

The SFYSA Guide to Practicing the Violin

by Karles McQuade, rev. July 2015

These suggestions are intended only as raw material (however detailed they may be). Figure out with your private teacher how these suggestions can be the most effective for how you personally learn and operate.

Some of these suggestions seem draconian on first reading, but once you've made them a regular routine, they will seem ordinary. A nine year-old student of mine, who has practiced for over a year without missing a single day, told me: "The first three or four months were rough, but after that, [practicing everyday] got easy." As of this writing, she still has not missed a day.

SOME PERSPECTIVES ON PRACTICING

1. Many people say to make practice fun, but the standard of "fun" they're using is akin to hanging with friends or playing video games. To a degree, this type of thinking is appropriate. However, I would say that while practicing should be fun, it's generally *not* the same kind of fun you get from hanging with friends or playing video games. Instead, learn to treasure the type of fun that practicing offers. Find something in practicing that speaks to you.
 - (a) The taste of practicing, like that of kale or avocados, is an acquired taste.
2. My fiancée, who is a performer and instructor of piano, observed that practicing is like a marriage. There are great times and frustrating times, but success ultimately depends on the day-to-day, week-in/week-out stuff.
 - (a) Put another way, however clichéd: what you get out of practicing depends on what you put into it.
3. To paraphrase Shinichi Suzuki: Knowledge does not equal ability; knowledge plus ten-thousand times equals ability.
4. To paraphrase Edmund Sprunger: We practice to make something easier than it was before.
5. To paraphrase Sue Levine: Amateurs practice until they get it right; professionals practice until they can't get it wrong.
6. To paraphrase numerous other teachers: Practice does not make perfect; practice makes *permanent*.

THE SINGLE CHALLENGE OF PRACTICE

1. The basic challenge of practice involves WHAT you practice.
 - (a) The specifics of this are between you and your private teacher; however, there are some general categories of work:
 - i. Scales and Arpeggios
 - These help by constantly improving speed control, tone production, intonation, bow distribution, and familiarity in all keys, modes, positions, and registers.
 - ii. Etudes
 - Etudes usually focus on building a specific technical skill.
 - iii. Repertory
 - Repertory is where you apply and develop new skills, or skills from scales, arpeggios, and etudes.
 - iv. Orchestra and Chamber Music
 - These help by cultivating your sense of ensemble, exposing you to repertory you may otherwise avoid, and improving your sight-reading skills, in addition to building other skills.
 - v. Unaccompanied Bach
 - 'Nuff said.
 - vi. Fun Stuff
 - The possibilities are without limit.
 - (b) Not all of these categories are always active, but WHAT you practice should be connected to something on this list.

QUALITY versus QUANTITY: PRACTICING versus PLAYING

To Paraphrase both Pam Parfitt and Haley Lovelace: *Practicing* your violin and *playing* your violin are different things. The difference is purpose: you *practice* to make something easier; you *play* to share music with your audience (and with yourself). Smart practicing leads to beautiful playing.

How do you realize that difference at home? For example, playing your piece all the way through, five times in a row, is not practicing. It's not even playing. It's wasting your time. With 98% of all pieces you play, there are spots in that piece that are easy from the get-go, and spots that are difficult. If you just mechanically play through a piece, then you're getting good at the easy spots (unnecessary), and you're *also* getting good at playing the hard spots poorly (dangerous).

Your teacher, when showing you a new piece, points out the hard spots, and these spots are also probably the spots she goes over with you in subsequent lessons. Spend your precious practice time on these hard spots. How you practice them is between you and your teacher, but generally consists of playing them *consciously and thoughtfully* in unusual ways: slower, louder, with weird rhythms, adding open strings between each note, overlapping the bowings, etc. If you can make the hard spots comfortable, then the easy spots will require very little effort. However, to borrow from Robert Gerle, "Don't neglect the easy spots; they tend to take revenge on you."

Now, of course there are times when playing through a piece, time after time, is essential, like when you have an audition or recital or concert coming up. But this playing-through still has to be thoughtful. Your teacher can help you with thoughtful playing.

Never turn off your brain when practicing. If you find that you can't keep your brain on your violin, it's time to take a 10 minute break, have a snack and a cold glass of water.

The WHERE, WHY, WHEN, and HOW of practice shouldn't be obstacles; the rest of this outline deals with figuring out answers to these questions so they don't get in your way.

WHERE TO PRACTICE

1. Practice in a place you love! If you want to be there, it'll make practicing much more enjoyable.
2. If possible, leave your music-stand, music, and instrument out and available all the time.
 - (a) Often the hardest part of practicing is just opening the instrument case.
 - (b) Obviously if you have pets, siblings, or irresponsible friends, this approach may not be viable.

WHY PRACTICE?

1. If you really want to get into a specific orchestra or program, then *you must make violin a priority over all other activities until your audition.*
 - (a) If you are accepted, then you have the option of continuing to prioritize violin, or change to other priorities.
 - (b) Remember that if you aren't accepted, you won't even have the option to begin with; so, it's best to create all your options (by preparing a successful audition), and then make the smartest choice.

WHEN TO PRACTICE

1. Find the time of day that feels the best to you.
 - (a) Before school, right after school, before dinner, before bedtime, etc.
 - i. Arrange your other obligations around this time.
 - ii. For example, I do my best practicing at night, and my worst early in the morning.

HOW TO PRACTICE

1. Record yourself.
 - (a) With smartphones, tablets, and digital audio recorders, recording yourself is super easy.
 - (b) Listening to the recordings you've made will give you very honest feedback about your playing.
 - (c) If you're advanced enough, try recording yourself as you play with a metronome!

2. If it's difficult to practice everyday, either due to schedule conflicts or exhaustion due to many commitments, then:
 - (a) Scale-back other obligations, OR
 - (b) Re-evaluate your commitment to your instrument
 - i. *It is not possible to be a skilled musician without putting in the time; the quickest path to mastery is thoughtful daily practice, supported by a dedicated and masterful teacher.*
 - (c) Based on my own experience (SF Waldorf class of '97 and SF Prep class of '01), school + violin + one sport is enough. This combination means your school-weeks are tough, but you still have enough spare time to have a life and friends.
3. Talk with your school about getting credit for practicing at school. Perhaps you can make an arrangement to fulfill your Fine Arts or other elective requirements by practicing during school hours on-campus.
 - (a) When I was at SF Prep, I had an arrangement with the music teacher that I could fulfill my Fine Arts requirements as long as I practiced an hour during each school-day. Consequently, I didn't take a single music or performance class at Prep for my entire time four years there, but all that practicing allowed me to get into All-State four years in a row, helped me to win the YSO Concerto Competition in my senior year, and helped me to serve as YSO concertmaster for my last five semesters in high school.
4. Transition from X practice days per week to 7 practice days per week.
 - (a) Begin this transition TODAY (this is not the kind of transition that should be made gradually).
5. Your daily practice-time allotment should be enough to get the job done, and not more than that.
 - (a) Getting the job done means you can feel and hear some degree of real improvement, no matter how small. If you have the time and energy, work beyond this point.
 - (b) On very busy days, or when you're sick, decrease your practice time
 - (c) On very light days, increase your practice time
 - i. Spend extra time on the really hard or awkward spots
6. Do not skip any days, regardless of homework, family, friends, sports, travel (take your violin with you), or illness (I'm not joking). Practicing is not like missing a math assignment, where you can just do extra problems the next day. A day lost is time you will never get back.
 - (a) Jerry West observed: "You can't get much done in life if you only work on the days that you feel good."
 - (b) It's always possible to do some amount of practicing everyday.
 - i. As I mentioned at the beginning, one of my students has challenged herself to practice everyday for a year. As of this writing, she's practiced for 503 days in a row. She now has insane stories of making practice a priority, including having had to practice once at 3:00 AM, after celebrating the New Year and going night-sledding. Obviously, this student is an unusual case, but the point is that it's always possible to make time for practice.