

Practicing

A wise musician once said, “practice does not make perfect. Rather, perfect practice makes better.” Here is a list of suggestions for efficient practice.

Getting Organized

Develop a Routine: Often times, taking the instrument out of the case is the hardest part! Here’s some tips that might help motivate you:

- **What time of day do you practice most efficiently?** Try to practice when your brain is fresh. It might help to practice in the morning before you leave for school. You could also try breaking your practice session into smaller increments (15 minutes in the morning; 15 minutes in the evening). Whatever you decide, be certain to establish a routine and stick with it.
- **DON’T set a specific time-goal for practicing. DO set a tangible goal** (i.e. “I will play the G major scale while watching the position of my left hand wrist in the mirror.”).
- **Decide where you are going to practice.** Have a practice place or room. It should be quiet, well lit, and void of any distractions. The room should contain any necessary music supplies (metronome, stand, pencil/eraser, practice-log).

Condition of Instrument: Keep your instrument in acceptable playing condition. If you practice often, be certain to change your strings and re-hair your bow on a yearly basis.

Setting Up:

- Place music stand, endpin holder, shoulder pad, chair/stool in proper place
- Rosin bow, if needed
- Tune with accuracy
- Set your playing position –slowly and accurately

What Should You Practice First? Don’t start with your most difficult piece. Take time to warm-up. Remember, you are a musical athlete! Starting with a good warm-up will increase your overall stamina, improve your technique, and help you avoid injury. The following is a sample practice schedule:

1. Open strings/long tones, scales and arpeggios, shifting and vibrato exercises
2. Etudes
3. Orchestral excerpts
4. Difficult solo/new solo
5. Old solo/review/fun piece

The Art of Effective Practice

Setting Goals: Set a specific goal before you begin practicing an exercise or piece. What do you want to improve upon? If you're struggling with developing a goal, try videotaping/tape-recording yourself playing the piece. Replay the tape, take notes, and develop a plan of action!

Focusing on the Present: While you are practicing, stay in the moment. You can look to the past or the future, but don't live in it. Living in the present paves the way towards a more rewarding practice session.

Keeping Your Senses Active: As you practice, always self-reflect. Continually question and analyze your practice sessions. Remember, teach your head first and your body second! Before you reach a hard part: stop, think, and then play it. Here are some excellent questions to ask yourself while practicing:

- What facts must I know before I can accomplish my goals? Examples: "Do I know what a good bow hold looks like? Do I know what accidentals are in this measure? Am I using an efficient fingering? Do I know what position I'm shifting to? Do I know what hand-frame I need to play this in tune?"
- What do I need to feel with my body when I play this passage?
- What do I need to hear with my ears?
- What did I just hear?
- What do I anticipate hearing next time?
- Based on what I heard and felt, what did I learn? What is right and wrong?

Remember, to obtain knowledge, one must remain curious. A learner is a doer, not a spectator! You will never get bored if you stay mentally engaged at all times during your practicing.

Sample Practice Method:

1. CHOOSE a section of music or a concept (tone, style, dynamics, etc.) to work on.
2. PLAY THROUGH the section in its entirety.
3. IDENTIFY a problem area. Concentrate on one thing at a time.
4. ISOLATE the cause of the problem. Don't just get frustrated and say, "I can't play this." Look at your hand, the instrument, the music, and use your brain. Ask yourself questions. Define the nucleus of the problem, not just the symptoms.
Intonation and bowing problems are commonly caused by the following things:
 - Right hand position
 - Left hand position
 - Position of Instrument
 - Tension
 - Shifting
5. CORRECT the problem by isolating the notes.
6. REPEAT the passage correctly several times.
7. EXPAND out in each direction. Back up a measure to get into the problem passage; continue playing one measure beyond the problem passage.

Creative Ideas for Isolating Specific Problems:

Rhythmic Solutions:

- Ignore the pitches; practice rhythms on an open string
- Clap rhythms
- Pizzicato rhythms
- Count aloud while you clap, pluck, or play the passage

Intonation Solutions:

- Check pitches with open strings. Listen for resonance and sympathetic vibrations.
- Try playing a passage slower and slower until it's in tune. This will be your starting point for tempo.

Shifting Solutions:

- Sing the notes before you play them
- Study the positions involved.
- Apply a shifting exercise to the two isolated notes of the shift
- Could your shifting problem actually be a bowing issue?

Fingering Solutions:

- Try eliminating the bow. By removing the bow, you are able to concentrate on one issue at a time (the left hand).
- Study the finger patterns involved. Where are the half and whole steps?
- Finger the passage
- Pizzicato the passage

String Crossing Solutions:

- Play the string crossings used in a difficult passage on open strings only. For now, eliminate the notes of the left hand.

Other Creative Solutions:

- Play the passage with different rhythms. If it is a passage of straight 8th notes in groups of four, try playing them in the following ways:
 - Long, Short, Long, Short
 - Short, Long, Short, Long
 - Long, Short, Short, Short
 - Short, Long, Short, Short
 - Short, Short, Long, Short
 - Short, Short, Short, Long
- Try doubling each note.
- Play the passage backwards.
- Play the passage two times in a row, mistake-free. The optimal number of times depends on the nature of the passage, but twice in a row is a good starting point.
- Play the passage expressively two times in a row, mistake-free. Including the expressive elements introduces a new level of difficulty.

- Start with this problem spot in your following practice session.

Slow Practice: Remember the tortoise who eventually won the race? Slow practice is imperative. When you are hurried for time, practice more slowly! Slow practice helps your brain and muscles retain more information.

Ideas For Keeping Repetitions Interesting: Repetition is a necessary part of practicing a musical instrument. To get the most out of repetitions, try implementing the following techniques:

Bit by Bit: If you try to learn too much at once, your brain gets overloaded. It can't retain it all, and just shuts down. Work on small chunks at a time (perhaps only a few notes). This allows your brain to relax and retain more information.

Practice it Correctly: Wrong notes, fingerings, and rhythms may be hard to change. Your brain is so smart that it remembers every note you learn...both the right and the wrong! Try to learn only the correct notes, rhythms, and bowings. Remember, incorrect practice can actually make you worse.

Place Repetitions Within Rhythmic Boundaries: Messy repetitions executed at a spastic tempo are a complete waste of time. Use a metronome (the "truth machine"). Start slowly at a mistake-free tempo. You will likely need to slow down more than you think.

How Much Should You Repeat a Passage? Someone once said: "Don't just practice until you can do something right. Practice until you can't do it wrong!" Here's some ideas for repetitions:

- Try playing just a few tricky notes repeatedly 15-25 times. This will take you less than one minute and make a big difference in your retention.
- Make a mistake? Fix it once. Make the mistake again? Practice it five times correctly. Missed it again? Practice it ten times correctly.
- Play a measure once very slowly and once very quickly.
- Play a measure slowly in your mind three times. Then play it physically at tempo. Did you improve?