

Streamlined Practice

Mark William Minnich, June 2014

Intended for students age 12 and up, Suzuki book 3 and beyond

Manageable quantities, problem solving, habit building, and the joy of playing- these capture my violin practice in a nutshell. Ideally, a method will introduce only a single element or idea at a time as students are gradually drawn through repertoire, games, and exercises, allowing complete focus until each element becomes habit (at which point a new skill should be added, building layer upon layer).

On a smaller scale, practice should replicate this procedure. Each skill must be learned in advance so that “practice” can be focused towards the implementation of each technique and idea within a specific context (particular works). When attempting implementation, an ordered layering is needed to ensure minimal frustration, maximal retention, and thorough refinement. Whatever this order is, it should ensure that only one element is added at any time. Here is one possibility:

- Immerse yourself in a piece through listening, background, score study, and “faking”.
- Pick a single phrase; realize its place within the larger whole of the work, and decide the phrase’s tentative musical shape (where is it going?), color, tone quality, etc. (begin by using intense “colors”, then mellow them out if necessary).
- Intonation training: teach the brain to recognize accurate pitches. Maintain a clear, ringing tone, and hold each note as long as needed. Tune with open strings and metronome drones.
- Left hand training: find the path between adjacent notes; use trills and double stops to make things trickier for now (and easier later on).
- Right hand/rhythm training: use a metronome at a variety of tempi. Double-check your tone and confident attitude- your level of energy will effect how fast you learn. For younger students, train bowing and rhythm simultaneously.
- Add bowings; review tone (is it still rich and ringing?).
- Add elements of phrasing:
 - Bow: contact point, frog/tip placement, speed, weight, and tilt.
 - Vibrato: speed, width.
 - Other: articulation, tempo rubato, and body language.
- Connect several phrases into larger sections; consider the meaning of each section.
- Connect several sections in the larger work; consider the meaning of the whole.
- Perform/Record (and spot-check after every performance):
 - Record in private (it always hurts at first...).
 - Record with accompaniment.
 - Perform/record for family.
 - Perform/record in a recital setting. Keep this one for memories!

It should be noted that not all passages need all stages of practice. However, until a student has paid careful attention to individual elements on multiple occasions, awareness of those elements has yet to be refined. Immerse yourself, make a plan, solve your problems, form your habits, and have fun with your beautiful creation!