C. al Coda — Go back to the beginning of the piece, play to the "Coda" sign, then jump to the Coda section to finish. Coda means "tail" and refers to a concluding section of a piece.

D.C. al Fine — Go back to the beginning and end at the Fine marking. D.C. is an abbreviation for *da capo*, meaning "from the beginning"; Fine means "end".

Diminuendo — Diminuendo (dim.) means to gradually become softer. The term decrescendo (decresc. or decr.) also means to become softer.

Dolce — A way to play sweetly, softly and gently.

Down bow — Indicates a downward stroke of the bow, from frog to tip.

Dynamics — A term that indicates the degree of loudness or softness in music. When the dynamic level is changed instantaneously it is called terraced or changed dynamics (popular during the Baroque period). When the Italian word "issimo" is added to a dynamic term it means very, extremely, or as much as possible — pianissimo means "as soft as is possible" and fortissimo means "as loud as is possible".

Fermata — The sign ♯ under or over a note or rest indicates it should be held and prolonged at the discretion of the performer or conductor. Also called a "hold" or a "bird's eye".

First and second endings — Repeat signs played as follows: play the first ending the first time through the music, repeat to the beginning of the section, then skip over the first ending and play the second ending.

Frog — The bottom part of the bow, a block of wood (often ebony) that the bow hairs are attached to. When music indicates "play at the frog", it means to use the bottom part of the bow hair, closest to the frog, for that section. Some scholars postulate the frog is named after the bottom soft part of a horse's hoof, also called a frog (e.g. Robin Stowell, *Cambridge Companion to the Violin*, 1992: 24–29). Other terms for the same instruction include "play at the nut", heel, or *au talon* (French for "at the heel").

Grace note — An ornament written in a small font, indicating the musician should quickly play the grace note and then the note it is attached to. The grace note is not part of the rhythmic value of the measure.

Incidental music — Music supplementing a spoken drama, such as music composed for a play. It could introduce a play (as an overture), come between acts (an interlude), or supplement spoken parts and dramatic elements.

Interlude — A piece of music played between other pieces, or between the verses of a hymn.

Legato — Indicates the notes should be smoothly connected, played either in one bow or several. Slurs are often used to indicate legato.

Moderato — To play at a moderate tempo or speed. This term sometimes modifies others, such as Allegro moderato, which means moderately fast.

Multiple stops — Chords played on stringed instruments. Double stops describe playing notes simultaneously on two strings; triple stops mean playing notes simultaneously on three strings.

Notation — The writing down of musical notes and symbols to represent pitch, rhythm and melodies.

Pitch — The relative “highness” or “lowness” of a sound when compared with other notes. It can also indicate an absolute fixed position in a range of musical notes (e.g. the pitch “middle C”).

Pizzicato — Pizzicato (pizz.) means the string is plucked with the finger instead of being bowed.

Presto — A fast, rapid and lively tempo, faster than allegro.

Rallentando — Gradually becoming slower. Also abbreviated as rall.

Repeat signs — A double bar with two dots is a repeat marking, indicating the music in between the repeat signs should be repeated. If there is only one repeat sign with the dots facing to the left, go back to the beginning and play the entire section of music again. For more repeat sign variations see Da capo, Da segno, D.C. al Fine, D.C. al Coda, and first and second endings.

Scale — An ascending or descending arrangement of pitches.

Sforzando — Means forced or accented, and is usually attached to a single note or chord. It generally indicates the note should be played loudly with a sudden, accented emphasis, and is indicated by the marking *sfz.*

Slur — A curved line grouping notes together, meaning the notes included in the slur should be played in the same bow. Unless otherwise indicated, notes in the slur should be played legato (smoothly). When slurs are used with dots over or under the notes, a slight separation should be used between them — the terms slurred staccato or dotted slurs describe this technique. When a slur is placed between two notes of the same pitch it is called a tie, and the two notes are played in one bow for the duration of both.

Spiccato — An off-the-string, controlled bouncing bow stroke which produces a crisp sound and very short notes. It is the slowest of the bouncing strokes. Dots above or under the notes may be used to indicate spiccato.

Staccato — Indicates the bow should remain on the string to play shortened and detached notes, distinctly separate from successive notes. Staccato is sometimes used with slurs (slurred staccato) for a series of short, stopped notes played in the same up or down bow — many violinists perform slurred staccato as a series of slurred martelé strokes.

Tempo — The rate of speed or pace of the music. Tempo may be used with other qualifying words such as “a tempo”, meaning return to the original tempo or speed. Various tempo markings indicate the rate of speed, such as andante (moderately slow) and allegro (fast). Metronome markings specify the tempo even more precisely — e.g. ♩ = 60 means each quarter note should be played at the speed of 60 quarter notes per minute.

Tie — When a slur is placed between two notes with the same pitch it is called a tie, and the two notes are played in one bow for the duration of both notes.

Time signature — A sign or fraction placed at the beginning of a piece to show how many beats are in each measure. For example, a time signature of 3/4 indicates each measure contains three quarter notes.

Trill — Ornaments a note with a rapid alternation between two pitches, usually a major or minor second above the note. The letters *tr* and a wavy symbol are used as trill markings. Accidentals are often used to indicate whether the trill is a major or minor trill.

Up bow — Indicates an upward stroke of the bow, from the point (or tip) to the frog (or nut).

Vibrato — For stringed instruments this is similar to vocal vibrato — a slight and rapid fluctuation in pitch used to add warmth and expression to music. There are three types: finger, hand, arm, or a combination of all three. Many violinists use a combination of finger and hand vibrato, produced by a back-and-forth rolling motion of the finger and hand on the string, which lowers and raises the pitch. Variations in the width and speed of the vibrato produce a wide range of expression.

Whole bow — Initials are sometimes used in music to indicate what part of the bow should be used: WB = Whole Bow; LH = Lower Half; UH = Upper Half; MB = Middle of the Bow.