

PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE

“No brain, no gain”

by Janet Horvath

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Have you heard this one? A youngster holding a violin case asks: “How do I get to Carnegie Hall?” Answer: “Practice, practice, practice.” That is certainly true. Like elite athletes, we constantly refine and change and, we hope, improve our techniques.

In the past, if something went wrong in performance, it was always because, “you hadn’t practiced enough!” You always felt guilty, because mistakes inevitably occur.

Musicians have a love/hate relationship with practicing. We admire the colleague who “never” practices, who can launch into any repertoire any time and to whom it’s no big deal. But we also applaud the discipline of the person who practices “day and night.”

I am reminded of the following story:

When the cellist Stephen Kates was a student, he was a great admirer of Rostropovich, the legendary Russian soloist. One day, Rostropovich was scheduled to play an 8 P.M. recital of several difficult works, in Kates’s town. It was to open with the Brahms Cello Sonata No. 2 in F major, which within the first few measures has three soaring and formidable leaps in high positions: CFDGC. Kates was determined to learn “how he does it.” Kates decided to hide in a closet in Rostropovich’s dressing room to witness the pre-concert warmup and practice first-hand. 7:30 came and went, then 7:45. Still no sign of the great master. Incredibly, Rostropovich finally raced into the dressing room at 7:55, whipped out the cello, sat down, played: CFDGC and raced onto the stage!

We musicians will spend countless solitary hours practicing. In fact, in a study of violinists that appeared in the journal *American Psychology* in 1994, it was found that 10,000 hours of accumulated practice time over about ten years is necessary to attain elite levels of performance.

When it comes down to it, though, many of us are in the dark. What exactly is a sensible, fruitful approach?

During practice, we work on our skills

in order to achieve ease of musical expression. But as Tom Heimberg wrote recently in *Strings* magazine, “Repetition is the mother of learning. Repetition of error and inefficiency will never lead to success. Hard practice can mean hard muscles, hardheadedness — and in the end, hard playing. It is a trap to think that sincerity of effort is shown by severity of effort.”

Good practicing entails close observation of musical, technical and physical details within the framework of a practice plan. Learning how to practice efficiently, without injury over time, is our goal. Let us examine the principles.

Warm Up

Muscle speed, efficiency and strength are enhanced by a rise in the temperature of the muscle. It is important to start by gently and smoothly using our muscles for a few minutes to increase the blood flow through them without stressing them. Cold muscles are inelastic and will not stretch or respond well.

Stretching before you begin to play is essential to begin warming you up for the challenge of playing. Even five minutes will get your blood flowing. Don’t forget that warming up is necessary both at

home before a practice session and at work before a rehearsal or concert. I have several stretches in my book for both warming up and cooling down. A physical therapist, personal trainer or exercise instructor can guide you as well. Shoulder shrugs and circles, and arm reaches with your hands clasped above your head, forward in front of you and behind you are good for starters, as are hand and thumb circles.

What can you do at the instrument? Make sure you differentiate between warming up and doing exercises and passage-work to improve technique. There seems to be a misnomer in our vocabulary, and our interpretation of “warming up” is faulty. So many musicians have the misguided idea that warming up means launching into double-stops, octaves, “Dounis”-like etudes, high-range or other chop-busting exercises or punishingly fast scales and arpeggios. How you start playing is more important than what you play. Avoid strenuous technical exercises or phrases when you first begin. Stretching or working a muscle too quickly can cause a muscle to contract.

“If you elongate your muscles slowly and regularly they will remain elongated for longer and longer periods of time,” says Dr.



This newly published book is essential for all musicians. String, keyboard, percussion, harp, brass, and wind players will play and feel better.

It is available for credit card orders at www.playinglesshurt.com, by fax to (651) 222-7420, or purchase locally at Orchestra Hall box office, Claire Givens Violins, Groth Music, and Bound to Be Read bookstore, 870 Grand Ave., St. Paul. (\$21.00 plus \$4.50 shipping and handling. MN residents add 7% sales tax; 2'x3' poster \$10.95; 6 card stock 8-1/2" x 11" posters \$16.00; ea. additional item add \$2.00 shipping.)

Ben E. Benjamin in his book *Listen to Your Pain*. “Few people have the patience to do this and instead force their muscles to get a quick result. When you force muscles to stretch they spring back to a tight position and often damage muscles or tendon tissue.”

Begin each playing session slowly and gently. Be mindful of how your body feels. If you’ve overplayed the day before or had very little sleep you will be stiffer and need more gentle warmup. Other days, you will feel relaxed and limber. Adjust your routine to fit what your body is trying to tell you. There may even be days when you’ll wake up so sore and stiff that your body is telling you to take a day off. Heed the messages.

A Practical Approach to Practicing

One would think that when we practice at home on our own, injury risk is lower because we are in total control of what we do, what we play and how we play it! Unfortunately, we tend to get so involved that we lose track of time. We are so emotionally involved that we lose awareness of what we are doing. We push ourselves into endless repetition, we try to cram, we force ourselves to stay put and get through everything. At the work place, at least break times are prescribed! First, remember these:

- Warm Up.
- Take Breaks.
- Vary Your Repertoire.
- Increase Your Practice Load Gradually
- Reduce Your Practice Intensity Prior to Performance. Avoid heavy practice on the day before and day of a concert or audition.

We are extremely disciplined, organized people. Use those skills when practicing.

Start with a practice plan. Do you have one hour or the luxury of a two-hour chunk? Allocate your time wisely. Budget time for warming up, cooling down and one ten-minute break per hour of playing. If you have a particularly long or taxing work to learn, allow several days and master a few pages per day.

If you have several works to learn, make a list and categorize them according to their physical demands. If you’re a string player, for example, place left-hand-intensive pyrotechnical works in Column I, and right-hand-intensive works in Column II. If these are mutually inclusive, as they sometimes are, put slower, less challenging repertoire in Column I.

Budget your time to include the works you need to cover and alternate from column to column. By alternating different

works with different challenges you use different muscles and allow your body some respite. Alternate slow and fast passages and use variety in the passages you choose.

Especially when time is short, one must learn to analyze. Isolate passages and work out problems carefully and methodically, asking yourself questions like: Why isn’t this fluid? Is my shift too jerky? Is my string crossing too angular? Does my fingering need to be changed? Is my bow speed too fast (or too slow)? Is my contact point too high (or low)? Is my coordination from left hand to right hand working? Should I use less (or more) bow? How is my tonguing? Is it efficient and does it sound clear? Avoid constantly playing through in your practicing, especially at top speed and volume. Protect your body and your ears! Go on to something else and return to a difficult passage later in the day, rather than repeating and repeating. Without slowly figuring out a problem, you may just be reinforcing a bad habit.

Preparing for a recital, competition or audition presents extra challenges. There’s a mountain of repertoire to learn. How do I avoid going into panic mode and feel like I’m just not covering the stuff? This is where preparing a list is most helpful. First, write down all the works you need to learn. Put easier, shorter works in one column and difficult, technical works in another. Now, pair up works from each column, so that each practice will be sure to include contrasting types of repertoire.

Now figure out how much time you have. If you have a month you may want to arrange a three-day plan to start with, wherein you could cover all of the repertoire once in three days. Then perhaps two weeks before the audition or competition you might switch to a two-day plan. (Presumably by then you are more familiar with the repertoire and you can work on the tough spots in less time.)

- Take time to study the music away from the instrument. This is extremely effective for memorization.
- Be vigilant about your posture and your stand placement. Time must sometimes be spent in compromising positions. Be conscious of repertoire where your wrists, arms or back are very flexed. Notice any awkward stretches you do playing chords or reaching keys. Control the length of time you spend on these passages. Release often, stretch frequently and use a mirror to monitor your posture.

- Playing fast should not be your ultimate goal. We sometimes sacrifice the phrase, breath, and fluid movement for speed. According to Lyonn Lieberman, “Effort is not what it takes to play fast. It takes supreme relaxation and attention to quality of sound.” Always search for the least amount of effort.
- Stop frequently for a couple of mini-breaks or a quick stretch, a glass of water and a few deep breaths. Change your position often.
- Be mindful of how your body feels. If one day you just can’t stick to your plan and you need a break, take it without guilt! You will be fresher and more relaxed during the next session and accomplish more.
- Avoid erratic fluctuations in your practice schedule. Doing a consistent hour a day is more productive and safer for your body than skipping days at a time and then launching into a marathon session!
- Most important, if something hurts, stop! [*Playing (less) Hurt* contains a list of 10 Danger Signals in Chapter VI.] As previously discussed, it is safe to say that we should limit practice sessions to two hours (including two ten-minute breaks). With a large chunk of time in between sessions, we may then be able to repeat the session without physical risk.

You can become extremely efficient in your use of time. We in the professional world rarely have the luxury of big blocks of time, and our bodies cannot keep up with the rigors of nine-service weeks in addition to practicing long hours, extra gigs, teaching and living! Learning to use your time well will put you in good stead for the rest of your career.

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