

# Finding the next step to take

- If you are practising, how can you be certain of making the fastest possible progress?
- If you are teaching, how can you be certain of your students making the fastest possible progress?

## The three-stage process

When someone stands in front of you and plays the violin, a huge amount of information floods towards you: aural, visual, physical, musical, technical, emotional, intellectual, and so on. It is similar when you are practising: there is a lot going on and you are right in the middle of it all.

There is always one question to ask: what is the single most important next step for your student, or yourself, to take next? Then, what is the second most important next step to take, and so on.

Teaching or practising, there is a simple three-stage process to follow:

- 1 The first thing is to notice everything. You have to hear, see, and sense everything that is happening in the playing – every detail of technique, musical expression, posture and so on – without missing a thing.
- 2 Then, from the mass of information received, you have to make a list of each musical, technical or other point that could be improved or helped in some way.
- 3 Then you have to sort that list into the right order of importance. Of all the things that could be improved or helped in some way, what is the most important thing to improve right now? What is the second most important thing?

The fastest progress comes when you isolate and improve the most important point, and perhaps also the second and third most important points.

Then, once progress has been made in those areas, so that now they are no longer the most important, they fall away and other areas take their place at the top of the list.

The challenge is to get the list into the right order. If you work hard on steps eight, nine and ten, instead of concentrating on steps one, two and three, progress may be slower than it could be.

The list may never be absolutely complete; and there is often more than one best possible order, and more than one best way to work. However, the more complete the list, and the better the judgement in deciding what is more important and what is less important, the faster the progress.

## Noticing everything

If you do not notice details of posture, technique, musicianship and so on, crucial items may not even get on the list, never mind in the right order of importance. If we are not to miss anything, it means we have to be completely free of any type of 'blind spot'.

A formal word meaning 'blind spot' is 'scotoma'. A dictionary definition might be 'an area within the total field of vision in which your vision is weaker or completely absent'. In psychology, the term means a mental blind spot, an inability to see or understand certain matters.

If you do not know about details of technique and so on, important subjects may again be missed off the list entirely. Although the facts are there straight in front of you, you do not perceive them because you do not know what to look for, or know what they look like.

Therefore, the first thing is to make sure that there are no blank areas in your knowledge of the subject. Constantly add to your understanding of music and violin playing, in every way you can, by reading about players and teachers, studying technique books by Carl Flesch, Ivan

Galamian, Demetrius Dounis *et al*, violin in hand; by going to concerts, listening to recordings, watching DVDs, and so on.

One problem is that when we look intently in one direction, it is like using a small flashlight in a dark room. You point it one way, and everything in that area is lit up, but everywhere else is dark. You point the flashlight in another direction. Now the area that you could see a moment ago is dark, and a new area is lit up. For example, you may not notice some intonation questions because all your attention is on (say) whether you are bowing near enough to the bridge.

After I had finished studying I sometimes went to New York for a few days to observe Dorothy DeLay teaching at the Juilliard School. In one of the brief chats we would often have between lessons, she asked me what I thought about a fault in the previous student's bow hold. I confessed that I had not particularly noticed the bow hold.

"You didn't notice THAT?!" she said, making her hand into the shape the student's hand had been in.

It was an embarrassing moment. I made a quick mental note to at least *try* never to be caught out like that again.

## Knowing where to put the X

Spotting problems and solutions in violin playing is all about 'knowing where to put the X'. The following is an illustration borrowed from a business management training programme by Brian Tracy:

There was once a nuclear power station that had developed a fault. The power output was slightly below normal but none of the plant's engineers could locate the source of the fault. So they called in a specialist.

The specialist, a man in a white coat with a clipboard, wandered around taking notes. The control room contained a host of dials and meters and readout displays, all connected to equipment located around the plant. After a couple of hours the specialist took a piece of chalk out of his pocket and marked a large 'X' on one of the readout displays.

'Replace the unit linked to that display,' he told the management, 'and it will fix the problem.'

They did as he suggested, and immediately the power output returned to 100%.

A few days later the manager of the plant received the bill from the specialist, who was asking for a fee of \$10,000.

Now although this was a multi-million dollar plant, it was the manager's job to keep down expenses. So he wrote back to the specialist thanking him for his work, but saying that \$10,000 seemed a very high amount to charge considering he had been at the plant for only two hours. Would he please itemize his bill?

Some days later a new bill arrived from the specialist, and this time he had broken it into two parts. For time spent on the premises: \$100. For knowing where to put the X: \$9,900.

Around the time when I first heard this story I was scanning quickly through an article about cello playing in a strings magazine when a particular paragraph caught my eye. The writer said that if you do such-and-such with somebody's technique, you will cause problems which may take years to fix.

It is difficult not to think: yes, if you don't know where to put the 'X', it probably would take years to fix. But if you do know where to put the 'X' wouldn't it take weeks, days or even minutes to fix?

## Aural blind spots

You can also have aural blind spots, or 'deaf spots', where you do not hear sounds that are right next to you and around you. Notes that are out of tune, bulges, scratches and squeaks, acoustic beats, and lack of colour contrast are typical areas that can go unnoticed.

Many players do not notice the scraping sound of the wood of the bow touching the string. This happens when the bow is tilted over too far in the direction of the fingerboard, which causes any downward pressure to result in the wood 'bowing' the string alongside the hair.

Check the wood of the bow, underneath at the middle, to see if it is covered in scratches from contact with the string. It is a sobering thought when you consider that at the time of their creation, each of these marks made a scraping sound which was part of the tone but which perhaps you did not notice at the time.

## The most common technical areas to check

One solution to the problem of blind spots is simply to keep checking everything anyway, just in case you can find something to adjust, even if at first you think that it is okay. You have to keep an eye on everything all at the same time.

Yfrah Neaman used to say that the sweep of your attention must be like radar, which scans the entire 360° range all the time without leaving gaps through which an enemy could slip undetected. In the same way your awareness must in one instant be on sound, in the next instant on intonation, in the next on the left hand, right hand, arms, fingers, vibrato, expression, phrasing, and so on, and all this within the space of a single second or less.

Here is a list of some of the most common technical areas that should be checked regularly to make sure that they are in good working order. Check and re-check these areas, constantly experimenting with slight, subtle adjustments and noting the different results that you get:

### General

- Feet positioned well to provide a strong base and overall balance, with a feeling of the weight of the body going down into the floor through the feet.
- Not gripping the violin hard between the chin and the collar bone
- Violin held up so that the strings are close to horizontal – sometimes slightly above, sometimes slightly below the level position
- Scroll pointing more to the left for longer arms; more towards the centre for shorter arms
- Chin more to the left of the tail-piece for longer arms; closer to the tail piece (or directly above) for shorter arms
- Violin tilted midway between too flat and too tilted
- Keeping the shoulders free
- Lengthening the back
- Understanding how the head balances on top of the spine

### Left hand

- Thumb not squeezing backwards or pressing against the neck
- Finger pressure on the string usually as light as possible
- Using the correct fingertip placement to create a comfortable hand shape
- Fourth finger base joint not sticking out
- Fingers moving from the base joints freely, without partly moving from the hand or forearm
- In low positions, using the side of the first finger to orientate the hand against the neck
- Fingers staying in the same shape, on or off the string, during simple up-and-down movements
- The shape of the fingers changing from square to extended
- Wrist not pushing out as the third or fourth fingers descend onto the string

- Fingers widening at the base joints, rather than squeezing sideways together
- Hand often based more on the upper finger, with the lower fingers reaching back, rather than always based on the lower finger with the upper fingers stretching forwards
- Angle of left knuckle joints neither too parallel to the neck nor too steep
- Fingers staying close enough to the strings
- Perfect co-ordination, the left fingers always leading the bow
- Vibrato not too wide or slow
- Vibrato pitch throbbing up to the in-tune note, not going above it
- Only one active movement in the vibrato: forward, to the in-tune note
- The vibrating finger going slightly more heavily into the string on the forward motion and releasing on the backward motion, rather than having an equal weight during the forwards and backwards vibrato movement
- Changing fingertip placement for different colours of vibrato
- The elbow more to the left on the E string, more to the right on the G string
- Knowing which finger to shift with, and how to use intermediate notes to help measure the shift
- The development of the trill

### Right hand

- Understanding the bow hand and bow arm (and left hand) in terms of balances and levers
- The role of each finger on the bow
- The hand soft, with every joint flexible and acting as a 'shock-absorber'
- Thumb placed not on the pad but on the tip
- Thumb curving out, not bent inwards
- First finger not too close to the second finger
- Second finger positioned opposite the thumb so that when the hand leans into the bow it can exert leverage
- Knuckles not sticking up
- Understanding the principles of tone production: balances of speed, pressure and distance from the bridge
- Seamless connections between strokes
- Playing down into the springiness of the wood of the bow, not just horizontally along the string
- The feeling of playing into the string at the heel (where the hair gives) in contrast to playing into the string at the point (where the hair is rigid and the wood gives in the middle of the bow)
- Sustaining the bow evenly as you move from one area of the bow to another
- Understanding what it means to bow 'from the lower back' rather than trying just to move the arm
- Including forearm rotation as an intrinsic part of bowing, not just a part of string crossing

### The higher the standard the less obvious the next step

The higher the standard of playing, the more of a challenge it becomes to identify the next step. I often think of a concert I went to as a student at the Aspen Music Festival, in which a very good Russian violinist called Mark played the Strauss Sonata. Dorothy DeLay, Mark's teacher, was there too. Afterwards, chatting with her about the concert, she asked:

“What do you think is the most important next step for Mark to take right now, as a musician or as a violinist?”

I did not know what to say. Mark had a fabulous technique and had given a superb performance: it had been effortless playing, and really without technical blemish. Besides, it was the sort of convincing musical performance where you forget about technique because you are so involved in the music.

What was the next step for him to take? I felt so positive about the performance I could think of nothing whatsoever that could be better. So I felt relieved when Miss DeLay, seeing me pause, said that it had taken her the last three months, hearing Mark regularly each week, to work out what the most important next step was for him to take; but now, she said, finally she was sure that at last she had got it.

What was she going to say? I was fascinated to know what had taken her three whole months to decide. She was just about to continue and tell me, when someone approached us and interrupted the conversation. Unfortunately, the subject never arose again, and I never found out the answer.

Conversely, the lower the standard the bigger and more obvious the problems become. The great Catalan cellist Pablo Casals once taught an amateur cello student who was not very good. A friend of his asked him: “Pablo, why do you teach this man? You can teach the best talents and musicians in the world – why him?”

Casals answered: “Because from him I learn how to teach the good ones!”