

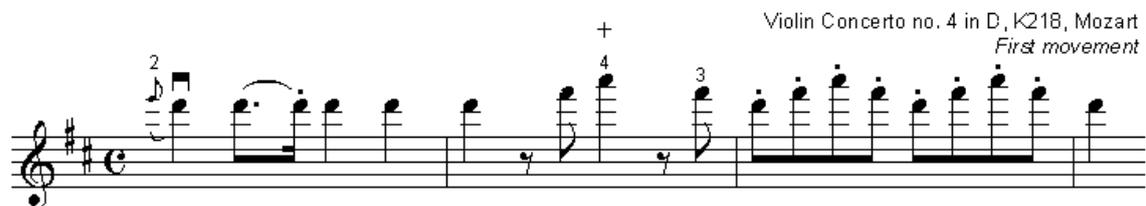
Mental rehearsal

Mental rehearsal techniques have been employed in sports training for decades. The top coaches in international football, tennis, athletics or any other sport emphasise training the mind just as much as any physical training. All the most successful performers in any field rehearse mentally whether they do it knowingly and deliberately or not. At times they may spend their every waking moment building, sculpting, refining and polishing their mental picture of the perfect outcome.

Mental rehearsal is not simply a matter of thinking 'positively'. Suppose I have a performance to give tomorrow for which I am not sufficiently prepared. There are many passages that I am not completely sure of; I do not know the score well; many notes remain out of tune; my memory is not reliable, and so on. 'Positive thinking' means saying to myself over and over again: 'It is going to go well, it is going to go well!' Unfortunately it may not go well at all (although it may go better than it would were I to be worked up about it).

Mental rehearsal means visualising exactly how you want to play the beginning, middle and end of each note, phrase, passage, movement, and entire work, musically and technically, as clearly as if you were watching yourself on film. The pictures need to be in great detail and include the musical drama and expression, tonal colours, precise physical motions, general ease of playing and physical calmness, a calm mental and emotional state, and so on.

The following example of mental rehearsal is concerned with technique, but the same process of building pictures of the ideal result can be applied to every aspect of a performer's work. For example, many performers find that building solid, vivid images of themselves relaxed and calm in the warm-up room as well as in the concert, or of the bow absolutely steady in the string without shaking, or of themselves returning home pleased with their performance, ensures a performance undisturbed by nerves.



Suppose that when you play the fourth finger D (marked '+') five things happen:

- 1 The finger feels tense.
- 2 Vibrato feels tense and tight.
- 3 The scroll of the violin shakes, disturbing the bow.
- 4 The bow arm feels awkward.
- 5 The stroke is uneven.

Without the instrument, picture yourself playing the down-bow A. Picture the fourth finger curved, relaxed, loose, light, contacting the string near the tip of the finger. The finger is vibrating freely, evenly and expressively, and the note is in tune with the open A, making the instrument ring. The left thumb is loose and free, the muscle of the base joint of the thumb soft to the touch, providing 'shock absorbers' which prevent the vibrato from shaking the scroll. The bow is perfectly smooth and even, the bow arm free and effortless, the shoulders relaxed and uninvolved, all the energy directed powerfully into the string.

Use size and colour: visualise the results you want in large images, in three dimensions, in colour, including as much detail as possible. If this process is interrupted by images of what you do not want (for example, the finger being tense), shrink them into tiny, flat, two-dimensional images, in black-and-white, and in blurred detail.

At first it may take a few seconds to assemble the picture. The more times you run it through your mind the easier and quicker the process becomes. Carry on until you can summon up the complete picture instantaneously. When you next come to play the note you will find that it has improved dramatically, and often far more than it might have improved had you physically practised it.

One way to achieve the picture is to imagine perfect playing in the future, and then to *do it now*. For example, the student plays a scale: the playing is a little too effortful, the left hand is not quite relaxed and the fingers a little uneven; some of the shifts are unreliable; the tone weakens as the student reaches the top of the scale, and so on.

The teacher asks the student: Suppose you were to practise scales every day for one hour, every day of the year, for the next five years. Suppose that throughout the five years you always practise intelligently and musically, always listening well, practising slow, medium and fast, in rhythms and accents, speeding up with the metronome, and so on. At the end of five years what would your scale playing be like?

The typical answer tends to be non-specific and lacking in detail: the student may say that after five years of good work the scale would be 'much better', or 'brilliant', etc. The teacher then asks many questions to help the student assemble a detailed, vivid, colourful, three-dimensional picture of playing the scale. To everything the student says, the teacher prompts the student to go deeper into a description of each aspect of the scale by asking: What do you mean? How do you mean exactly?

As soon as the teacher is satisfied that the student really has built a detailed picture of the scale (smooth; even; effortless; the hand and fingers relaxed and easy; every note in tune; a glowing, even tone that crescendos a little up to the top of the scale; the posture upright and confident, feet planted firmly on the floor like a tree with roots deep into the ground, and so on), then the question is: If you can see it so clearly, why not do it now rather than waiting five years?

The instantaneous improvement when the student then plays the scale can be so great as to seem like a different player, yet the whole process can take just a few minutes.

Mental rehearsal depends entirely on *knowledge*. That is why it is not possible for an elementary player simply to visualise playing the Brahms Concerto and then to be able to play it: an elementary player would not be able to visualise it in the first place. To say 'picture every note in tune' is not enough in itself unless the player has a vivid concept of the tuning and relationships of each note to each other note.

In mental rehearsal you tend to see in your mind's eye exactly the same strengths and weaknesses that exist in your actual playing. For example, if everything feels fine when you play a particular phrase, when you picture yourself playing the phrase you will picture it that way too. If you habitually become tense and tight when you play a particular note or phrase, you will see yourself tensing when you imagine playing the phrase. You may even find your hand and fingers tensing or making almost-invisible playing movements, although you are not even holding the instrument. This is because by picturing yourself playing you are directly accessing the very same 'computer program' that 'runs' your playing.

By changing the pictures in the 'computer program', you change the actual, physical playing. Changing the pictures in our mind is all that we are doing when we are practising with the instrument anyway.

The key point is that it is not enough simply *not* to think about, say, the bow shaking, with an approach of 'I am worried that my bow may shake, so I will try not to think about it at all'. Rather than not thinking about it, the answer is to build clear pictures of the result that you *would* like – the bow arm easy, responsive and calm; every bow stroke completely smooth and even, the bow carried by its own momentum, and so on.

If you cannot immediately visualise the ideal, and find negative images always coming back into your mind, you may simply need to work for a little longer at building the desired image. Since you cannot think two thoughts at the same time, holding the image of what you want (for example, the finger relaxed) automatically gets rid of the image of the undesired result (the finger tense). The same works in reverse: if you allow into your mind a picture of the undesired result (for example, a picture of yourself being very nervous) it means that you cannot at that moment hold in your mind a picture of the desired result (a picture of yourself being very calm).

For the best results in mental rehearsal you have to stay constantly on the lookout for the tiny little thoughts hidden at the back of your mind. Negative images must not simply be suppressed, but

completely eliminated by putting a positive picture in their place. It is all too easy to build large, detailed pictures of yourself playing with freedom and ease, for example, but at the same time to have other pictures, lurking unnoticed at the back of your mind, of yourself not being able to focus or not being on top of the playing. With the added excitement of a performance, these negative images can suddenly rise up and overflow, like a river bursting its banks, and cause distractions.

Negative images also easily take root in the beginning stages of learning a piece, when naturally lots of things may go wrong. A typical example of the process is as follows:

- 1 You play a shift. The shifting finger is too heavy, you arrive on the note too flat and with the hand feeling tight.
- 2 You think: 'Oh, the shift is too heavy – the finger is sticking – I must practise it.' Obviously, in thinking this you hold an image of the too-heavy finger in your mind.
- 3 Although you may for an instant see in your mind's eye a picture of the finger being light and accurate, you keep a clearer image of the too-heavy finger at the front of your mind. The picture of what you actually want remains dim and foggy at the back of your mind.
- 4 You repeat the shift over and over again, with the image of arriving too flat and with a tight hand clearly at the front of your mind. Every time the same result occurs: the finger is too heavy and arrives too flat.

Instead, the moment you realise that the shift is too heavy, form a clear picture in your mind of the finger being lighter. Better still, simply picture the musical phrase and its expression, and play 'note–note' not 'note–shift–note'. Keep this image at the front of your mind as you practise the shift.

Mental rehearsal is an excellent way to improve memory. It is very helpful to 'play' through mentally to discover exactly which notes or phrases are strong, vague or blank. Picture the printed music in detail with all the bowings, fingerings and other markings; 'hear' the violin tone; 'feel' the instrument and bow in your hands and under your chin. If you get lost or cannot remember a note, look at the music or play the phrase on the violin, and then go back over it again mentally.

'Practice' does not have to mean putting the bow on the string. If you mentally rehearse in a focused and constructive way for three hours while sitting in the park, you can tell yourself afterwards that you have done three hours' work.¹

¹ How much should you practise? Dorothy DeLay's advice to college-level students was to do six to seven hours work each day. But this did not necessarily mean actually playing the violin. For example, if you spent three hours of bow-on-string practice, and one hour listening to recordings of the pieces you are studying, and one hour looking at the score of the sonata or concerto, and another hour spent listening to a recital, and half-an-hour reading about something violinistic or musical, this adds up to 6½ hours work.