

Some remarks about practice

Without question, practice is the single most important activity determining the ability of any performer. Effective practice will transform ability, build motivation and most importantly build the skills that sustain successful performance. But how does this actually work? And what do we need to do to make practice effective and more importantly improve it along the way?

One of the characteristics of violin playing is that performers spend a large amount of time on their own, attempting to improve their playing without any help from an observer or external perspective that could allow them to modify potentially unproductive approaches to practice. In addition and when improving our own performance, the aims and relationship of the existing way of playing and doing to an improved or even ideal way are not always clear to us. However, to be effective, practice needs to transcend or overcome the limitations that our own perceptions impose on us consistently. How is that possible? Here, I will outline some basic principles of practice. They should be the foundation of our work on our own way of practicing and should help us to develop practice over time.

1. The aim of all practice is to build our ability for performance on stage.

Successful performance is dependent on a particular way of thinking. In performance we cannot stop, repeat or backtrack. Performance is a one-opportunity event where our thinking must continue to move forward without hesitation or doubt. On stage, our thinking and our imagination have to be reliable, comfortable, clear and purposeful. Practice must prepare the attitudes and abilities that sustain such thinking and build the skills that enables us to think well even under stressful conditions. The thinking and imagination that we develop in practice has to be accordingly completely clear, free from hesitation or elements of doubt and unresolved challenge and completely at ease. This implies attention to some vital elements in practice.

- i. All physical action (so-called “technique”) needs to be perfectly balanced and performed with greatest ease conceivable. The greatest ease conceivable is a concept we impose on our actions through our imagination. Note: in this way “the greatest ease conceivable” is not gained after practice but it is imposed on- and demanded from action in practice. In practice we pursue active relaxation of all passive movements, recovery and balancing movements.
- ii. All playing needs to be performed, performable and conceivable in concrete form in the imagination. This means: much of our practice is rehearsing our imagined, intended performance (visualisation, mental practice, miming of playing) where we clarify repeatedly our playing and demand the greatest ease, musical and artistic expression and clarity or accuracy. The concrete playing in practice is a process of confirmation of this mental idea of playing.
- iii. Any technical obstacle to our playing (sluggish co-ordination, blemishes to sound, rhythm or intonation, etc) must be addressed without delay through clarification of our playing- not through reaction to the obstacle, the incomplete playing and its faulty features. So-called mistakes must be removed, not merely overcome, by a more perfect and clearer image creating the idea of our playing in advance of the sounding reality. The images, pre-presentations or imagined projections of our playing are complex, temporally extended, kinaesthetic-acoustic ideas and feelings. We rehearse these feelings in the widest sense and test their translation to concrete sounding reality.

2. Practice is learning.

Practice is both teaching and learning. As all learning, practice is most effective when attention and reflection work in harmony (Capet). What does this mean? Attention to what we do, feel and think relates to the content of our perception but indirectly refers us to our intentions, our ideas and imagination as well. Attention - often referred to as listening- provides us with the material for our multi-sensorial perceptions, our feelings and direct insights. These perceptions themselves are used and transformed by us in multiple ways. In practice, the challenge is to note perceptions, to remain attentive in quasi objective way (Galamian) but at the same time to notice how such perception reflects intentions and informs the imagination of the music and our playing. In musical, artistic performance, imagination must lead always and automatic processes cannot be so strengthened that they undercut the autonomous, active freedom of the imagination. In fact, automatic processes are dangerous in so far as they have the potential to sideline our imagination and attention. The attention required for successful performance is divided between a predominant attention towards future sound and feelings and verification of current sound and reality albeit unfolding at a lower level of importance.

Accordingly, an attention which critically establishes the features of a reality is on its own insufficient and impotent (Galamian, Leimer). Attention in practice must always include a relation towards our imagination, a reflection of our ideal which is the leading force in music making. In other words: the leading thought and its attention in practice is intentional and directed. This is the primary reality which constitutes and improves our performance. Perception of our concrete playing is only relevant in so far as it reflects a stage on the path towards complete and full realisation of the possibilities of our imagination.

These thoughts give rise to a number of methodological steps:

- i. Practice needs to include renewal of attention through purposeful planning (short segments), variation (rhythm, stop practice) and thoughtful repetition which rehearses anticipation.
- ii. Physical relaxation must be comprehensive, active and balanced movement needs to be actively and autonomously conceived.
- iii. Perception of playing (objective listening and assessment) is contextual and contingent. What matters is the dominant and overriding model of our playing. Strictly speaking, practice does not improve our playing given to us in any one instance, but it affirms our ideas of playing. It works on the pathways which allow effortless and direct translation of such ideas into sounding reality. This points to the limited relevance and contextual importance of "critical listening". The benefits of such listening are merely indirect: We cannot preserve the perceived incomplete reality and hope to incrementally improve it, but the imagination must rather always constitute the playing anew. What we can improve is the intentionality of our actions and the clarity and detail of our imagined performance. Further, we can improve our playing by reducing interference (tension, reaction, unproductive habit, etc) in the playing thus providing for a clearer connection between imagination and performance. However, the thought that we can take a sounding performance and improve it itself is ontologically impossible - in music as in life we cannot improve the past. We can only improve ourselves, that is, our thinking, its intentionality and contextual discipline (relaxation) which will enable ideal translation of thought to action in the future.

3. Practice is **organisation**

Much of the above already refers to a central characteristic of practice as organisation. Violin performance is a movement based activity constituted through psycho-physical co-ordination. This involves a balance of physical effort, energy and intensity and timing of effort. (*kinesis* and time). There are thus always two dimensions to violin technique: the amount of physical energy or intensity and its timing. We must remember that they are related in so far as the latter may determine the former. Lateness in timing may generate increased energy to compensate undermining in turn the natural way of playing. Accordingly, practice must pay the greatest attention to timing of actions. In particular:

- i. Correlation between imagination (thought, mind) and movement (arms/body/hands). This is particular relevant in the pursuit of improved abilities for anticipation.
- ii. Left hand preparation as the clear, straightforward presentation of material of performance.
- iii. Right hand/ arm feeling and movement as the manifestation of the form of performance (expression).

Organisation in these three areas can be practiced

- IV. without sound (performance without bow, without violin and bow),
- V. with sound through slow, rhythmic practice (metronome)
- VI. through specific rhythmic co-ordination practice (stop- and accent practice),
- VII. through separation of left (tapping, rhythmic accentuation) and right (bowing schema, vibrato-less playing).

In general, the organisational features of practice are correlation (mind/body interaction), rhythmic organisation and tempo stability. In addition, energetic attention to impulses and their recovery (rhythmic movement). All features do not occur in concrete reality alone but their concrete characteristics are the reflection of an active imagination and intent.

4. Practice is **care of self**.

It seems clear from the above so far that practice is about improving the performer and his abilities through work. Performance requires particular behaviours and ways of thinking in action - performing musicians are in this respect no different from athletes who play (as distinct from those who "execute", like sprinters, for example) and who must learn to think in action. The practice of these behaviours and mental and imaginative resources is accordingly a way of taking care of the self. Practice is largely a process of self-improvement and consequently deserves our best attention and most diligent effort. Practice cannot be isolated from patterns of ordinary life in a person and consideration of when to practice, how much or how we practice must be thoughtfully related to the overall wellbeing - physical and psychological - of the person practicing. Furthermore, to be effective, practice must derive a large component of its meaning from the identity and belief of the musician in the profound significance and importance of this activity. All practice of this kind involves an advance of motivation where the whole person creates a fundamentally meaningful form of activity within the identification of this activity within the greater purpose and meaning of their life.

The idea that practice is actively related to a fundamental creation of meaning and form of life-making, and is nurtured by an attunement to the profound importance of this activity to the identity of the individual is referred to in some literature as *Ustanovka*. ("This theory directs a

person's attention to the internal components of success and to an individual's particular relationship to an activity (as external circumstances are not always under our control). Change yourself and you change both who you are and your relationship to the matter at hand - and you raise the probability of success in your undertaking." (Kirnarskaya, 315). *Ustanovka* constitutes a musical-creative life in which being a practising musician is fundamentally important to the identity and wholeness of the person.

5. Practice improves **playing**.

The comprehensive and holistic view of practice here does not only relate to improving the discipline of performance, but aims at forming our ability to play. Play is a fundamental human quality which unifies the human being in its disparate and at times conflicting faculties. Intuition and reflection, planning and imagination, body and mind, all combine to fulfil a unified expression of what it means to be human. In music, the formative force of play is the pursuit of beauty. This is not only a self-serving or limited pursuit but ultimately a pursuit that leads to the greatest freedom and independence of spirit and being the human being is capable of attaining. In his "Letters on Aesthetic Education" Friedrich Schiller expresses this as follows: "But what do we mean by *mere play* since we know that among all human conditions it is play and only play that completes him and unfolds his double nature at once... man must only *play* with beauty and he must play *only with beauty*. To say it once and for all: man only plays in so far as he is in the fullest sense human and he is only fully human when he plays. This sentence which at this point may seem paradoxical, will achieve a great and deep meaning, once we have understood how to apply it to the doubly important duty and fate; it will, I promise you, carry the entire building of aesthetic art and of the far more difficult art of life" (Schiller, Letters on Aesthetic Education, 15th letter)

Goetz Richter, Sydney, February 2017