

Practicing

As aspiring violists, we all spend a great deal of time in the practice room, but no one wants to spend more time than is necessary; here are some tips to help you get the most from your time.

Be Organized

- Make a list of everything you need to practice (all pieces and techniques)
- Divide your available time amongst the items on your list, giving priority to those things that need the most work
- Plan to spend at least 1/3 of your time working on technique, more if you are a less-advanced player. Learning music is important, but techniques you can transfer from piece to piece will help you even more
- Keep track of how much time you spend each day working on each thing, and what you did to work on it

Limit Distractions

- Have everything you need before you start (stand, pencil, water, organizer, etc.)
- TURN OFF YOUR PHONE
- Bring a sheet of paper to write down "to do list" items that pop up while practicing

Know Your Brain

- Practice when you feel freshest, and take breaks frequently
- If you are frustrated, do less (a smaller section, slower tempo, LH only, etc.)
- Don't be fooled into thinking you are better than you are (see below)
- Don't try to learn more than you can in one day (see below)

Don't be fooled

Our brains have a funny way of deciding how good we are. If we practice the same piece for two hours, over and over, and the very last time we play it we are finally able to play it exactly how we want, with all the expression, accuracy, and heart we were hoping for, then our brain will choose that time (the very best time) as representative of our current ability. In reality, this is not true. We just played the piece 100 times, and each of the first 99 times lacked something (or many somethings); this means we were 99% imperfect, and 1% perfect. That's just not the reality of our current ability. Don't let your brain fool you this way! A good way to prevent this is by doing "First Tries" (see Burton Kaplan's book in the bibliography below). Record yourself playing the piece for the first time in a day (after having warmed up, but not having played that piece yet) and listen back with a pencil in hand to circle trouble spots – you'll get a much clearer picture of where you really are in the development of your ability to play that piece, and will be able to organize your practice accordingly.

Don't Cram

We retain until tomorrow about 50% of what we learned today. Moreover, it takes 4 to 5 days for our long-term memory to kick in, and long-term memory is what we want to be training. Practicing is a bit like investing – the money you invest now is more important than the money you invest later in life; the practicing you invest now, today, is more important than the practicing you will do next week. Both are compounding. The brain prefers a steady climb that allows for each step to become part of long-term memory before adding the next step. It is therefore much more effective (and a lot faster) to master a very slow tempo, and keep the tempo the same for 4 to 5 days until your long-term memory kicks in, than it is to try to increase the tempo every day. Wait until it feels very, very easy before you move to the next tempo. Patience is key. But you will also reap the benefit of spending far less time per day on each thing, knowing that your goal is to be truly secure at one tempo before moving up.

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Practicing for Artistic Success and *The Musician's Practice Log*-Burton Kaplan
The Musician's Way-Glenn Kurtz
The Art of Practicing-Madeline Bruser
A Soprano on Her Head-Eloise Ristad
Deepening Musical Performance Through Movement-Alexandra Pierce

Brain Training

Violist Molly Gebrian <https://mollygebrian.com/writing/> on current neuroscience.
Scholar.google.com - search "violin practicing" or "skill acquisition in music".
Erwin Schoonderwaldt interesting research on physics and upper string instruments, much of which can be incorporated into practicing technique

Remember: practicing is a technique just like spiccato or shifting. It needs to be practiced!

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