

How To Practise

“We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, therefore, is not an act but a habit”^{[1][2]}
Aristotle

Have you ever wondered what's the proportion between your time spent performing and your time spent alone practising? At a guess, we might only spend 2% of our time engaged in public performance with the remaining time spent practising! We rightly give a lot of thought to that small percentage, the art of performance, imagining ourselves on the stage, but we need to give equal thought, some might say more, to the 98% of our time which we spend alone practising, to the *means* by which we get there.

Like an iceberg, the public only see the section which shows above the water: our public performances. However, under the water lies the mountain-like structure of the main body of the iceberg, which corresponds to the hours we work on our own, unseen by others.

Many working musicians describe how they have increasingly less time available for practising, due to the different pressures of later life and the need to earn a living. Student life is busy, but many remember it as the time when they had the most available time for calm, considered practice time. However, at the time of writing this article, here in the midst of this challenging moment in history, we're presented with an opportunity to focus on our instrumental development in a way which may not come our way again.

Let's think about how to turn the discipline of practising into a creative skill of its own.

In this short article, I can't give you the “perfect” formula for practising, or a one-size-fits-all strategy, but rather, I can offer food for thought and encourage you to question what you already do.

One of the first answers, which young musicians want to know, is how much we should practise each day. Most readers will be familiar with the 10,000 hour rule and whilst it's true that we need to commit to working hard, it doesn't always follow that one's rate of improvement is proportional to the number of hours we invest.

I'll take a step to the side for the moment and ponder which activities count as practice. Do you have to be using your hands to practise? For example, does reading the score of your work and memorising your music count as practice? To my mind, yes! How about reading about music and performance style (history, biographies, letters)?

Henning Kraggerud, RNCM International Chair in Violin writes as follows: “If you can dance, sing or think the music better than you play it, then you can move more quickly towards your goals.

Valuable work away from the instrument also includes: learning the piano part, understanding the harmonies, singing your repertoire and crafting your interpretation.

In fact, these are examples of mental practice, which is a vitally important aspect of our work and worthy of a separate article.

To my mind, practice is certainly more than just exercising your fingers!

However, returning to the question of “how many hours” I would say that, more important than the question of quantity, is the question of quality.

Here's a quote of Leopold Auer, Nathan Milstein's teacher.

"Practice with your fingers and you need all day. Practice with your mind and you will do as much in 1.5 hours." Since Leopold Auer was American, I spell practice with a "c" here!!!

It's not just about practising **longer**, but practising **smarter!**

It's about achieving as much in 2 hours as another person achieves in 4 hours: spending less time, but doing more highly-productive practice.

Here's what Yo Ya Ma says about being smart with your time:

"I have never practised very much. When I was in high school I only practised about two hours a day. I once practised for four hours a day for a whole month, and was exhilarated. "My God," I thought, "I've actually done that!" Since I don't like to work hard, I've had to become efficient in my practising. I was lucky that, thanks to my father, I had a tremendously good foundation. It's the concentration that counts. I hated it, but it paid off because I can take a piece today – of 20-25 minutes – and probably learn it in two weeks by working two to three hours a day. This isn't talent – I'm not extraordinarily gifted in that respect. It comes from the amount of time I've put in to doing this kind of thing."

In other words, Yo Yo Ma is saying the same as Leopold Auer: he has become smart with his use of time, he realises the importance of concentrating throughout and that, with age, he is getting better at practising!

Smart practice is primarily a vibrant thought process.

It's about the mental agility which surrounds everything which we're doing so that every second counts: the why, the how, the objective listening skills, the problem-solving processes and the artistic vision.

Here's a quote from Matthew Syed's excellent book, *Bounce*, which describes the power of purposeful practice. It's a book, which I recommend to all our students at the RNCM.

"Deliberate, or mindful practice is a systematic and highly structured activity, that is, for lack of a better word, "scientific". Instead of mindless trial and error, it is an active and thoughtful process of hypothesis testing where we relentlessly seek solutions to clearly defined problems". (*Bounce*)

As musicians, this means assessing which element of your performance you're trying to improve, working out what steps you need to take to achieve your goals and knowing why you're doing what you're doing: as above, "relentlessly seeking solutions to clearly defined problems".

However, by contrast, many of us are guilty of mindless practice - going through the motions, employing trial and error and quickly correcting faults in order to move on.

Does practice *really* make perfect? I maintain that there are people practising right now who are getting worse! With their minds switched off, they're just strengthening their bad habits. Whatever we repeatedly do, good or bad, we're turning it into a habit. Practice makes permanent! And that's a health warning!

So, to be more specific, here's a guide to practising which you might consider:

How to practise a section of music

1. Consider your blueprint
2. Play, listening objectively
3. Appraise. Identify an area/ aspect to be improved
4. Devise a mechanism for working at this problem i.e. be a "problem solver"
5. Do this patiently and apply it thoughtfully.
6. Play again
7. Listen and re-assess. Has the above strategy worked?
8. If "No", either continue with same approach or devise another method. If "Yes", play the section again and identify a different aspect to be improved

1: **Consider the blueprint** for your playing and for your piece.

How do we form a good blueprint? That's to say, how do we establish what we're aiming for in our playing? As I wrote earlier in this article, consider the various ways in which you can develop as an artist without the instrument in your hands, "feeding" yourself from as many musical and artistic sources as possible: attending concerts, hearing "everyone who's anyone", listening to recordings and watching videos of great players. This is a contentious point, I know! I don't, in any way, suggest that we clone others' playing or interpretations, but rather, that we plant examples of fine artistry in our minds. The above is an ongoing process, part of maturing as a musician and part of forming your blueprint.

With regards to forming the vision for the interpretation of your repertoire, read your music, imagining the characters, the contours and the colours. Look at the architecture of the work in terms of the harmonies, the highs and lows and the emotional spectrum. One book which inspired Paul Tortelier was "Les Cathédrales de France" by Auguste Rodin.

Is this practice? Yes! After all, it's our minds, not our hands, which lead the way in interpreting our music.

We also need templates for specific areas of our playing, such as our tone and tuning.

What is your blueprint **tone** quality? When I studied with Alexander Baillie, I was encouraged to write "big, warm tone" over large sections of one particular work. That was the template which I was working towards at that time and in that work. Imagine which tone colours you're working towards in the various episodes of your repertoire. Might it be a fragile voile fabric or a rich velvet?

What is the blueprint for **tuning**? For many, a good starting point is to match piano tuning, though, as we know, semitones come in different sizes and we aim for finer margins than equal temperament. It's important to maintain our aural training, because tuning is led by our ear, not by our fingers.

All this practice happens away from the instrument.....

2. **Play, listening objectively.** One crucial skill to acquire is that of listening to yourself objectively and critically, in order that you can begin to become your own teacher. As musicians we need to be both subjective and objective. Yes, do play with commitment, but also listen, as though you were out in the audience.

Leon Fleischer, an American pianist, described as "the pianistic find of the century", put it well when he suggested that a performing musician should divide himself into three persons. **Person A** looking at the score and trying to understand what it's all about (that's the blueprint we were just thinking about). **Person B** trying to express this content with the instrument. **Person C** is out in the audience, listening and reporting back as to whether **Person A's** concepts are actually coming across. **Person C** is the hardest to develop: that's the part of you which is giving live, objective feedback.

Helpful ways of appraising yourself objectively (like Person C) include recording your playing, making a video recording of yourself (these are quick and easy to do on your phone) and using a mirror which reveals what you're doing physically - good when checking your posture and basic technique. Is this the stuff of New Year's resolutions: how often do we actually do this? In these ways, you're taking the role of your teacher, being that external set of ears and eyes.

The following is deliberately written in bold type. **Until you're able to give yourself this objective feedback, how can you practise really productively? It is essential that you can identify what's wrong in order to get better.** This phase is sometimes called "conscious incompetence".

If you don't know what your immediate goal is, how can you achieve it?

3. **Appraise:** this is the outcome of the critical listening, above. This is your Person C (as above). Don't just play it again and resolve to "try harder"!

Now that you have listened and appraised, define the problems and give them names. Which aspect have you chosen to work on: tidiness, tuning, evenness, a big shift, your sense of line, your bow articulation, variety of vibrato, tonal colour, musical drama, your musical story-telling powers?

Identify one aspect to be improved. Male readers will do well to work on just one thing at a time!

4. **Devise a mechanism for working at this problem:** this is you, the strategist and the problem-solver. At this point, allow me to remind you of my earlier quote: "Deliberate, or mindful practice is a systematic and highly structured activity, that is, for lack of a better word, "scientific". Instead of mindless trial and error, it is an active and thoughtful process of hypothesis testing where we relentlessly seek solutions to clearly defined problems".

At this point, you need your lateral thinking skills, code-breaking powers and good imagination. These are key tools for **real** practice. Consider what method you need to employ in order to tackle each problem. Within the confines of this short article, it's only possible to suggest a number of practice mechanisms.

However, for now, let's say that your run-through of a particular section was prone to slips and untidiness.

In this instance, **tidiness** is the name of the issue which you've decided to practise. Let's say that the mechanism, which you've chosen for practising it, is slow practice.

Find a slow-enough tempo which allows you to play the passage evenly and with total control. Take out the emotional heat and give yourself the time and mental space to achieve versions which are clean, even, in-tune and well-articulated. At this slow speed, repeatedly do “perfect” versions: in sport, this process is sometimes called “grooving”. Once the passage is clean and tidy at the slow speed, then make slight increases to the tempo, ensuring that you never increase the tempo until it’s “perfect” at the slower one. This is a process which works well for preparing movements of solo Bach so that your slow versions allow you to execute the music with ultimate control, articulation and craftsmanship. Begin to add the characteristics of the full-speed version: the same part of the bow, the same architecture and attention to phrase-ends. However, note that at slower speeds, off-the-string bow strokes may need to become on-the-string. Over a period of days and weeks, make gradual increases to the tempo, ensuring that you never leave one tempo until the performance is concert-ready at that tempo. Quality remains the constant in this process and it’s a method which, I gather, Heinrich Schiff employed in his own teaching and playing.

Another practice mechanism for tackling the issue of tidiness is: **up-to-speed, but in tiny fragments:** In this instance, take a small group of notes, perhaps just 4 or 5, but give yourself about 10 seconds of thinking time between repetitions. This allows you to retain your mental posture and to picture the short burst of notes which you’re about to play.

Moving on, let’s now say that you’ve identified **Intonation** as the matter for attention.

Here are some mechanisms which you could employ:

Don’t do vibrato.

Change the dynamic to a clear, unforced single forte so that your instrument resonates freely. It’s not helpful to play either ff or pp when working on intonation.

Play legato, practising off-the-string sections on the string. Similarly, change pizzicato passages to arco.

Play slowly. Modify the rhythm changing short note values for longer ones, enabling you to register and correct each note.

Use opportunities to pause and cross-check individual notes with your open strings, checking your perfect intervals, unisons, 4ths, 5ths and octaves.

Next, rather than stopping to check note by note, find a relevant small group of notes which you can repeat in a circle so the final note can lead back to the first note. Repeat this small cycle of notes without stopping, each time registering which note was out of tune and how it needs to be corrected. On each “circuit” adjust the note(s) which troubled you on the previous time around. In this way, there’s a sense of flow, more true to real performance, rather than the somewhat static process of lining up one note at a time, as in the cross-checking version above.

Of course, great tuning starts with our ears and with our ongoing aural training. You can’t train your fingers until you’ve sharpened your ears !

Another problem which you might have identified in your run-through could have been **Phrasing**

You have formed your blueprint by reading the music, seeing the contours on the page, feeling the harmonic tensions and by singing the piece (either out loud or in your mind).

However, when you appraised your performance, the music might have been somewhat flat, or subject to the individual qualities of down bows and up bows ie down bow diminuendi and up bow crescendi.

Here are a couple of mechanisms for helping you to phrase more skilfully. Play more slowly than the desired tempo in order to make the passage more difficult. At this slower speed, make a conscious effort to do the musical shapes you have in mind. When you return to Tempo 1, the overarching shapes should be easier to portray.

Play the phrase more quickly than Tempo 1 in order to gain an overview of the passage. In this way, you can get a clearer understanding of the contours and the sense of flow. William Pleeth describes this process well in the chapter on “The Ingredients of Architecture” in his excellent book, *The Cello*.

Without a metronome, indulge yourself in exaggerating the ebb and flow and the dynamic range in the style of Puccini. Be daring, even self indulgent and test your expressive limits! By contrast, use a metronome in order to give your performance underlying strength. Work with the metronome in crotchets, then in minims, then in semibreves in order to allow breathing space, rubati and timing subtleties within a structured framework.

As I wrote at the beginning of this article, there is no one formula for tackling each problem, and what makes our lives, as practising musicians, so interesting, is the opportunity to be both disciplined and creative in our work.

I once had the opportunity to ask a top chef about his secrets of success. I’m always on the lookout for some cooking tips! He explained how 90% of a truly great meal is about using the very best ingredients. This encouraged me to think about our development as string players and how we can refine each “ingredient” so that when we bring them together we have the best chance of presenting delightful, exquisite, sumptuous music! What are the key ingredients of your playing which you might wish to refine: heel bow changes, suppleness in vibrato ?

At this point you’ve spent time thinking about what type of practice manoeuvre you’ll employ. It’s significant that most of the above has been about thought processes; only in point 2, were you playing your piece.

5. Apply this practice mechanism thoughtfully and patiently.

In brief, take your time and practise calmly. Don’t be like the terrier wrestling with a bone!

Remain poised and allow yourself a few seconds to think between repetitions so that you can give each effort your full concentration.

As a student, I remember the repeated screams of frustration from someone practising in the next door room to mine. One day the screams turned into whimpering as he broke both his foot and the wardrobe door!

By contrast, imagine the scientists in their laboratory, calmly assessing which experiments have worked and which not. Again, practice should be a thoughtful process, patiently testing various methods until we achieve a breakthrough.

6. Play again Having examined and practised individual components, it’s time re-assemble the phrase. Enjoy running the passage a couple of times.

7. Listen and re-assess.

Has your strategy for improving the chosen aspect worked?

8. If “No”, either continue with the same approach (you may have chosen a perfectly suitable practice technique, but it might just need more time), or devise another method. *As above, there are several ways of addressing a problem.*

If “Yes”, play the section again and identify a different aspect to be improved.

The above plan is certainly formulaic! I hope that, at the very least, it helps to itemise some of the processes of conscientious work in practice. Over time, it becomes less (dare I say) pedantic, as one area flows naturally into another.

However, it comes with a caveat: it represents only **a** way of working rather than **the** way.

There are valuable aspects of practising of which I haven’t spoken in this article: for example, warming up, learning from scale practice, a healthy attitude to the study book, sight reading and improvising.

My colleague Henk Guittart, RNCM International Tutor in Strings Performance and Pedagogy, recommends using a daily mix of: 1) revisiting old repertoire (for consolidation and reworking), 2) material which you are working on now, 3) new material (pieces of well-known music for your instrument which you haven’t touched yet, as well as music which you don’t know at all for sight reading and quick study practice).

Henning Kraggerud is a great advocate of improvising within practice time, believing it to be a great liberator of all creative processes.

He advocates “playing some songs which have meant something to you since childhood.

Try to let yourself be totally free for 10 minutes every day without trying anything other than just enjoying the moment, both physically and spiritually”.

In conclusion, I return to my observation at the start, that practising, rather than performing, occupies most of our time as musicians. In order to enjoy a lifelong love of playing, on our own and in ensembles, in private and in public, we’re best to have a happy relationship with practising. One can’t pretend that there’s no place for discipline, but with the right approaches, practice can be creative, fulfilling and even exhilarating!

Chris Hoyle