

ALL-STATE: THE AMAZING LIST OF PRACTICE TECHNIQUES!

(In no particular order)

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Dr. Molly Gebrian was one of our online presenters at the August 2020 All-State Teachers Workshop. Watch for similar sessions at our workshop this August.

Intonation

- If an individual note is out of tune, start at the beginning of the measure, line, or phrase and stop on the note in question. *Don't adjust* if it's out of tune: make a mental note of whether it was too high or too low and try again. Once you get it, try to get it perfectly in tune at least 5 times in a row.
- If a shift is out of tune, play the open string it's on and then try to play the note in question in tune without playing anything that comes before it. *Don't adjust* if it's out of tune: make a mental note of whether it was too high or too low and try again. Once you get it, try to get it perfectly in tune at least 5 times in a row.
- Play the note, then drop your hand as you continue to play the open string with your bow. Bring your hand up and try to get the note perfectly in tune (finding it "from the air"). *Don't adjust* if it's out of tune: make a mental note of whether it was too high or too low and try again. Once you get it, try to get it perfectly in tune at least 5 times in a row.
- Sing the passage. If your voice is out of tune, your hand will be, too.
- Sing the next note before you play it and then match your finger to your voice.
- Practice with a drone (a continuous pitch). To choose the drone note, pick Do in whatever key you're in or the note that seems the most important or prominent in the phrase.
- Play the passage super slowly, making sure you can hear the pitch and its resonance in your head before you play it.
- Play any notes that come one after the other on two adjacent strings as a double-stop to check the intonation between them and to feel the hand shape.
- Record yourself and listen back, making note of where it's out of tune.

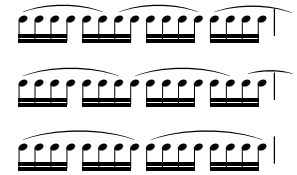
Audio Stretch helps immensely with this.

Rhythm

- Clap the rhythm.
- Sing your part and conduct along.
- Put the metronome on and walk in tempo while you play. Then turn off the metronome, but continue walking.
- Practice with the metronome on off-beats.
- Have the metronome click only on the downbeats.
- Make the clicks further and further apart. Start with every other beat, then just downbeats, then every other down beat, then every third downbeat, etc.

Bow issues

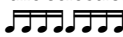
- Play open strings only. Make sure it is clean before you add your fingers back in.
- Play backwards bowing (if it starts down, start up and vice versa).
- Play everything at the extreme frog.
- Play everything at the extreme tip.
- Play it all up bow.
- Play it all down bow.
- If there are slurs, play it first separate bows. Then play with hooked bows. Next play with "mushy hooks"—not smooth slurs, but not really hooked either. Finally, play with smooth slurs.
- Before each string crossing, stop on the new string, wiggle the bow back and forth on the string without making a sound to make sure you can feel the string. Then play the new string.
- Before each string crossing, stop and say "Cross" out loud very enthusiastically. Then play.
- Practice with the following bowings:
- 2 through 8 slurred:



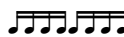
- Different combinations of slurred and separate:







Playing Faster

Play the selection in dotted rhythms. Original:  Play as:



Change the  rhythm in the following ways:

- First note of each group long, the others fast 
- Second note of each group long, the others fast 
- Third note of each group long, the others fast 
- Last note of each group long, the others fast 

Note: the passage should be done in these rhythms both with separate bows and also with the printed bowing.

Play the passage using the Gingold scale rhythms. Again, do with separate bows and also the printed bowing.

Play the passage in different bowings (under "Bow issues").

Click the passage up with the metronome (basic way):

- Start at a tempo so slow you couldn't possibly make a mistake (60 or slower).
- Make it faster very gradually, going up

by 5 or 10 at a time (no more). It shouldn't really feel perceptible faster if you are going gradually enough.

- Click up as fast as you can play cleanly.
- Make a note of how fast you got and try to beat that tempo the next day, if only by 1 click.
- Click up to faster than your goal tempo.

Chunking method #1:

- Play a beat + a note as fast as you can *cleanly*.
- Play two beats + a note as fast as you can cleanly. Make sure to do beats 1 & 2 and then 2 & 3. Don't just skip right away to 3 & 4.
- Play three beats + a note as fast as you can cleanly.
- Keep going on this way until you can do the whole thing.

Chunking method #2: (thanks to Dr. Cora Cooper at Kansas State University for this idea!) Original:



- Step 1: Play each beat plus a note followed by rests at a slow tempo with the metronome. Click up until you reach your goal tempo.



- Step 2: Same as step 1, but now two beats plus a note.



- Step 3: Same as step 1, but now three beats plus a note.



- Keep going until you have done the whole passage with no rests up to tempo.
- You can increase the number of rests in between chunks from what is written in the example, but keep the number of rests between chunks consistent for a given step of the process.

Other Practice Ideas

- Play last bar of the passage as clearly as possible. Back up one bar and play the last two bars as cleanly as possible. Continue

working backwards until you've gotten to the beginning of the passage.

- Record yourself playing a short passage. Listen back immediately and notice what you would like to be better. Play and record again. Keep doing this until you're happy with how it sounds.
- Mental practice: imagine yourself playing the passage as vividly as possible. Feel your fingers on the strings, feel the space between them, where you are on the string (which position, which string), feel what your bow has to do (bowing, which string), hear the pitch, hear the quality of sound, etc. As many things as you can imagine, the better. Once the passage is crystal clear in your head, then try to play it again.
- Sing how you want it to sound for phrasing and dynamics.
- Play the passage with hugely exaggerated dynamics.
- Play the passage with the opposite of what you think you should do for phrasing/dynamics. This will often help clarify what you should do.
- Pretend you are the teacher and are helping a student play the passage. What would you tell them? What would you have them do?

Good general practice habits

- Create a practice routine. Try to always practice in the same place at the same time for the same length of time so it becomes part of your day.
- You should start every practice session with a clear goal or goals for what you want to accomplish and how you think you will go about accomplishing them.
- The *worst* possible way to practice is to play from the beginning, play until you make a mistake and then either fix the mistake and go on or start over. All this does is reinforce your mistakes. You need to locate where your trouble spots are, isolate them, and work on them using the suggestions in this list. Only once they have been perfected in isolation can you go back and put them in context.
- Playing through your piece is a *last* step after weeks or months of work, only to be done when you are getting ready for a performance. If you're running through your piece everyday (and it's more than 2-3 weeks before your concert), you're not practicing well and are only reinforcing your mistakes.
- *Always* ask yourself, "Why am I playing this right now? What do I hope to accomplish?" If you're practicing, never just play. Always have a reason, especially if you are playing something again. Someone should be able to interrupt your practicing at any point and ask you these questions and you should have a good answer immediately. If you tend to practice mindlessly, set a timer to off every 10 minutes or so to remind yourself to ask this question.
- Keep a practice journal. Write down your goal for each practice session. Never practice without a goal!
- At the end of your practice session, write down how well you achieved your goal so you can monitor your progress. Write down what worked and what didn't in solving the problems you hear in your playing.
- Make sure you practice at least a little bit every day. It's *much* better to do 10 minutes every day than an hour once a week.

- Use random/interleaved practice to allow your brain to practice performing.
- Use breaks strategically to allow your brain to do the necessary reorganization it needs to in order to consolidate what you practiced in the last session.

Molly Gebrian completed degrees in both viola performance and neuroscience. She has served as the Assistant Director for two inter-

disciplinary conferences on music and the brain, has published papers dealing with music and neuroscience, and currently teaches at the Fred Fox School of Music at the University of Arizona. Her background in neuroscience gives her unique insight into how the brain learns and how musicians can use this information in the practice room. For more information on practicing and brain research, visit <https://mollygebrian.com/writing/> 🐘