CLARA ROCKMORE
METHOD FOR THEREMIN

Revised Transcription by
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Jeffrey McFarland-Johnson

[redacted]

"But instruments do not make music: people do."

Max Rudolph
(N.Y. Times, June 21, 1992)

Dedicated to my very special friend
Dr. Robert Moog
In appreciation of his continued
Interest in promoting and reproducing
The space-control theremin.

Clara Rockmore

A few suggestions for future "thereminists" – those who approach and welcome it, as yet another voice, with which to interpret **real music**, not a magic toy for producing strange and eerie **sounds**.

Less is more

The very name of space-controlled ether-wave theremin should guide you. Don't forget your whole body is an electro-conductor, in the electro-magnetic field and it is therefore necessary to control the slightest motion – not only of hands and fingers. Any involuntary motion, such as the head or shoulders can interfere with pitch and volume.

You don't need hammers to work with air

Don't forget that you are dealing with air! Think of your fingers as delicate butterfly wings, and you will get much further than if you use strength.

* * *

It is of course advisable – even necessary – to first learn to read music and have at least elementary knowledge of theory – harmony etc., by starting music lessons on the piano – just as all violinists do.

You cannot point to a spot in the air and say, "Here is middle-C !"

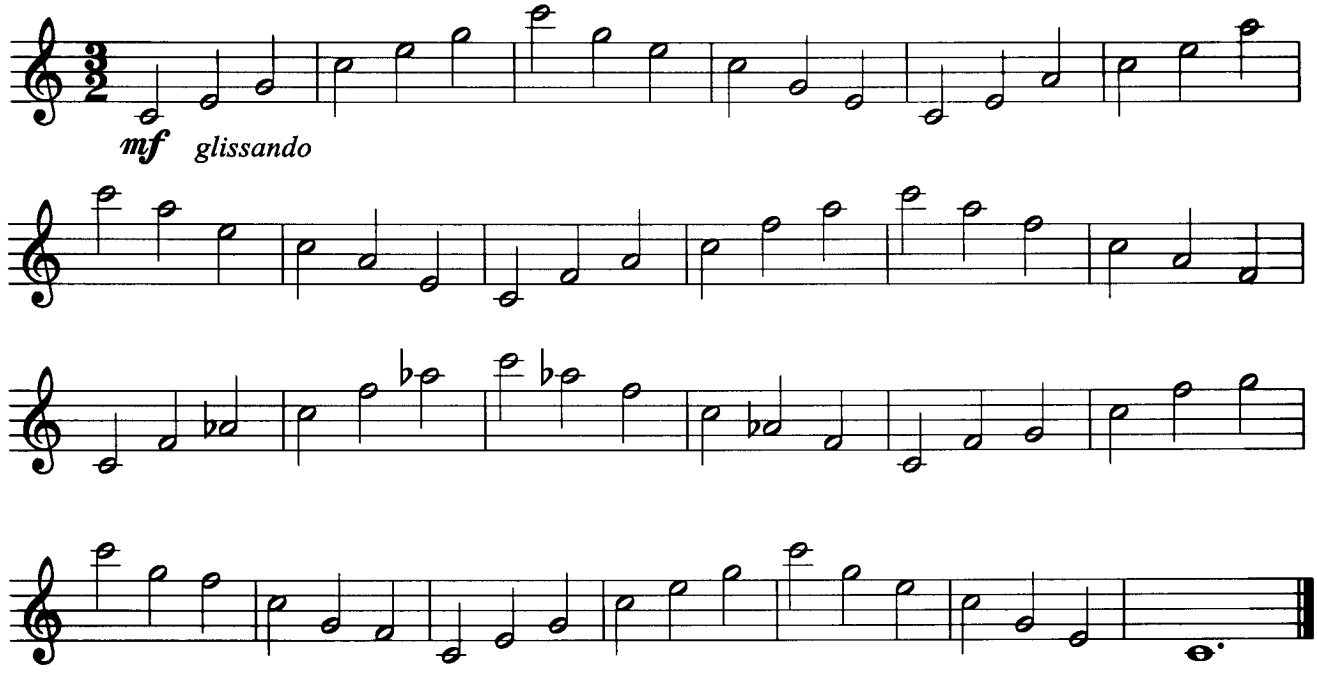
IMPORTANT

Be sure that no one passes by, as you are playing, and enters the electro-magnetic field **from the other side**, immediately affecting the performance.

EXERCISE NO. 1

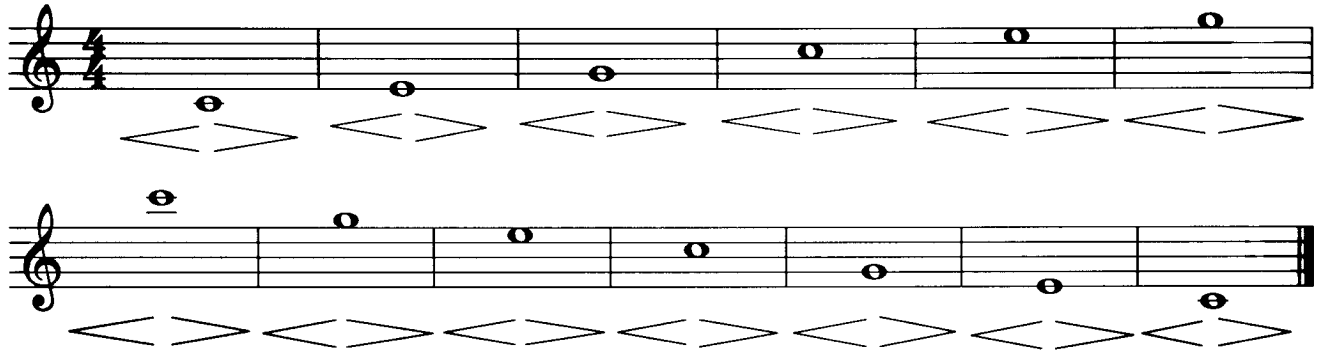
The first study in the relative distance between different intervals. To be played slowly – sliding from one note to the other, but with great care taken not to slide beyond the note. The left hand remains stationary. This exercise is to be practiced in different keys.

Hand in first position – forefinger resting on thumb.



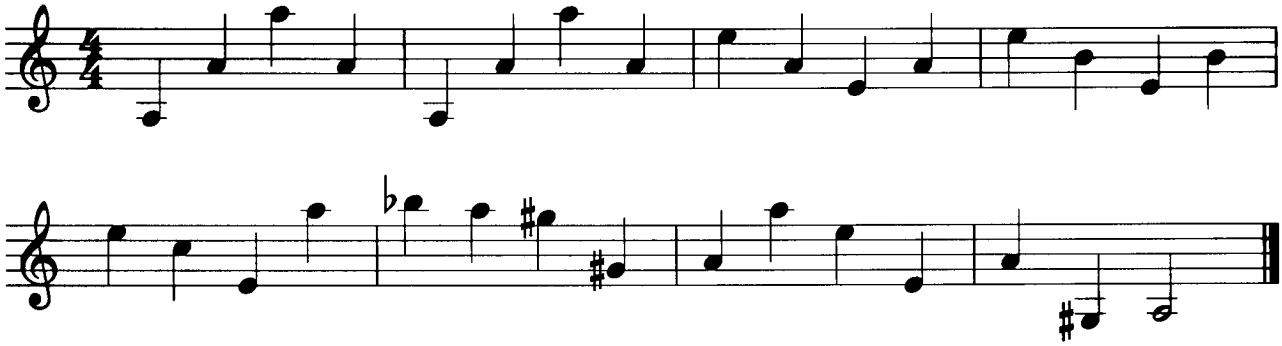
EXERCISE NO. 2

An important study to prevent the action of one hand affecting that of the other. To be played as slowly as possible – beginning each note pianissimo and slowly raising and then lowering the left hand on each note, at the same time being very careful to retain the correct pitch with the right hand.



EXERCISE NO. 3

Further study to achieve greater freedom, speed and accuracy, in finding intervals of different distances. This exercise serves as an example. The most beneficial method would be having the student follow intervals given at random on the piano. Begin slowly and increase speed as the student becomes more advanced – always returning to slower tempo if the intonation is not pure.

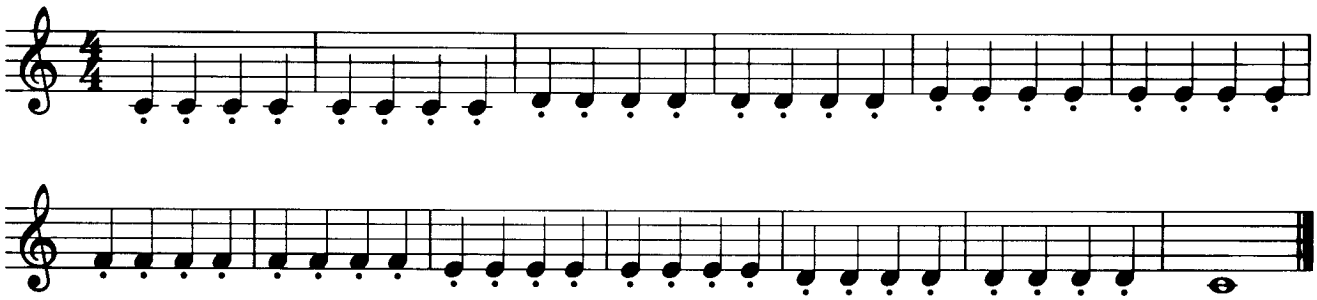


EXERCISE NO. 4: STUDY FOR THE LEFT HAND

The left hand is to be raised and dropped sharply on each note – producing a staccato effect. To be practiced in different keys.

Use your left hand, as you would use a violin bow. All legato, staccato and various accents can be achieved with different motions of the hand or fingers.

First have a clear idea of what you want to say, and then logic will help you find the best way to achieve it.



EXERCISE NO. 5

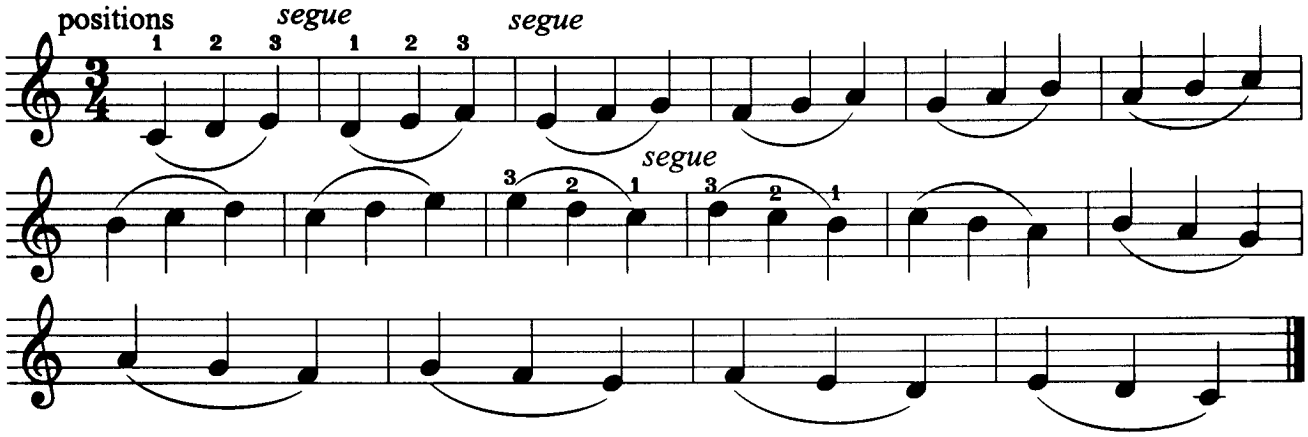
This is the first study in the use of different positions of the fingers of the right hand.

Instead of moving the whole hand – leave hand in position 1 (forefinger on thumb). To achieve position 2, move only the fingers by stretching them forward. For position 3 move them still further.

Additional explanation of **positions** as distinct from **fingerings**:

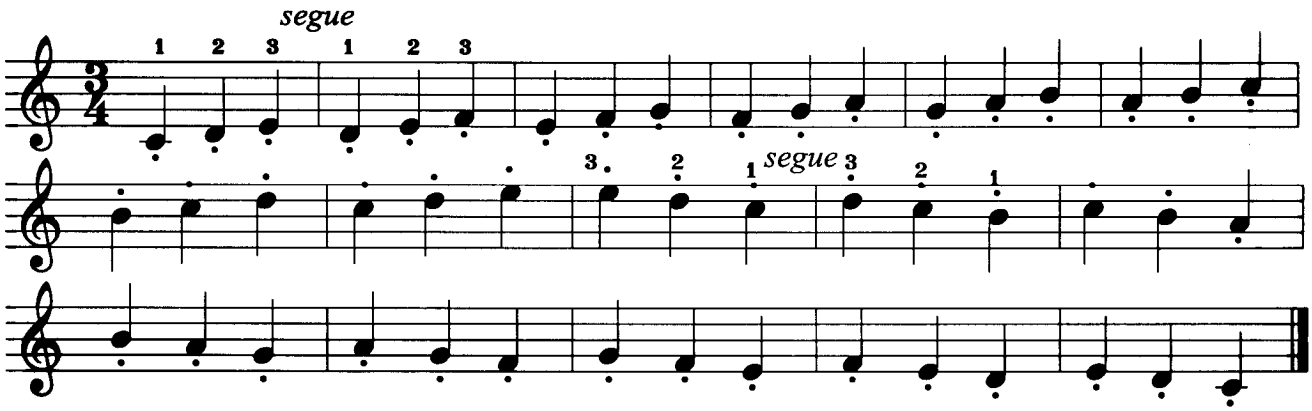
Position 1 – forefinger resting on thumb

Position 2, 3, 4 – stretching all three fingers forward (arm at rest) towards the vertical antenna and then, as needed, moving the fingers back, not only to the original position 1, but all the way to the palm of your right hand. When desired for musical effect – the very contact of the fingers touching the palm serving as accent.

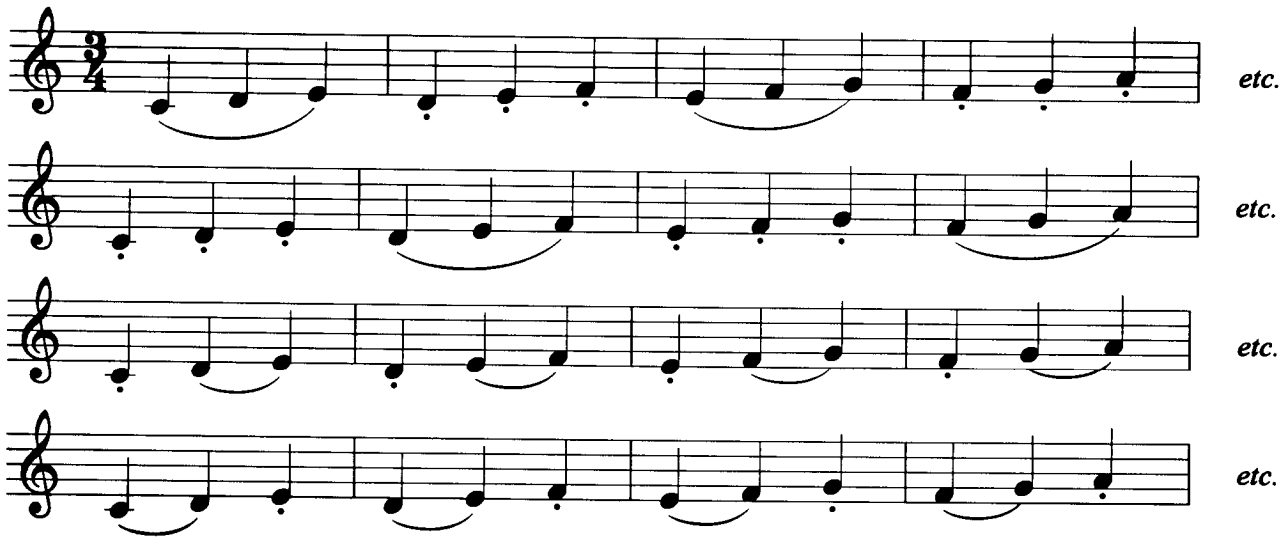


EXERCISE NO. 6

Exercise No. 6 is the same as No. 5, but it is to be played staccato.
If found difficult – further practice of exercise No. 5 will prove helpful.

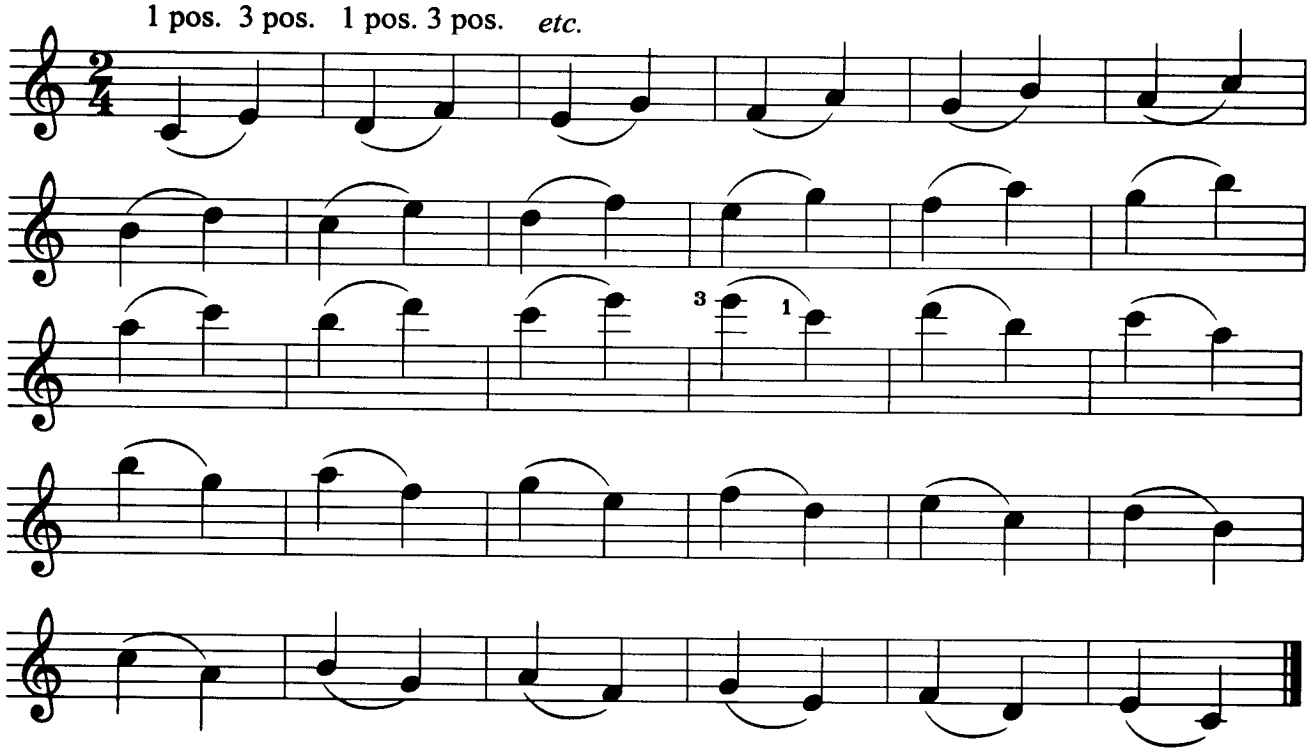


LEGATO/STACCATO VARIATIONS OF EXERCISE NOS. 5 & 6



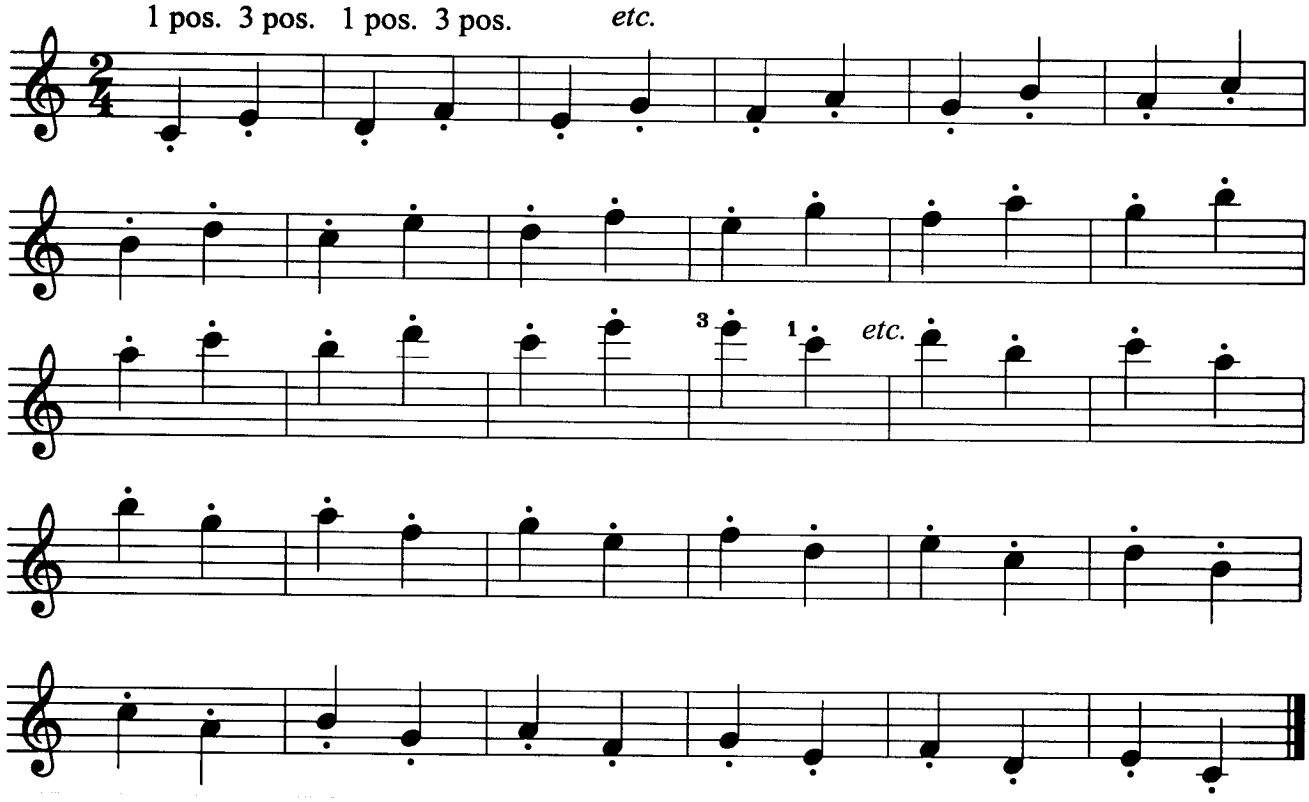
EXERCISE NO. 7

Further study in finger positions going from position 1 to position 3 directly.

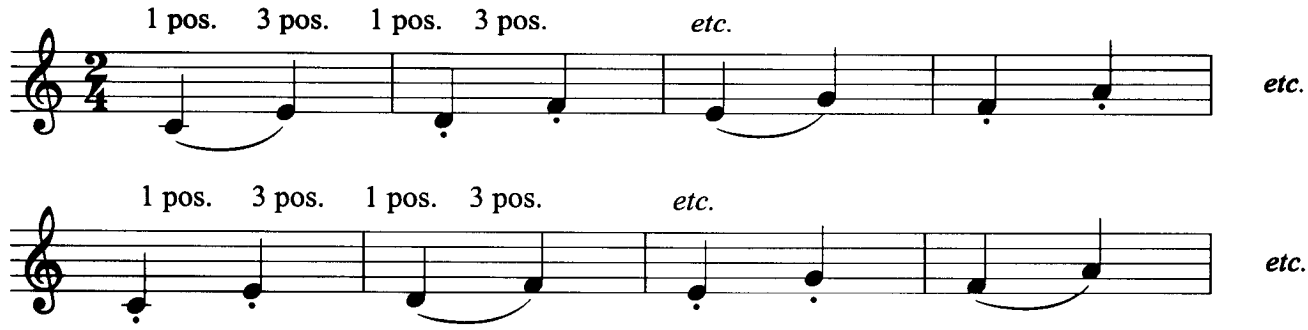


EXERCISE NO. 8

Same as exercise No. 7 only to be played staccato.

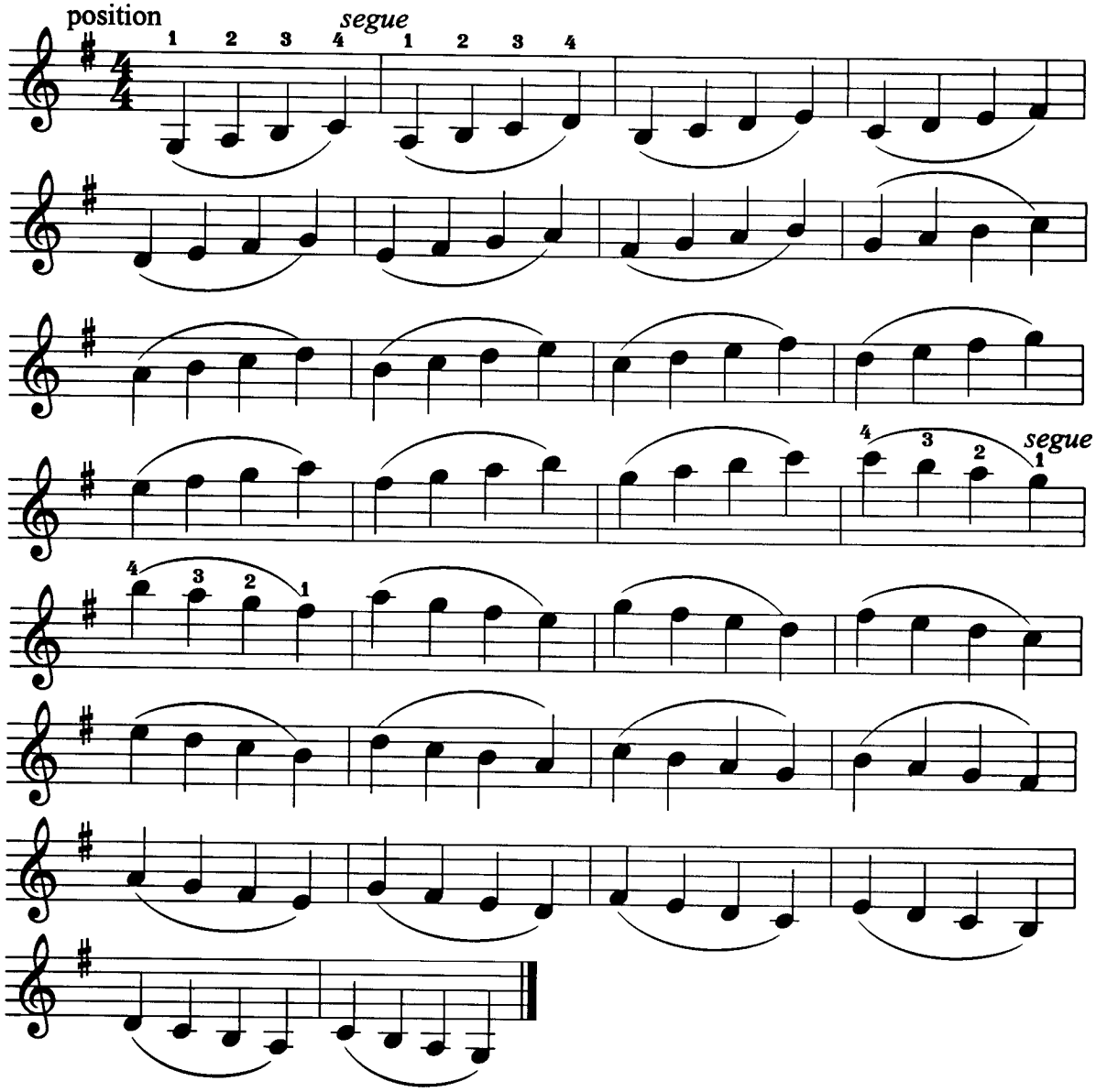


LEGATO/STACCATO VARIATIONS OF EXERCISE NOS. 7 & 8

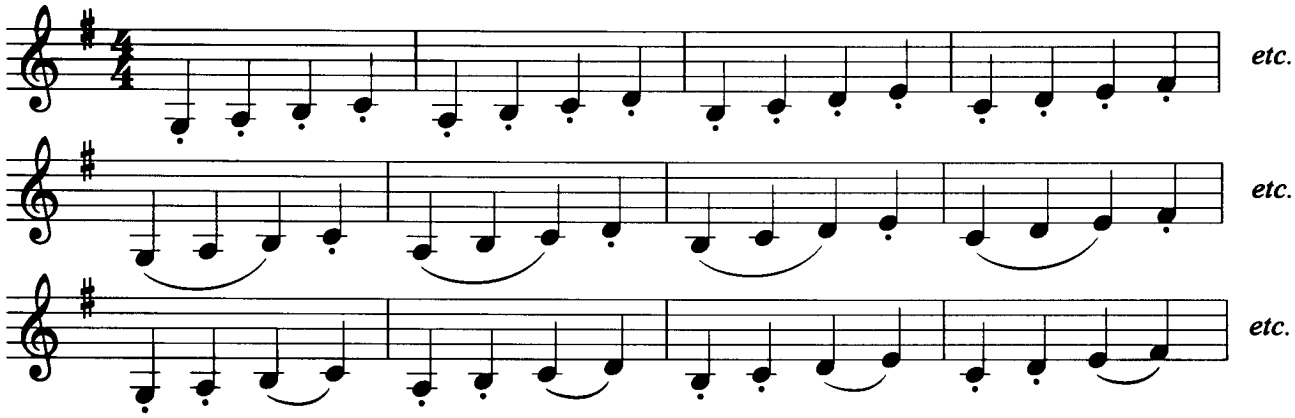


EXERCISE NO. 9

Study in positions 1, 2, 3, and 4 also in half position. Half position is obtained by stretching the fingers to a half-tone distance.

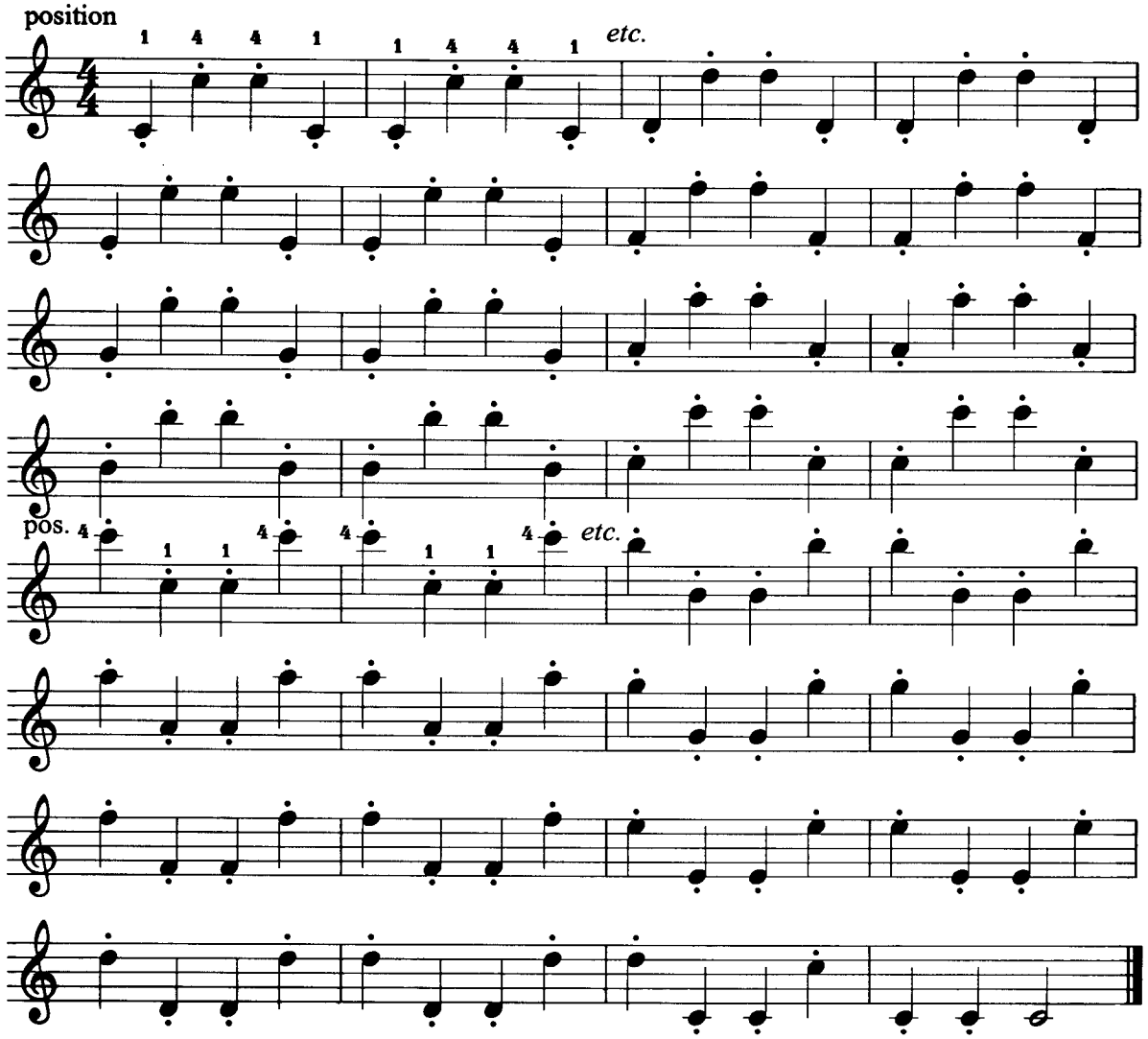


LEGATO/STACCATO VARIATIONS OF EXERCISE NO. 9

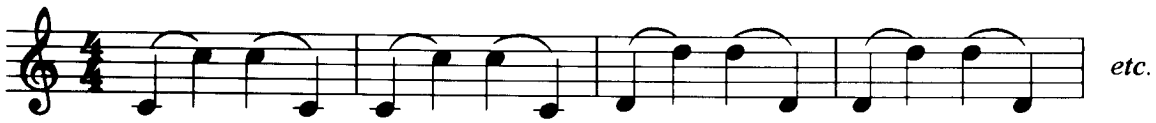


EXERCISE NO. 10: OCTAVE STUDY

Finger position 1to 4 is first played staccato. The same exercise is then practiced legato. The sound of the slide to be eliminated by opening the left hand while going from one note to another and closing it when the note is reached retaining even volume.

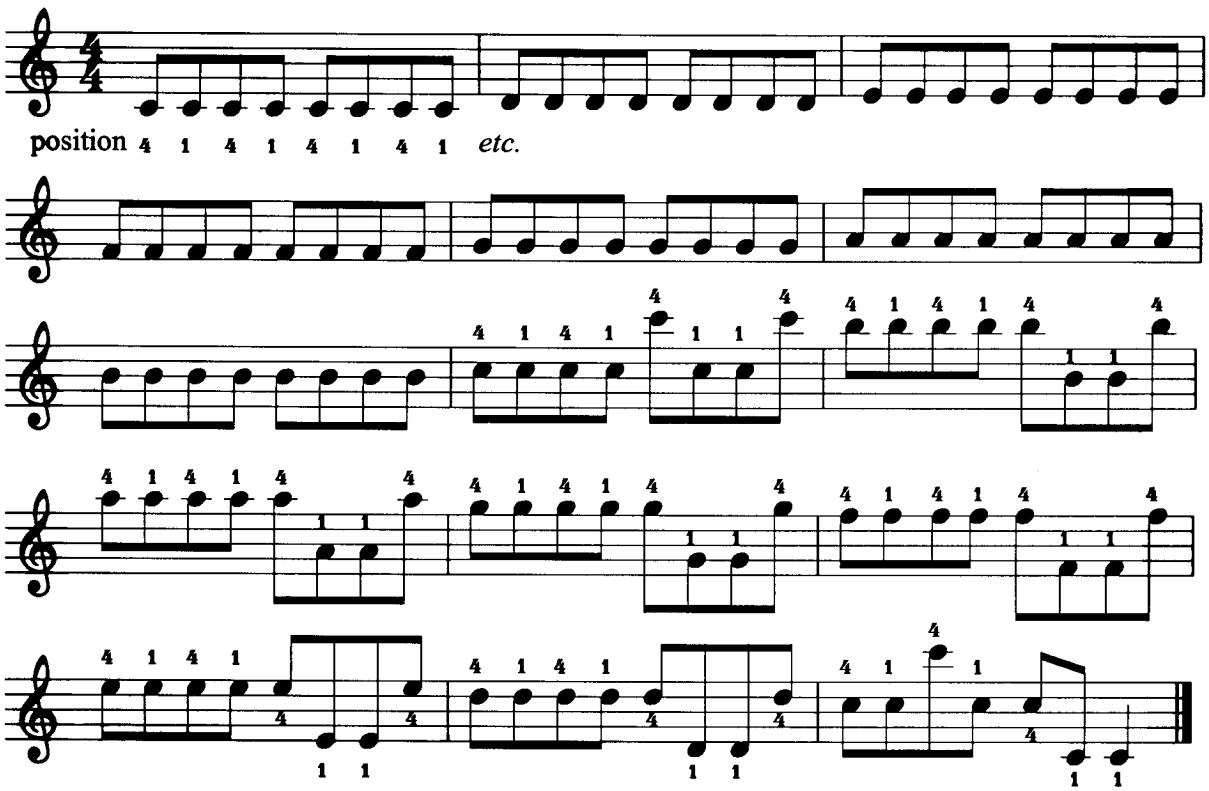


VARIATION OF EXERCISE NO. 10



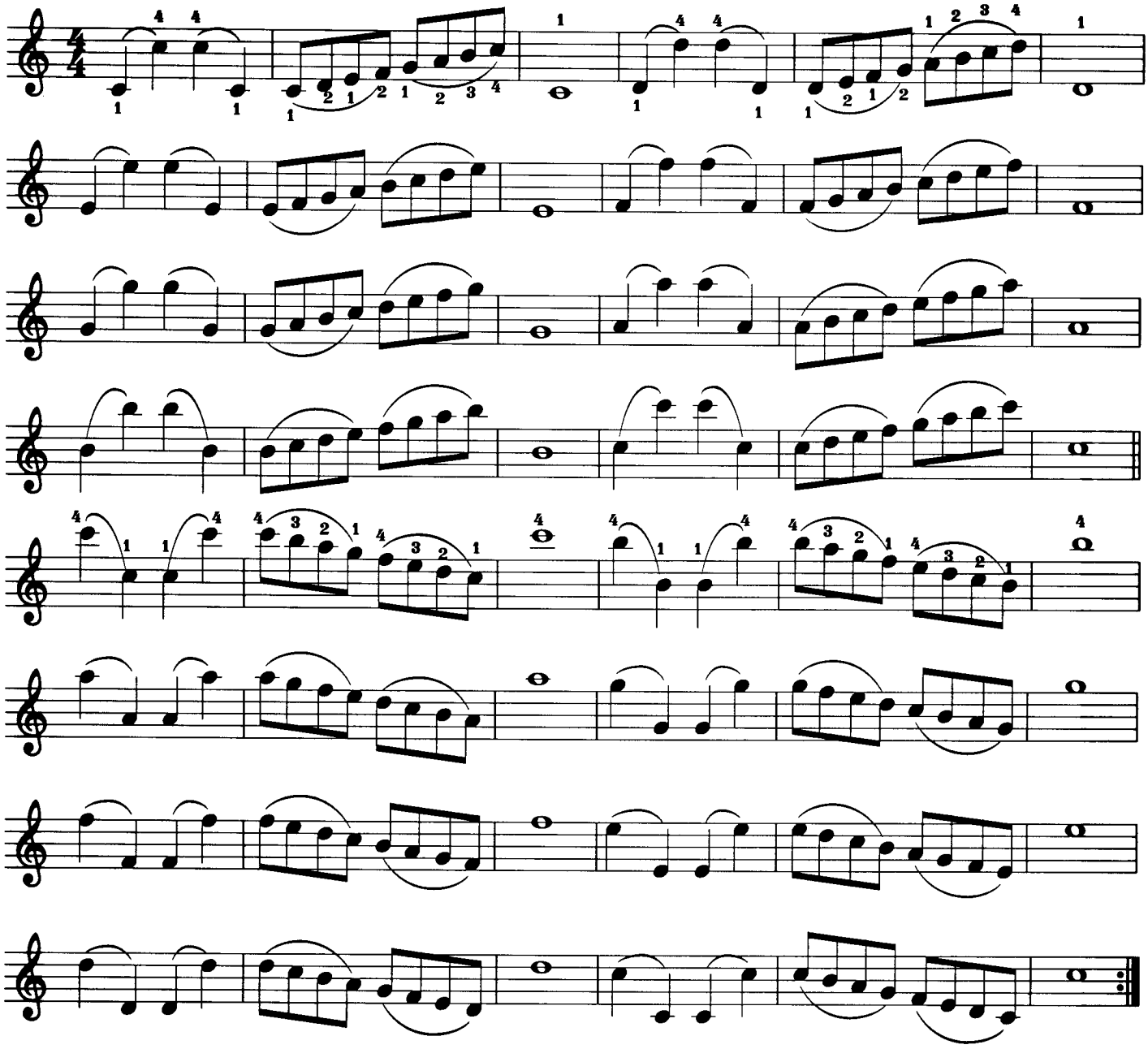
EXERCISE NO. 11

Advanced study in quick changes of position.



EXERCISE NO. 12

Daily warm up exercise.



VIBRATO

Very important to produce the desired tone quality.
Forefinger of the right hand resting on the thumb and please, please not a wide vibrato, but as fast and as much **in place** as possible – not to be mistaken for a trill.

A trill should not be a wide vibrato, but a very exact, either half- or whole-tone, distance.

Avoid constant vibrato, allowing areas without it, as the music dictates.

* * *

When ready to try to make music, start with easy pieces.
Example: **The Swan** – C. Saint-Saëns
Air on the G-String – J.S. Bach

* * *

Now, the quality of the sound is all-important – mold it with a **beautiful vibrato** and **beautiful phrasing**.

The choice of "positioning" your right arm or fingers will depend entirely on your musical phrasing, so always be prepared for the direction that the music is going.

Try all alternatives, of arm at rest and fingers forward or back, or arm forward or back, with fingers either together or stretched forward or back as the music dictates.

PRACTICAL INSTRUCTIONS

Connect the instrument first and let it warm up, about fifteen minutes, before tuning.

Tune to your own body capacity. I found it, for myself, to be the G – below middle-C – giving me three + octaves up to the vertical rod and one + octave down toward myself.

The range of each newly built instrument may be different.

In searching for material, in the vast libraries for voice and other various instruments, suitable for the theremin, remember that in fast passages close intervals are possible, not so for passages easy for the violin, the "over the string" ones.

In playing, develop the daring of a diver in reaching wide jumps without any sliding – always aiming not only for the **desired note**, but the **very center** of the note.

When performing as soloist with a symphony orchestra, make sure at the rehearsal that your instrument is placed accordingly to insure that neither the bows of the first violins, nor the baton of the conductor, can possibly intrude in your magic electro-magnetic circle.

A sample of what level of difficulty I was able to perform on the theremin:

Schelomo – E. Bloch, for cello and orchestra, played with the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra in Philadelphia.

Sonata for violin and piano – C. Franck, performed with my sister, Nadia Reisenberg (all four movements) in recital at Town Hall, New York.

Concerto for theremin and orchestra – in three movements by Anis Fuleihan, performed with the New York Symphony in New York with Leopold Stokowski (who commissioned the work especially for me) conducting. This composition was subsequently performed with the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra at the Academy of Music in Philadelphia, Alexander Hilsberg conducting and with the New York Philharmonic at the Lewison Stadium, New York.

Now – take it further, with all my blessings, and may the theremin remain – yet another voice – in the world of music.