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## NEWS FOR CELLISTS SPRING 2020

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### *The Art of Cello Practice* by Chris Hoyle

Being confined to our homes during lockdown is a challenge in very many ways, but it does mean that there *might* be a bit more time for practice than usual in a normal, busy musical life.

Chris Hoyle, head of strings at the Royal Northern College of Music, has been giving specialist lectures about practice for over ten years and we're very grateful to him for sharing his inspiration and insight here in a special extended guest article for *News for Cellists*. A longer version of this article can be found on our website.

This newsletter doesn't contain our normal list of cellos and bows for sale as we decided we'd rather give more space for Chris's article. Our website has all the details of instruments and bows currently available, plus an extensive library of specialist cello articles to browse.

### *String reviews*

In this autumn's newsletter we plan to review some cello strings and would love to hear from you if you have any experiences to share of the following:

- Pirastro Perpetual Edition (A, D, G, C)
- Pirastro Perpetual Cadenza (G & C)
- Versum Soloist (A, D, G, C)

Please call us on 01353 668559 or email [sarah@aitchisoncellos.com](mailto:sarah@aitchisoncellos.com) Thank you!

### *Teaching online*

Cellist friends have been in touch during lockdown, talking about the challenges of teaching online so we decided to pool their ideas and publish them for everyone's benefit. You can find this short article here: <https://www.aitchisoncellos.com/teaching-online-in-the-lockdown/>

Huge thanks to Raphael Wallfisch, Jo Cole, Nicholas Jones, Eduardo Palao, Gillian Thoday, Sarah Westley, Daniel Springate and to all the people who responded to our recent survey.

### *Solidarity*

To express our solidarity with the cello community, we would like to offer a free service of essential basic cello maintenance work to professional cellists. There are so many challenges in life at the moment and we would like to ensure that at least everyone has a glued-up and adjusted instrument! So if your cello needs some sound post adjustment or you think there's a seam open somewhere, please phone or email us and we'll make an appointment for you to visit when travel restrictions have lifted sufficiently to allow you to come to Ely.

We envisage continuing this free solidarity service until the end of 2020 as it may be some time before musical life is back to anything like normal. We feel so lucky to work with our wonderful community of cellists and we look forward to seeing you soon.

Meanwhile, we send you all our warmest good wishes and hope that you, your families, friends and communities stay safe and well.



Have you ever wondered what proportion of your playing time is spent performing rather than practising? Amazingly, we probably spend just 2% of our playing time engaged in public performance compared to 98% practising. As students and professionals, we dedicate a lot of thought to the art of performance but we need to give at least as much thought – if not more – to the 98% of our time which we spend practising, which is the means by which we achieve our goal as performing musicians.

I've heard many musicians describe having less and less time available for practice during their professional careers, due to the pressures of family and working life. As I write this article during lockdown, we have an opportunity to focus on our instrumental development in a way that may not happen again. We can turn the discipline of practice into a creative art form of its own.

**Mental practice.** *'If you can dance, sing or think the music better than you play it, then you can move more quickly towards your goals.'* (Henning Kraggerud, RNCM International Chair in Violin)

Before talking about practice in a traditional sense, it's helpful to consider which other activities count as practice, even if you're not touching your instrument. For example, does reading the score of your work and memorising your music count as practice? To my mind, yes! How about reading about music and performance style (history, biographies, letters)? Absolutely! One book that inspired Paul Tortelier was *Les Cathédrales de France* by Auguste Rodin. Is this practice? Yes! After all, it's our minds, not our hands, which lead the way in interpreting our music. Valuable work away from the instrument also includes learning the piano part, understanding the harmonies, singing your repertoire and crafting your interpretation.

**Smart practice.** *'Practice with your fingers and you need all day. Practice with your mind and you will do as much in 1.5 hours.'* (Leopold Auer)

From Auer's perspective, it's not just about practising **longer**, but practising **smarter**. It's about achieving as much in 2 hours as another person achieves in 4 hours. Most will be familiar with the 10,000-hour rule but our rate of improvement is not necessarily proportional to the number of hours we invest in practice. Here's what Yo Ya Ma says: *'I have never practised very much. When I was in high school, I only practised about two hours a day. I once practised four hours a day for a whole month and was exhilarated. Since I don't like to work hard, I've had to become efficient. Thanks to my father, I had a tremendously good foundation. It's the concentration that counts. I hated it, but it paid off because I can take a piece today – of 20-25 minutes – and probably learn it in two weeks by working two to three*

*hours a day. This isn't talent – I'm not extraordinarily gifted in that respect. It comes from the amount of time I've put in to doing this kind of thing.'* The Strad December 2016.

Smart practice is primarily a **vibrant thought process** where every second counts. This means applying true mental agility to everything we do: the why, the how, the objective listening skills, the problem-solving processes and the artistic vision.

**Purposeful practice.** *'Deliberate, or mindful, practice is a systematic and highly structured activity that is, for lack of a better word, 'scientific'. Instead of mindless trial and error, it is an active and thoughtful process of hypothesis testing where we relentlessly seek solutions to clearly defined problems.'* (Juilliard trained violinist Noa Kageyama, as quoted in Matthew Syed's excellent book, *Bounce*.)

As musicians, we need to assess which element of our performance we're trying to improve, then work out which steps we need to take to achieve our goals in order to know why we're doing what we're doing. By contrast, many of us are guilty of mindless practice – going through the motions, employing a trial and error approach, and quickly correcting faults in order to move on. Does practice like this *really* make perfect? Sadly, I believe that some people get worse while they practise! With their minds switched off, they are just strengthening their bad habits. Whatever we repeatedly do – good or bad – we turn into a habit. Practice makes permanent! That's a health warning.

## Guide to practising

1. Consider your blueprint.
2. Play, listening objectively.
3. Appraise. Identify an area/aspect to improve.
4. Devise a mechanism for working at this problem *i.e.* be a problem solver.
5. Do this patiently and apply it thoughtfully.
6. Play again.
7. Listen and re-assess. Has the above strategy worked?
8. If 'no', either continue with same approach or devise another method. If 'yes', play the section again and identify a different aspect to be improved.

**1. Consider your blueprint** Mental preparation is essential in establishing a blueprint for your playing. What are you aiming for? What's your vision? Feed yourself from as many musical and artistic sources as possible: attend concerts, hear 'everyone who's anyone,' listen to recordings and watch videos of

great players. I don't in any way suggest that we clone others' playing or interpretations, but rather that we plant examples of fine artistry in our minds. If you want to be a good writer, read widely. It's the same for musicians. We need to create our own personal interpretation of a piece and I believe the best way to do this is to work away from your instrument in the early stages so that your head, not your hands, dictates how to express the piece. Sing the music, rather than allowing your hands to suggest an easy solution or interpretation.

Evolve your interpretation: study the score, imagine the characters, contours and colours. Look at the architecture of the work in terms of the harmonies, the highs and lows and the emotional spectrum. What tone quality are you aiming for? When I studied with Alexander Baillie, I was encouraged to write, 'Big, warm tone,' over large sections of one piece. That was the template I was working towards in that piece of repertoire. Imagine the tone colours and textures you're looking for. Might it be a fragile voile fabric or a rich velvet? I sometimes encourage my students to visualise the belly of their instrument vibrating – so they are more inclined to play freely and allow sound to radiate.

**2. Play, listening objectively.** One crucial skill to acquire is that of listening to yourself objectively and critically, so you can begin to become your own teacher. As musicians we need to be both subjective and objective. Play with commitment, but also listen, as though you were out in the audience.

Leon Fleischer, an American pianist, suggested that a performing musician should divide himself into three persons. **Person A** looks at the score and tries to understand what it's all about (that's the blueprint we were just thinking about). **Person B** tries to express this content with the instrument. **Person C** is out in the audience, listening and reporting back as to whether **Person A's** concepts are coming across. **Person C** is the hardest to develop; the part of you which is giving live, objective feedback, which leads us to the next point:

**3. Appraise:** this is the outcome of the critical listening, above – your Person C. Objective feedback is essential for productive practice. We need to identify what's wrong in order to get better. This phase is sometimes called 'conscious incompetence'. If you don't know what your immediate goal is, how can you achieve it?

Helpful ways to appraise yourself objectively include making an audio or video recording of yourself (easy to do on your phone) or playing in front of a mirror to reveal your posture and technique. During lockdown I've asked my students to send me videos and as well as sending them my comments, I ask them to critique their own playing, using their videos. In these ways,

you're taking the role of your teacher, being that external set of ears and eyes during your practice.

Once you've listened and appraised, define the problems and give them names. Which aspect have you chosen to work on? Tidiness, tuning, evenness, a big shift, your sense of line, bow articulation, variety of vibrato, tonal colour, musical drama, your musical story-telling powers? Identify one aspect to improve.

**4. Devise a mechanism for working at this problem** – or, as Kageyama says, '*relentlessly seek solutions to clearly defined problems.*' For this, you need lateral thinking skills, code-breaking powers and a good imagination. These are the key tools for **real** practice. Consider what method to employ to tackle each problem. Remember that there is never just one formula for tackling each issue! What makes our lives as practising musicians so interesting is the opportunity to be both disciplined and creative in our work.

I once had the opportunity to ask a top chef about the secrets of his success. He explained that 90% of a truly great meal is using the very best ingredients. This encouraged me to think about our development as string players and how we can refine each 'ingredient' so that when we bring them together, we have the best chance of presenting delightful, exquisite, sumptuous music! What are the key ingredients of your playing that you might wish to refine? Here are a few practice mechanisms (not an exhaustive list).

*Practice mechanisms to improve tidiness.* Let's imagine that in your most recent run-through of a piece, one passage was prone to slips and untidiness. In this instance, **tidiness** is the name of the issue you've decided to work on and a mechanism with which you could choose to work at this problem is **slow practice**. Find a slow-enough tempo that allows you to play the passage evenly and with total control. Take out the emotional heat and give yourself the time and mental space to achieve versions that are clean, even, in tune and well-articulated. At this slow speed, repeatedly play 'perfect' versions. In sport, this process is sometimes called 'grooving'. Once the passage is clean and tidy at the slow speed, then make slight increases to the tempo, ensuring that you never increase the tempo until it is 'perfect' at the slower one.

This process works well for preparing movements of solo Bach. Your slow versions allow you to execute the music with control, articulation, and craftsmanship. Begin to add the characteristics of the full-speed version: use the same part of the bow, the same architecture and attention to phrase-ends. However, note that at slower speeds, off-the-string bow strokes may need to become on-the-string. Over a period of days and weeks, make gradual increases to the tempo, ensuring that you never leave one tempo until the performance is concert-ready at that tempo. Quality

remains the constant in this process. It's a method which, I gather, Heinrich Schiff employed in his own teaching and playing.

Another practice mechanism for tackling the issue of tidiness is: **play up-to-speed, but in tiny fragments.** In this instance, take a small group of notes, perhaps just 4 or 5, but give yourself about 10 seconds of thinking time between repetitions. This allows you to retain your mental posture and to picture the short burst of notes that you're about to play.

**Practice mechanisms to improve intonation.** Play without vibrato. Change the dynamic to a clear, unforced single *forte* so that your instrument resonates freely. (It's unhelpful to play either *ff* or *pp* when working on intonation.) Play legato, practising off-the-string sections on-the-string. Similarly, change pizzicato passages to arco. Play slowly. Modify the rhythm, changing short note values for longer ones, enabling you to register and correct each note. Use opportunities to pause and cross-check individual notes with your open strings, checking your perfect intervals, unisons, 4ths, 5ths and octaves.

Next, rather than stopping to check note by note, find a relevant small group of notes that you can repeat in a circle so the final note can lead back to the first note. Repeat this small cycle of notes without stopping, each time registering which note was out of tune and how it needs to be corrected. On each 'circuit,' adjust the note(s) that troubled you on the previous time around. In this way, there's a sense of flow, closer to real performance, rather than the somewhat static process of lining up one note at a time, as in the cross-checking version above. Great intonation starts with our ears and with our ongoing aural training. You can't train your fingers until you've sharpened your ears!

**Practice mechanisms to improve phrasing.** You have formed your musical goal or blueprint by reading the music, seeing the contours on the page, feeling the harmonic tensions and by singing the piece (either out loud or in your mind). However, when you appraise your performance, the music might have been somewhat flat, or subject to the individual qualities of down-bows and up-bows *i.e.* down-bow *diminuendi* and up-bow *crescendi*.

Here are a couple of mechanisms for helping you to phrase more skilfully: Play more slowly than the desired tempo to make the passage more difficult to phrase. At this slower speed, make a conscious effort to create the musical shapes you have in mind. When you return to Tempo 1, the overarching shapes should be easier to portray. Play the phrase more quickly than Tempo 1 to gain an overview of the passage. In this way, you can get a clearer understanding of the

contours and the sense of flow. William Pleeth describes this process well in the chapter 'The Ingredients of Architecture' in his book, *The Cello*.

Without a metronome, exaggerate the ebb and flow and the dynamic range, in the style of Puccini. Be daring, even self-indulgent, and test your expressive limits! By contrast, use a metronome to give your performance underlying strength. Work with the metronome in crotchets, then in minims, then in semibreves to allow breathing space, rubati and timing subtleties within a structured framework.

**5. Apply this practice mechanism thoughtfully and patiently.** In brief, take your time and practise calmly. Don't be like a terrier wrestling with a bone! Remain poised and allow yourself a few seconds to think between repetitions, so that you can give each effort your full concentration. As a student, I remember the repeated screams of frustration from someone practising in the next-door room to mine. One day the screams turned into whimpering as he broke both his foot and the wardrobe door! By contrast, imagine a scientist in a laboratory, calmly assessing which experiments have worked and which not. Practice should be a thoughtful process, patiently testing various methods until we achieve a breakthrough.

**6. Play again** Having examined and practised individual components, it's time to re-assemble the phrase. Enjoy running the passage a couple of times.

**7. Listen and re-assess.** Has your strategy for improving the chosen aspect worked?

**8. If 'No', either continue with the same approach** (you may have chosen a perfectly suitable practice technique, but it might just need more time) **or devise another method** (as above, there are several ways of addressing a problem). **If 'Yes', play the section again and identify a different aspect to be improved.**

The above plan is certainly formulaic! I hope that, at the very least, it helps to list some of the processes of conscientious work in practice. Over time, it becomes less (dare I say) pedantic, as one area flows naturally into another. However, this plan comes with a caveat: it represents only **one** way of working rather than **the** way.

Since practising, rather than performing, occupies most of our time as musicians, we need to have a happy relationship with it, in order to enjoy a lifelong love of playing on our own and in ensembles. With the right approach, disciplined practice can be creative, fulfilling and even exhilarating – an art form in its own right!

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A longer version of this article is available on the website.