

BASICS

Repetition practice

In sports training, the term 'grooving' means to repeat a new action many times, like wearing a groove into a surface by constant rubbing, until it becomes an unconscious habit. In the same way, muscle memory is quickly ingrained in practice when you focus on a very small area, often much faster than when attention is spread over a larger section or movement.

- Repeat a note or phrase many times, up to tempo, so that both the left hand and the bow arm have time to learn the feel of the notes.
- Listening carefully, with each repetition correct what you are doing with each hand so that you get nearer and nearer to the goal of 'pitch-sound-rhythm-ease', i.e. every note in tune, every note expressively and tonally as desired, every note exactly and musically in time, and every note played without tension or effort.

Repetition practice is powerful, so it can also be the most dangerous. You have to be very aware of what you want, and what you want to avoid, and listen very carefully, so that you avoid strengthening mistakes. It is said that the old adage 'Practice makes perfect' should really be: 'Only perfect practice makes perfect; bad practice makes worse!'

Example 1

Violin Concerto no. 23 in G, Viotti
+ 4
First movement

Search for the perfect expression, and the greatest ease and balance in the finger, in the fourth finger D:

Example 2

Violin Concerto in G minor, op. 12 no. 1, Vivaldi
First movement

The syncopated bowing creates a feeling of expressive leaning on the E^b. Practise with a slight stress:

Example 3

Sonatina in D, op. 137 no. 1, Schubert
+ 3
First movement

Practise moving expressively from the E to the E[#]. It is not a change of position, so be careful to move only the finger, not the hand:

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Move only the finger

3 3 3 3

Espressivo

Repeat several times

2 3

Violin Concerto no. 4 in D, K218, Mozart
First movement

Example 4

It is often helpful if you find ways of ‘going round in circles’:

Espressivo

24 Etudes and Caprices, op. 35, Dont
No. 13

1 3 1

p

Example 5

The process of practising is often one of breaking down larger tasks into smaller ‘sub-tasks’, and then refining them in some way before putting them back together again:

etc. etc.

Performing a short phrase

Repeating a short phrase many times is not only a good way to get something right technically. Once you can already play something, repeating a phrase many times as if in the full heat of performance is where a different level of practice begins. This is one of the most valuable (and generally most neglected) practice methods of all.

- Play a short phrase over and over again many times with the same fire, intensity, commitment, involvement, passion, drama and expression as if you were in the middle of a performance.
- With each repetition ask yourself if this is exactly how you want the phrase (or group of notes, or short passage) to sound. Is this exactly the expression, colour or atmosphere that you want to create? If you were in the middle of a concert performance, is this exactly what you would want the audience to hear and feel when you play this phrase? If your playing was recorded, and later somebody switched the recording on at this precise point, is this exactly what you would want them to hear?

Continue sculpting and polishing the phrase until there is no difference between your inner vision of the music (which includes physical freedom, balance and lack of effort), and your actual playing. Then do the same work on longer phrases, and then whole sections.