



CELLO

Tips for Practicing Efficiently

by Benjamin Kulp

I became fascinated by practice technique when I noticed several years ago that I was not progressing well despite several hours a day of practice. If I performed on a recital or in studio class the consistency of intonation, articulation, and phrasing was not what I knew my capabilities to be. This inconsistency caused residual stress and so I decided to focus on what makes an effective practice session. After concentrating on patterns that help steady improvement and asking questions of teachers I have formulated several small steps that will help any student. While there is no “easy-fix” to problems in a performer’s playing, there is an approach that can be taken to help you improve. The following are points of advice that I recommend every student and teacher should review for their own benefit.

Setting a practice schedule is essential to any musician who wishes to improve. For example, my practice schedule usually consists of technical studies, a concerto, a Bach cello suite, and a sonata. To efficiently practice each of these every day is an unrealistic goal if I hope to improve. In order to come prepared to my next lesson I need to plan out what I will practice. Scales and etudes, which need to be studied every day, provide a great warm up. From this point I recommend micromanaging what you practice. Practice one movement of the concerto you are working on each day of the week on a rotating basis. Also, playing a Bach cello suite is convenient because the movements can be assigned to one a day by breaking up the Minuets and Bourrees. Likewise, practicing an entire movement of a sonata each day can be overwhelming (especially with compositions from the Romantic era). Practicing the exposition, development, and recapitulation of a single movement sepa-

rately can help you learn the sonata more effectively. Approaching practicing through micromanagement is only the first step to practicing efficiently. What you focus your energy and efforts on is just as important as what sections you are learning.

Teachers often assign specific works in order to **emphasize a certain technique**. For example, the second movement of the Elgar Cello Concerto is notorious for its rapid staccato that forces the performer through the entire range of the instrument. The basis for this movement’s bowstroke is the arm and wrist of the bow hand. Recognizing that this specific technical aspect needs to be practiced makes it easier to tackle the difficult passages appropriately. Focusing on specific aspects of the technique in a composition can save countless hours of wasted time.

String musicians need to **pay careful attention to intonation**. Practicing slowly is essential to improving intonation. Manage your time by taking small steps. First, practice a passage completely out of tempo so that you can focus on technique. Intonation is affected by bow control, left hand position, and shifting between notes. Many string students receive inadequate amounts of ear training instruction from their private teachers. It is therefore very important to take additional lessons in piano and voice in order to have a strong foundation for understanding of intervallic relationships. Intonation comes naturally for some students, while others need to learn intonation through practice. Recording yourself while you practice is an excellent and often eye-opening way to quickly identify and correct intonation issues.

If a mistake is made, stop, and see what you did wrong. I recently attended a

master class with Stephen Balderston, the cello instructor at De Paul University. He said, “Making a mistake in practice is actually a golden opportunity.” I agree with him completely. If you are alone while practicing, put yourself in a teacher’s role. Ask yourself what you would do if your student made the same mistake as yourself. This role reversal is surprisingly effective and will save time during practice.

Finally, it is important to **study with several teachers**. Private teachers should always be willing to allow their students to take a few lessons with other teachers to gain perspective. Even a handful of lessons with a new teacher can produce rapid improvement because of a change in routine. A great way to meet new teachers is by attending summer music programs. There are countless summer programs available for students of all levels. While some programs can be expensive, there are several programs available that provide need-based financial aid.

The art of practicing an instrument is an important strategy I have only considered in the past few years. A well-practiced musician will always be able to perform better and go farther than someone who is inconsistent with their practicing. By practicing with more focus and direction you can greatly improve your chance of success.

Benjamin Kulp has been playing the cello for fifteen years. He graduated from St. Olaf College with a B.M. in Performance with Dr. David Carter. He will finish his Master’s in Music Performance at Ball State University with Mihai Tetel. Benjamin hopes to continue his studies in Chicago after this year. As well as attending graduate school, he is a member of the Graduate String Quartet. †