Some thoughts on practising

Self-teaching

The art of good practising is the art of self-teaching. It is not possible to teach anybody to play the violin in one or two hours of lesson-time each week, but if the student practises enough they can teach themselves how to play. Therefore one of the best uses of lesson time must be in teaching the student *how to practise*.

To be effective teachers, first we have to see, hear and sense *everything* about the student's playing. Then we have to analyse the mass of information we receive so that each aspect can be placed in order of importance. We offer the student the fastest possible progress when we identify the single most important thing that they need to fix/change/re-think, and maybe also the second and third most important thing. Anything else is simply not so important. If we have blindspots – if we don't notice details of posture, technique, musicianship – and/or if we arrive at the wrong conclusion as to what is most important – we may get slow results.

Similarly in our practising, if we want the fastest possible results in the shortest possible time we have to pinpoint exactly what is the most important thing to do next. Never mind about steps 9, 10 and 11. If we have any blindspots while practising, if we don't listen well or notice different musical or technical points, progress may be slow or problems may even get worse.

None of us can be successful teachers just by being personally brilliant, informed, experienced etc. The only way we become successful is by bringing success to our students. So everything about teaching is a matter of problem-*solving*, not problem identification, and the same applies to practising.

As important as wheels on a car, good practice depends on self-discipline. Self-discipline has been defined as the ability to make yourself do what you should do, when you should do it, whether you feel like it or not. The key words are 'feel like it, or not'. Anybody can do something if they feel like it, if it feels good, if it's fun and enjoyable. It's when you don't feel like doing it, when it's hard, when you're tired – and you do it anyway because there are rewards you want to reap in the future – that you really start to achieve things.

Results, not process

The most important thing is always to go for *results, not process*. This means that you must have the clearest, most detailed image of the exact musical result you want to achieve (and often the physical actions that create it as well). A vague idea is not enough – the end result you want must be as vivid in your mind as your actual playing.

The bigger the gap between the vision and the reality of the playing, the more our creative genius is stirred into action to bridge it, to make the two pictures as near to identical as possible. But that creativity doesn't start without a sharp awareness of the difference between what we really want and how things actually are. The clearer our musical wish, and the harder we listen, the faster we achieve what we are after.

Severe gaps between our ideal picture and reality can be painful. The only thing to do is to work with *an intensity of purpose* so that every phrase resembles ever more closely the inner vision. If we want to get the best out of ourselves, we have to avoid reducing the gap by other means. Making any sort of excuse spells the instant death of inspiration because the excuse takes the place of the vision.

One easy way to eliminate the gap is simply to not listen, or to listen selectively. (Becoming an expert practiser is only a short step away from becoming an expert listener.) Another way to reduce the gap is to set the standard in the vision very low. For example, we can't play something so we say to ourselves, 'well, the accompaniment is loud in that bar so the intonation probably won't be heard anyway', or 'well, how many people can *really* play this passage perfectly – not many, so it doesn't matter if I can't', or 'well, only a few people in the audience would notice if it was wrong anyway', and so on.

Planning

Practice which is planned in advance can be *hundreds of percent* more productive than practising at random. Sporadic bursts of odd bits of inspired practice, in between much longer periods of procrastination, disorganisation and soul-searching, is not the mark of 'artistic temperament'. This is really just another excuse. The fact is that when we work within a structure we can be far *more* brilliant and inspired.

Before starting, decide how long you are going to practise in total. Then decide how many minutes you will give each part of your practice – exercises, scales, studies and pieces. Then plan what you will do in each category. Planning your practice of a piece, write down a list of all the key areas you want to work on (an area can be one or two notes, a phrase or a whole passage). The more detail you go into the better, so using short phrases write down exactly what needs improvement: is it left or right hand; is it a question of pitch, sound or rhythm; co-ordination; type of stroke; type of vibrato, etc. Decide also *how* you want to practise to achieve the result you are after, for example 'top of page 2, rhythm practice, fifteen minutes'. You can always change your mind later about what and how to practise, but the important thing is always to be making decisions in the first place.

Of course you can do all this without pen and paper if the results are the same, but many players find that once they have experienced planning practice on paper they wonder why they haven't done it all their lives.

As part of our approach to planning, it is important to remember that whoever we are and whatever we do, be it music or anything else, we will be excellent at some aspects of our work, good at some aspects, mediocre at some and downright poor at some. If we want to develop either our playing in general or our playing of a particular piece, it is a mistake only to concentrate on the areas we are already excellent at; and trying to make the poor areas excellent can be psychologically too daunting. But it is always pretty easy to make the good areas excellent, and to make the mediocre areas good; and it is always possible to make the downright poor areas at least mediocre. This is the fastest, as well as the most comfortable, way to move ahead in our work.

The four stages of learning

1 Unconscious incompetence
2 Conscious incompetence
3 Conscious competence
4 Unconscious competence

In sports training the term 'grooving' is sometimes used to describe the process of repetition whereby a new action is repeated again and again, like wearing a groove into a surface by constant rubbing, until it becomes unconscious habit. Reaching only Stage 3 in the preparation of a piece is the reason why things can unexpectedly go wrong in performance. ("I don't know what happened. You should have heard me play it yesterday.") When we are under pressure it can be difficult to think fast, or sometimes even to think clearly at all, and passages which before had just about worked OK may easily fall apart.

There is also a fifth stage of learning: reaching the point where you can teach it to someone else.

Some of the chief technical/physical goals

It is often said that 'habits are easy to make and hard to break'. If that is so, then don't try to break habits – just form new ones! Like the choreography of a dance, which plans each movement in minute detail, all the actions in playing must be *designed.* For example, some of the questions about sound to ask constantly are:

1) exactly where in the bow does the stroke begin, 2) where does it end, 3) how close to the bridge (does it stay the same distance away during the whole stroke, or should it move closer to, or further from, the bridge), 4) how fast is the stroke (is it even, or fast-slow, slow-fast, slow-fast-slow or fast-slow-fast), 5) how much pressure (is it even, or heavy-light, light-heavy, light-heavy-light or heavy-light-heavy), 6) how much hair?

Examples of key left hand areas are: general relaxation of the thumb and minimum finger pressure; the different shapes of the hand and fingers in different positions and on different strings; when to keep fingers down on the strings and when to lift them; the speed of the finger movement (as opposed to the speed of the passage); co-ordination; finger preparation; shifting mechanisms – which finger to shift with, which bow to shift on, practising intermediate notes; speed and width of the vibrato, and which part of the fingertip; unceasing attention to intonation – memorising the *feel* of the hand and finger on each note, checking open string notes with the open strings, thinking in intervals and keys, relating ♯'s and ♭'s to the naturals above or below them, etc.

What to practise

The main categories of daily practice are exercises, scales, studies and pieces.

Exercises and scales

Technical exercises save infinitely more time than they take to practise. Just a few short sessions each week, on a regular basis, can bring very fast results which improves all of your playing. If, say, you regularly spend a little time playing shifting, intonation or tone production exercises, all of your playing gains in security and confidence, and it then takes far less time to master any particular passage.

It is always better to approach things from a variety of angles, since you can easily lose interest if you go over the same ground again and again, so vary the material. Build a library of technical books by a variety of composers/teachers/players, sometimes using one, sometimes another.

You never have to practise these books in order, from cover to cover front to back. It is much better to choose whatever looks relevant or interesting at the time. The essential thing is to keep a record of everything you practise. Tick every section, line or bar you work on. A tick does not have to mean that it is 'perfect', only that you have looked at it and taken a few steps forward.

Unless you mark what you have practised you can't skip around out of sequence without losing track of what you have already done. Motivation to practise can burst like a bubble when you get that lost feeling of 'there is oceans of this stuff – I know I've done odd bits of it before, but I don't know what – I'll have to start from the beginning again'. Using ticks, you can start and finish wherever you like, and can leave it for weeks or months and still come back to it knowing exactly where you are. It is also a real motivation-builder to watch your ticks building up over a period of time.

Rotation of different material is also important when it comes to scales. Again, tick everything you play. Use a variety of scale books. They should be practised with all sorts of different fingerings, on single strings, across the strings in one position starting on each finger, using the whole range of octaves, and in different bowing and rhythm patterns.

Studies and pieces

Some of the chief goals are: realisation of each musical idea, maximum result with minimum effort, intonation, sound, rhythm, dynamics, phrasing, timing, structure, and bowing and fingering decisions.

Studies offer a simple, step-by-step way to improve technique, often concentrating on one aspect of playing at a time. It is important to decide which studies to polish and which to stop practising before they are really polished. In many cases the fastest progress comes from simply doing *enough* work on a particular study to take a few steps forward, before quickly moving on to the next.

The law of diminishing returns applies here, as it does in learning pieces. Suppose you practise, for an hour, a study or piece that is entirely new to you. It is hardly surprising if in that time you improve it by hundreds of percent. But carry on every day, and after a few weeks try improving it by hundreds of percent in just one hour. By then you may be down to one or two percent improvement in any one practice period. So move on quickly. Try to keep all of your work at the stage of peak return for your efforts, unless of course you have a performance coming up, when every extra per cent counts.

You can always return to a study or piece in the future, when you will find that it has improved in the meantime anyway. Working afresh on studies you have learnt before is another useful part of the week's work, and you can gain more and more from them each time.

Galamian described three aspects of practising pieces: building time, interpreting time and performing time. Building time is all the work of taking passages apart, playing slowly, playing in rhythms, gradually speeding a passage up with the metronome, and so on. Interpreting time is the work on structure, phrasing, dynamics, shaping, expression and so on. Performance time, in which you play through as if in concert, is an essential element of daily practice, often missed out because of the player always feeling that the piece should be practised a bit more first.

Another part of daily practice is the relearning of old repertoire. Rather than having a repertoire of pieces that you once played, though you can't quite remember what or when, continually relearn everything on a rotating basis – piece number one in week number one, piece number two in week number two, and so on until covering all of them. Then go back to the first piece and cycle through again. Practise one or two passages for a few minutes if you like, but basically just play through, enjoy and get the feel of it. Do this with concertos, sonatas, short pieces, everything important that you have learnt.

A couple of hours like this each week soon adds up, and over just a couple of months you may be able to rotate your repertoire several times. The feeling of being at home with a whole repertoire as opposed to just one piece gives you tremendous confidence, and of course regular practice of such a wide variety of already-familiar music greatly improves your overall command as a musician and instrumentalist.

Methods of practice

It is always helpful to know many different ways to practise. If you only practise a passage in one or two ways, you may make a lot of progress in the beginning but then find the rate of improvement decreasing, and not reach the level you want quickly enough. Using many different practice methods enables you to look at the same problem from many angles, and each method improves all the others at the same time.

Space does not permit a fuller list, but some typical practice methods are:

- Take a small phrase and repeat it over and over again *as for performance* – i.e. up to tempo, with full dynamics and full expression.
- Play through from beginning to end slightly under tempo.
- Practise in rhythms and with accents.
- Play very slowly to sort out technical problems – it gives you time to think.
- Fast passages: play with the metronome, starting very slowly and gradually speeding up. Also play in groups of four or eight notes, learning how to play each group with one mental command rather than one command for each note.

- Fast runs: play the first note, then the first two notes, then the first three, and so on to the end. Also work backwards starting with the last note, then the penultimate note, and so on.
- Also practice fast passages at performance tempo even if you can't play them yet. 'You can't run before you can walk' may be true, but practising at the speed you want to end up at is actually one of the best ways of getting there.
- Play separate-note passages slurred, to ensure a legato left hand. Play slurred notes with separate bows, to strengthen clarity.
- Identify which notes in a passage are 'dropping out', i.e. being played more softly or shorter than the surrounding notes. Play these notes with an accent, making them longer and louder than the surrounding notes.
- Check all open string notes with the open strings.
- Play the same group of notes in different positions to check intonation.
- Play very slowly, exaggerating musical expression.
- Play through using very little bow, then more and more, in all parts of the bow.

Mental rehearsal

Practice is nothing to do with training muscles. The muscles are always innocent, simply carrying out instructions from the brain. Playing is literally 'all in the mind'. This is easily illustrated by the following: suppose you sight-read through a piece, making many mistakes of intonation, sound, rhythm and so on. Then you practise it for two hours, after which you can play it fluently. What has changed? Physically you have not changed at all. It is not like working out in a gym for a month, after which the muscles you have trained are now physically different. All that has changed is that your mental picture, of what and how to play, has now taken shape.

In essence, mental rehearsal is a matter of visualising *in detail* exactly how you want to play. Incidentally this is also the ultimate cure for nervousness. When we are nervous we picture vividly what we *don't* want to happen. Many players only make an effort *not* to think of horror images of their coming performance, but this is nowhere near enough. You have to replace the negative images with the clearest, most precise and detailed images of what you *do* want to happen. These include the musical design, right down to the beginning, middle and end of each note and phrase, as well as the physical actions that produce them - like watching an internal movie.

The fascinating thing about mental rehearsal is that you see in your mind's eye exactly the same difficulties (or lack of them) as happen in your actual playing – for example, if you suffer from tension when you play, you will see yourself tense when you imagine playing. This is because you are accessing directly the very same 'computer program' that 'runs' your playing. By changing the images in your mind, next time you pick up the instrument you will find your playing has changed too. This can produce the most dramatic results.

Therefore practise on trains, in the bath, in bed – at every opportunity. The bottom line is that there is no actual difference between this and real practice, except that it is far less exhausting and a quicker process than playing.

How long to practise

You can achieve anything you want, you can set your sights as high as you like, so long as you are prepared to pay the price, i.e. all the blood, sweat and tears, sacrifice, dedication, discipline and general hours of hard work that it takes. The higher you aim, the higher the price. Dorothy DeLay said recently that whenever a student says to her "Miss DeLay, it's so difficult" (i.e. a piece or a passage), she replies: "It's not *difficult*, sweetie, it's *time-consuming*!"

It is said that 'the amateur practises until it goes right; the professional practises until *it can't go wrong*'. Success only comes after intense preparation. We must never be put off course by the occasional exceptions who seem to get far without apparent effort. Neither does success come

instantly as a result of one or two factors or efforts: we need to build up, over a period of time, enough very small ‘successes’, moving inch by inch in the direction we want to go in.

Studies in concentration skills show that concentration is at a peak at the beginning of a learning session, and again just before the end, with a big dip in the middle. This means that if you practise for one hour without a break, you have two periods of peak concentration. If you divide that hour into two half-hours, with a short break in between, you will have four periods of peak concentration.

Everybody must work in the way that suits them best. If you prefer to do all your practice pretty well in one shot, i.e. it takes you about five hours to practise for four hours, then that is what you should do, bearing in mind the importance of taking regular short breaks. If you are more the Milstein type, i.e. a little bit in the morning, a little bit in the afternoon, a little bit in the evening and a little bit before you go to bed, then that could be the best for you.

How long should a particular practice method be employed, given that most of us do not have endless spare hours in which to practise? Practising a passage of regular semiquavers, for example, for how long should you practise them in dotted rhythms?

There are always four main goals to achieve. Each rhythm should be practised until the three basic elements of playing – pitch, sound and rhythm – are all good: every note in tune, every note clean and resonant, and the rhythms mathematically precise. The fourth key goal is that this should feel *easy*. Until each rhythm is in tune, clean, in time, and feeling easy, you haven’t really mastered it yet.

However, it is often a mistake to carry on working on each rhythm (or other practice technique) until it is 'perfect' before moving on to the next. Having made some progress with one rhythm – i.e. it is more in tune, cleaner, more in time, and feeling easier than it was five minutes ago – it is generally better to move on to the next rhythm. Solving some of the problems of playing the new rhythm will improve the former rhythm at the same time. But practise the same passages in rhythms on many different occasions.

The importance of making mistakes

Although it is true that ‘practice makes perfect’, it is only by practising *imperfectly* again and again that gradually we get nearer to what we really do want. Motivation goes straight out the window if every time you make a mistake you feel stupid, or untalented, or too technically deficient, etc. Mistakes are like stepping stones across a river. Each error that we make, or area of weakness that we identify, provides us with an opportunity to learn, and therefore to move forward. It has been said that the person who makes no mistakes is the person who doesn’t make anything; and if you have not yet succeeded, it just means you haven’t failed enough times yet! Thomas Edison experimented more than 10,000 times before he succeeded in inventing electric light. When he was asked by a journalist, after the 5,000th attempt, why he persevered after so many failures, he replied that he had not ‘failed’ 5000 times – he had successfully identified 5000 ways in which it did not work, and was therefore 5000 steps closer to succeeding!

Postscript

A couple of years ago Vladimir Ashkenazy, on tour conducting the RPO, mentioned happily that the free day coming up was his first day off for months. “Gosh, what are you going to do, then?”, we asked. “Why, eight hours practice of course!”, he replied immediately. And you know what? He was serious.