



VIOLIN

Mirror, Mirror on the Wall, You're the Most Undervalued Practice Tool of All!

By Katie Gustafson

You will never hear me admit this to young students, but the violin is one big physical challenge. This is true for a host of reasons, but here I will focus on just one that I have encountered lately: it is difficult for students to see accurately what they look like while playing. Much of the left arm is blocked from sight by the body of the instrument, and the right arm operates at an angle that can be awkward to look at while holding the instrument properly. Fortunately, teaching students how to use a mirror in their practice can help address many technical problems just by improving awareness of them.

The first step is to show students how to position themselves in the mirror in order to see what you want them to see. Most techniques cannot be addressed by looking in the mirror face-forward as we usually do. For right arm and bow technique, it is usually best to turn so that the scroll points off to the side, and the f-holes and bowing lane are facing the mirror. Students may have to turn their head slightly in order to see, but this is usually easy to do. This angle is helpful for many left hand techniques as well, but in some cases the left hand is easier to address with the scroll pointing toward the mirror. Remind students to turn their entire body and not just their instrument so that they can keep their playing position intact while looking in the mirror.

Here are a few techniques that a mirror can help address:

The first, and perhaps most common issue, is posture. Many students struggle to keep their back tall and their instrument level with the floor, and end up slumped over with the left elbow resting on their side. Often they do not realize how silly this looks until they see themselves doing it in the mirror. Fortunately, the mirror can serve as a helpful practice partner to remind them as they play.

The second technique that can be aided by a mirror is straight bowing. Because the violin is held at a slight angle from the face, it is difficult to see whether the bow is going straight or crooked. The mirror can help by providing a clear, head-on view of the bow and bowing lane. Ask the student to turn their body so that the f-holes are facing the mirror, and have them practice bowing on open strings only, trying to keep the bow staying perfectly parallel to the bridge. This may take some time as they learn how to angle their hand and elbow correctly. The mirror will also show them if they are using their elbow as a hinge, or bowing from their shoulder. These are easy things for a young student to identify once they can see it well.

After the student has gotten used to steering the bow correctly on open strings, you can have them try to play something slightly

more complex, like a scale or a memorized solo. They should continue to watch in the mirror so that they can correct the bow angle as they go.

A third technique, usually addressed with intermediate students, is the flexibility of the right wrist and bow fingers. This can be done with the instrument held in the same position to the mirror as with straight bowing. This usually begins with many bow hold finger exercises, but once the student gains a certain level of control with these, you can add the mirror. This will give them a better visual perspective as they try to use their flexible bow hold while playing on the string.

The mirror's usefulness is not limited to right hand technique! Consider these left hand techniques that are difficult for a student to see: First is the tilt of the left elbow as you move from the G-string to the E-string. Many young students keep their elbow stuck in one location, and tilt their wrist so that it has a kink. This causes them to "lay over" their fingers onto the E string. A good way to help them with this is to position them in front of the mirror with their scroll pointing toward it. From this angle, they will be able to see most of their left arm. With this line of sight, you can more easily show them what it looks like to keep the wrist straight and the fingers up on their tips as the elbow tilts the hand from string to string.

Another left hand technique that can be difficult to see is how the arm moves when shifting into high positions. For example, if a student is shifting from third position to fifth position, their elbow should swing in toward their belly button, and their thumb should slide under the neck. Both of these things are difficult to see from the student's line of sight. However, if the student's scroll is pointing toward a mirror, they will be able to see it much more clearly. A side view in the mirror would also work well for this.

These are just a few of the situations in which a mirror might be useful for your students. Since many children learn visually, it could jump-start their progress in a variety of areas. If you're unsure, try playing a few things in the mirror yourself to see how it might work with other techniques you are addressing with them.

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