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# BASICS

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## Mental rehearsal

I never hit a shot, even in practice, without having a very sharp, in-focus picture of it in my head. It's like a color movie. First I 'see' the ball where I want it to finish, nice and white and sitting up high on the bright green grass. Then the scene quickly changes, and I 'see' the ball going there: its path, trajectory, and shape, even its behaviour on landing. Then there's a sort of fade-out, and the next scene shows me making the kind of swing that will turn the previous images into reality. Only at the end of this short, private Hollywood spectacular do I select a club and step up to the ball.

Golfer Jack Nicklaus

Performers in a wide range of different occupations use deliberate, conscious, mental rehearsal. Mental rehearsal uses exactly the same simple mental picturing that we all do naturally from moment to moment in normal daily life, but in mental rehearsal you do it deliberately and consciously. You construct complex and detailed inner pictures, methodically building, crafting and shaping them as precisely as if you were building something brick by brick in the material world. It is just like going off into a day-dream, but one where you are entirely in control of the images: you build pictures of the perfect result, the perfect outcome, in minute detail, including and excluding whatever you like.

Mental rehearsal is not simply a matter of thinking 'positively'. Suppose you have a performance to give tomorrow for which you are not sufficiently prepared. 'Positive thinking' means saying to yourself 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 you to be worked up about it).

Instead, mental rehearsal means to picture yourself playing note by note, finger by finger, bow stroke by bow stroke. In the beginning of visualising playing something, you may keep getting stuck. You may be able to play, mentally, only a few notes at a time, before hesitating, or before finding a phrase - or a bowing or fingering - that is completely blank in your mind.

This is the quickest way to discover the areas you need to strengthen the most. Once you can visualise an entire piece note by note, without hesitation, you never worry about your memory anymore when playing the piece. It is in the places in your mental rehearsal where you hesitate, wondering what the next notes, bowings or fingerings are, where you are most likely to have memory slips.

### Accessing the inner program

Much mental rehearsal can be spent correcting problems which have consistently occurred each time you put bow to string in the past. It is striking how, when you visualise yourself playing a note that typically feels tense whenever you play it on the violin, your finger or hand tenses up in exactly the same way when you picture it without the violin.

The benefits of visualising yourself playing that note with a relaxed hand or finger are obvious, since when you are mentally picturing yourself playing you are accessing the same 'data-bank' or 'program' that drives your playing when the actual violin is under your chin.

Changing the 'program' through mental rehearsal is exactly the same as changing it through practising.

When you are practising you run a series of pictures through your mind as you play, and it is the changing of those pictures that changes the way you play; but accessing the 'inner operating system' through mental rehearsal goes straight to the heart of the matter with the most amazing ease and speed compared to the experience of actually playing.

You quickly discover, in trying to visualise the emotional or dramatic content of each phrase, the places where you have not yet got far in really understanding the music, or really-and-truly knowing what - and how exactly - you want to play.

When you return to practising with the actual instrument, you may be astonished at how improved it is. You can feel as warmed-up and technically secure as if you had already been playing all day, even if you have not touched the instrument. Your memory will be infinitely more secure. Where you had visualised your hand feeling freer, it will feel freer when you now play the phrase on the violin.

Once a player has discovered the power, ease and effectiveness of mental rehearsal, they may start to spend every available free moment running their piece through their mind, when working up towards a performance. Their available 'practice time' each day therefore suddenly increases by many hours.

### Conquering nerves

The German violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter has said that she has never experienced stage-fright. What this must mean is that she holds no images in her mind of self-doubt or fear of any sort at all, and therefore her autonomic nervous system does not produce the symptoms of 'flight or fight'. Her mind must be 'broadcasting' non-stop images of the desired result in all respects of the performance. There is no room left

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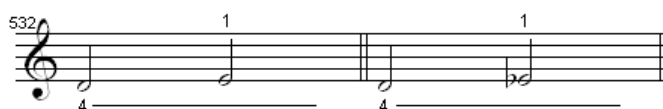
in her mind for negative, distracting and energy-consuming thoughts that then detract from the playing, or spoil it.

If you do suffer from stage-fright, or from the fear of suffering from it, mental rehearsal is the water that can quickly put the flames out. Suppose in everyday playing your bow is always smooth and even, and you are worried that it may shake in performance: picture yourself in the performance situation and see the bow being absolutely steady, smooth and comfortable; picture the shoulder and arm balanced and free of tension or obstruction, and so on.

If you build these pictures in enough detail, and for long enough, until you are able to summon them up all in one go and can have all the detail in your mind in an instant – and if you fill your mind with these pictures to the extent that you ‘crowd out’ all other thoughts – then these results will be the ones you get.

## Seeing what you want

Without the violin, imagine playing fourth finger D on the G string, and holding it down while playing first finger E on the D string. Then imagine the same, but this time an E<sup>b</sup>. There is a slight degree of pulling the first finger back to play the E<sup>b</sup>, compared to playing the E<sup>n</sup>.



- Wait! In your picture of pulling the first finger back to play the E<sup>b</sup>, did you picture the finger feeling tense in the base joint?
- Stop! Replace the picture of the tense finger with a picture of it being utterly free and effortless in the base joint.

You may be amazed at how much freer it feels when you next come to play it.

Exactly the same applies to vibrato, trilling, shifting, tone production, and anything else you can think of in violin playing. Whatever result you are getting in your playing is always matched by a mental picture of it. Think about your playing, and that picture is the one you will see. Change that picture, and the result changes with it. Therefore ‘practice’ does not have to include putting the bow on the string. If you mentally rehearse in a focused and constructive way for three hours while sitting in the park, and actually practise the violin for one hour, you can tell yourself afterwards that you have done four hours’ work.

## Filling your mind with the perfect result

When something is not working, or there is something you want to improve, the trap to avoid is that you fill most of your consciousness with what is actually happening – i.e. you fill your mind with pictures of the problem or difficulty – but give only a fraction of your consciousness to the picture of the better result that you would like.

It should be the other way round, so that you focus most of your attention on the inner picture of the perfect musical (or technical) result you are after. You do not need much of your available consciousness ‘left over’ to be keenly aware of everything that is actually happening.

## You already rehearse mentally

It is not a question of *beginning* to mentally rehearse: you are doing it all the time anyway. Every time you think of an approaching performance – that concert, examination or audition coming up – you hold a picture of it in your mind. For an instant, or for several seconds at a time, but on many occasions over and over again, you imagine yourself in performance.

The question is: what are the images that you are returning to over and over again? Are they images of an outcome you want, or images of what you do not want?

When you think of yourself being anxious, or worry about losing your memory, or worry about the audience’s reaction, or think of that shift you might miss at the bottom of the second page, or of that place near the end of the piece where your hand feels so tight, you hold a picture of each of these things in your mind.

It is easy to gain control of each of these moments of natural mental rehearsal. You simply say ‘no’ to the images that you do not want, and you do not allow them into your mind. At the same time you construct better ones – of freedom, enjoyment, flow, ease and confidence.