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Title: Practice Techniques for Advanced String Players

Earlier this year at his first lesson with me, a new tertiary student informed me, "I don't practice scales, I play them in my pieces."

I realized how very fashionable and superior he felt himself to be by the pride with which he stated this.

How does one explain to a student such as this that he will need to devote $\frac{3}{4}$ of his total practice time to the study of technical work – scales, studies, and, in his case, solo Bach? Today I will be outlining and, I hope, passionately advocating a teaching and learning regime which separates technical work from repertoire. This is not to quarantine repertoire from the learning experience but to staunchly advocate the primary importance of building and maintaining a sound technical foundation working alongside of what I might call "a proper experience of the repertoire". These matters I will amplify and clarify in my paper.

My own teaching experience is in both tertiary (including postgraduate) and pre-tertiary teaching in Universities in Australia, the UK and New Zealand.

Paramount in all of my teaching is the mind-set which I want to foster at every developmental level of performance.

So, what is it, this "mind-set" for the performance platform? To answer that broadly:

it is active and lively mental processes, free to engage in musical direction, with a technique that responds effortlessly to musical ideas.

In other words, a good technique is a set of skills which is so well-learned, it affords the performer the freedom to focus primarily upon musical interpretation and projection. I guess there is nothing controversial about this. How to achieve it is perhaps the more debatable issue.

Is this definition that I have just given, that of the dependable technique allowing freedom to concentrate upon musical ideas, is this the norm among our first-year string students? The answer is obviously no. Most of our students present with varying degrees of technical faults which really hamper their musical performances.

Some of the faults which intrude upon their ability to play well are problems with rhythm which may be caused by faulty bowing/poor posture, or too much distraction with other difficulties such as intonation and shifting, or even a lack of rhythm training in their previous music education. There are also often problems with poor pitch/inability to really play in the key of the piece they are attempting, inability to shift fluently, to play in the upper register, to play multiple stops, to play up to tempo – the list goes on and on. I haven't even mentioned the importance of having a nice tone quality or appropriate vibrato. Students present with widely-varying degrees of these problems.

There are also associated mental and emotional problems allied to this scenario. When students have been accustomed to an inappropriate choice of repertoire (I mean here, repertoire that is too hard for them) they often develop expectations and attitudes of ploughing through the big repertoire in the foolish hope that if they struggle for long enough it will eventually become easier and their techniques will improve.

I can illustrate this point with another example from my files:

Another violin student, similarly a new first year B Mus student, informed me recently that he wished, as his first ever sonata (he'd hitherto played mainly concerto repertoire), to start with the Beethoven Kreutzer! He complained bitterly when I gave him the opus 12 D major Beethoven. He didn't see why, when he had played for his audition the Beethoven Romance in G and the Wieniawski Concerto no. 2, repertoire which I should say was beyond his level of expertise, he should take what he regarded as a retrograde step. This student had learned to expect ongoing struggle in conquering repertoire. He even felt he'd be bored without the struggle. I was able to relieve his anxieties by assuring him that he would have struggle enough with his scales and studies!

It's sometimes not easy to convince students like this, that when they eventually come to the Kreutzer Sonata, I as their teacher would like to be able to focus mainly upon the wonderful depths of musical meaning in the piece rather than to use such a masterpiece for note-crunching and technical drilling.

Here is another anecdote from my files:

In contrast to student (a) mentioned just now, is another student – I'll call her (b) – who gave a superb performance of the Sibelius Concerto earlier this year. She is also one of our first year B Mus students and her performance of this work with the Christchurch Symphony Orchestra earned her the first prize in the National Youth Concerto Competition. Her performance was exquisitely expressive and unhampered by any technical inadequacies. She later told me that playing the pieces had always been "the easy bit" (as she put it) for her. I know her to have been solidly drilled on her technical work from an early age, her teacher assiduously building the technique for her to draw upon when she plays her repertoire.

How much more preferable that this student has already perfected the techniques away from the music. Otherwise, when *does* one stop agonizing over the intonation, the shifts, the bow strokes, the note crunching...and decide that one will now consider the music?

Both of the students in the cases I have cited have been playing for a similar length of time and would appear to me to have similar levels of talent. But student (b) is the one who has been set up to now be able to cover the repertoire and, in her 4-6 years of tertiary study, will play a lot more repertoire than student (a). And student (a) is the one who has been pushed on through the harder pieces earlier and more quickly and who can "get around" them, after a fashion. Right from the start, student (a) has had holes in his technique which have never been addressed properly. Now, he will have to spend a lot of his tertiary study time establishing a dependable technique. But, having not experienced the discipline of daily technical work from his early years, will he have the wherewithal now to do it?

You will all realize our weaknesses in Australia (and New Zealand) when it comes to string training. That string training ideally needs to be taking place from an early age is self-evident. That there are grossly insufficient well-trained teachers is also self-evident. This is no different in other countries I have visited, including the USA and the UK.

For string teachers attached to Conservatoria, the usual scenario is when students present for a tertiary entrance audition. Here, very often, we detect holes in their overall preparation and, more often than not, bad habits that have been reinforced over many years. Not that we wish to exclude these students; musicality can shine through, regardless. And we can do a lot with these students in the 4 or 5 years they are going to be studying with us. Now we have to get them ready for their first tasks such as Concert Practice appearances or the exam at the end of the semester which is just 12 or 14 lessons away!

The faults students demonstrate fall pretty much into the following categories:

- Students can have a marked inability to play in tune. They are often aware of this but they associate playing their instrument with the constant struggle to get the intonation right and the need to be vigilant of poor intonation at all times. They experience performing as requiring a big effort to play at a satisfactory level of “in tuneness”. Often these intonation problems can result in the student thinking (or perhaps even being told in subtle ways by a previous teacher or through exam results), that they have limited musicality, when all along their out-of-tune playing may have, at its root-cause, a poorly established physical set-up on the instrument.
- Basic hand shapes have never been established (codified). This adds to their experience of music performance as a “struggle” and adds to their unreliable intonation.
- Their sense of fingerboard geography is faulty in varying degrees or, at worst, non-existent. Perhaps they have mainly learnt to play by ear. If you ask them to show you 4th position, let alone 6th or 8th, they cannot easily and reliably do it.
- If they have done scales and studies it may be as little as one or two studies per year and scales as per syllabus requirements. I often encounter young people who might have played quite advanced pieces but who don't know any scales and have no knowledge of (and what I would describe as the wrong attitude towards) the playing of studies. Yet, to me, it is through scales and studies that the fundamentals of technique are learned.
- Poor bowing skills are frequently encountered. These can be many and varied in their nature. Some manifestations are: a locked elbow joint, faulty supporting movement at the shoulder joint and an inflexible (or, at times, too flexible) bow hold. This results in poor quality of sound and lack of agility and coordination. The consequences of this can be quite serious and very hard to eradicate at the tertiary level of violin training. Poor sound, difficulty in executing smooth bow changes, inability to play legato and laboured off-the-string bowing are just some of the problems. When the right hand is not free to execute fine control of the bow, the effort to do so usually results in the tension being passed down the line to other parts of the body.
- Often poor rhythm is directly attributable to poor right-hand technique.
- Vibrato Issues. Most common among these is tightening in order to produce vibrato. The lack of knowledge of what vibrato is and how to teach it often

stagger me. Many students commencing tertiary study have never been taught vibrato at all.

- Postural Problems. All manner of these show up and can be attributable to a wide range of physical “set-up” issues. However, one of the most common is poor alignment of head over feet resulting in locked knees and hips. Consequences of this include “heavy” arms, poor sound, poor endurance, back pain, neck pain and can eventually lead to physical problems so severe that the student gives up altogether. Again, There is also the inevitable association of “struggle” with playing.
- Quite a few students present with major reading defects. Whatever method has been applied to their learning has resulted in them being encouraged to memorize quickly and to play by ear. As a result, one often finds it necessary to teach students to read more fluently. For such students, orchestra and chamber music can be a real nightmare in their first period of university study.
- All of these problems, or any combination of them, can result in an inability to play fast music accurately and so there is often an avoidance of fast pieces. Alternatively, the control and listening required for slow playing, or simply the dreaded and misguided “competition mentality”, produces the students who have avoided all the slow movements in their repertoire.

These and many other faults are common with students who are just beginning their tertiary study. They are also common in younger students. Ideally the younger students are when we can teach them, the earlier we can begin to eradicate their problems. In so many ways, it’s a shame to have to devote the tertiary years (even the postgraduate years) to doing the remedial work necessary for a better set-up. Unfortunately there is no alternative. One has no choice but to launch into a thorough renovation of their technique, for without this their chances of entering the profession at any level will be severely curtailed.

How much better it would be if, when they were starting out in first-year B Mus, these issues had already been dealt with by their previous teachers. Of course there are the students who have been well set-up and it is a joy to plot the trajectories of these students knowing that they will go so much further than those who have no option but to spend their tertiary years substantially re-learning technique.

As I said before, I have encountered similar pedagogical issues with (junior) teaching in the UK and USA. There is a world-wide shortage of good string teaching and the problem is certainly not unique to the Southern Hemisphere.

Of course, the last thing I want to do is to dwell upon the negatives in this paper. I want to devote most of my presentation to talking about what I think can be done and strategies for correcting these problems. Indeed, for students who are prepared to work consistently, many years of poor habits can be, in varying measures, set to rights.

I want to spend some time describing my approach to teaching because I have developed a set of beliefs and practices which I put into action with all of my students. After that, I will describe a technical regime that can be used to address problems and to renovate students’ techniques.

There are some general issues that I want to flag at the outset .

First among these is the principle that good teaching of strings is extremely labour-intensive. I know I'm not alone here in always giving more lesson time than is required by whatever university at which I am working.

As an aside, it has to be said that the university is not the ideal place for teaching professional music skills. It may be fine for musicology, even for composition; and, of course, there are many fine and interesting aspects to university life. But a 14-week teaching period, twice a year, with a 3-week stuvac is not the environment to produce good professional-standard string players. Students need many more weeks a year of teaching and many students need two lessons a week.

The University of Auckland is a happy situation for me (and for the string students) because each student is allowed a generous allotment for 1:1 lessons, plus 5 hours of Chamber Orchestra, plus 2.5 hours per week string class which includes frequent concert practices and also regular talks on various pedagogical topics. Then there is chamber music in which each group is allotted an hour per week for a tutorial. So, a total of 10+ hours face to face with me and with other members of the string department is a much better allocation of class time than I've encountered at many other universities.

A second important, over-arching principle is the use of each lesson as a rehearsal of the material which the student will be practising in the next few days before the next lesson. So, whatever technique(s) is being dealt with, is rehearsed and repeated until there is a fair chance of the student remembering it, both intellectually and physically.

Teaching a good practice technique is a large part of what I regard as my primary task. Some common flaws in practice techniques are:

- Unintelligent slow practice, namely practice which cannot be sped up. An example of this is when students use different and extraneous physical movements which they cannot do at speed.
- Another common flaw is no slow practice. Students do, actually, have to be taught exactly *how* to practice slowly.
- Yet another flaw is no fast practice.
- Another is unrhythmic practice, for example, allowing a tricky shift to distort the rhythm.
- Another is what I call "uninformed" practice, that is practising with no identified goal in mind. Mindless practice.
- Finally, a common flaw in students' practising is the inability to isolate the problem needing work. Students will commonly practise large slabs of music without identifying and isolating the real problem. For example, if there is one really difficult shift later on the page there is no point in playing from the beginning of the page, over and over.

A third broad principle is to use part of every lesson as a performance. This means that time is made in each lesson for the student to perform the repertoire piece(s) which has been prepared for that lesson. This helps to develop a different mind-set for performance including the ability to recover from little slips and to weave those little mishaps into the music. Students also learn to treat the repertoire they are playing as art and not as a mere series of technical hurdles.

A fourth principle (and this one may turn out to be controversial) is that, as much as possible, technical work should be separated from repertoire. Furthermore, technical

work is a primary tool; it is the servant of the music. A sound technique, capable of standing up to any test, must be in place before those technical skills are encountered and utilised in concert repertoire. It is, in my opinion, wholly advisable to avoid the practice of teaching technique through repertoire.

This is not to say that each lesson with any student does not contain both technique and repertoire but one needn't use the latter to teach the former. This separative approach is effective in two quite fundamental ways:

1. Developing a good technique, including correcting poor technical habits, takes a lot of specific effort. One doesn't want this "effort" to be going into the wrong thing, in the wrong direction. It is not desirable for that effort, or even struggle, to become associated with the repertoire which the student is studying.
2. This approach is a useful tool in helping students to deal with the stagefright that is often associated with their concert performances. When one largely confines one's comments about their repertoire pieces to musical issues ("what is the composer saying here? How is the music working at a purely musical level?") it takes the spotlight off the student him/herself and places it firmly upon the music. Also, in many cases, stagefright barely arises as the students have learned to associate "difficulty" with their technical work and not with their performing repertoire.

Talking further about this second point I must note that, in choosing repertoire for students, I adopt the practice of having them studying/ playing pieces that do not require them to be playing on a technical knife-edge when they perform in concert class, or for their exams and so on. It is important to realize that only one thought can pass through the conscious brain at any given moment. On the stage, one requires musical imagination and direction to be pre-eminent rather than, for example, the struggle for good intonation. This attitude and mental approach needs to be fostered in the earliest stage of learning. Ideally, and with very careful choice of repertoire, one "talks" music with a student whenever that student is playing music. This is only possible if one substantially "talks" technique elsewhere, namely in the study of scales and etudes.

Importantly, one may then teach an ever-expanding focus in repertoire study which embraces source material, related arts, architecture, history and culture. This is in huge contrast to the concentrated focus of mere note-learning which one often encounters.

Ideally, public performance should be a special experience. It should never be sullied by major considerations of whether the performer can "hold it together" to play the piece. Accordingly, it is important that the technical issues which the students are working on in their lessons, in their studies and scales, are much more technically demanding for them than the pieces they are being asked to play in public. It is my practice to avoid using repertoire to push a student's technique along. It is, in my experience, not good to give repertoire that is too hard for students in the belief that if they slog it out with those pieces for a few months (or for the rest of the year) their techniques will improve. I prefer not to use music in this way. The problem with this approach, viz. using repertoire to teach technique, is that students develop the wrong relationship with that repertoire. They learn to think about their performance repertoire in the wrong way and often in a negative way.

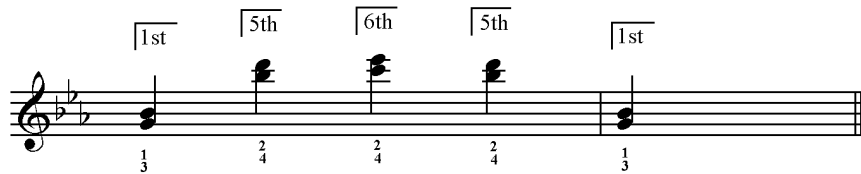
Another aspect of this needs to be highlighted here. Often, on the assumption that studies are less interesting than repertoire pieces, teachers will go looking for “real” repertoire in which to introduce particular techniques, an approach that stems from a conviction that the repertoire is “more musically interesting” and, ultimately, more “useful” to the student. To me, this is a fallacy. And it runs the risk of “spoiling” the repertoire for the students; it runs the risk of them having a less than ideal experience with it.

In teaching a student to deal with technique as a separate practice, one is really teaching what one hopes will become a lifetime’s habit. That which constitutes technical work will vary a little for younger students and be different again for established professional players. However, let’s talk about what, broadly speaking, constitutes technical work for advanced students:

1. Three and four-octave scales: all types – majors, minors, arpeggios, chromatic and whole-tone, and all double-stopping scales.
2. Studies: systematically working through all of the studies, i.e. all of the studies in the group being used. For me, that is largely Kreutzer, Dont, Rode and Paganini. I also draw upon other composers for specific technical issues.
3. Bowing – open strings practice, and various patterns applied to scales and studies.
4. A fourth category, perhaps controversial: Bach Solo Sonatas and Partitas, which I use for both musical and technical purposes. Some of the technical issues that are so well-covered in Bach are: preparing finger patterns across the 4 strings at once, thinking ahead with fingering for such things as blocking the fifths, hand positions and shapes, preparing the left hand ahead of the right, fluent bowing of chords, string crossings, martele, detache, legato.... so much of a solid basic technique is covered in Bach. I realize that here I am using great masterpieces of repertoire for technical purposes which seems at odds with what I have previously been espousing. My only defence is that one learns these pieces for a lifetime, and, with this music, one just keeps “peeling back the layers” to reveal, over time, their extraordinary musical content. It is interesting that Schumann and Chopin did the same thing with the Bach Preludes and Fugues. Bach presents us with ways of thinking, both musical and technical, which violinists can’t really get anywhere else.
5. Finally, and very importantly, a large component of technical work is the practice of taking any technical difficulties out of the repertoire being studied and mastering it in the designated technical work time.
How does one practise the technical difficulties that arise in new repertoire? Such things as difficult passage work, multiple stopping, shifts can all be transferred into scales practice. Problematic bowings can be applied to such studies as Kreutzer nos. 2 and 8 as well as being applied to scales and open strings. This is an important aspect of keeping technical work and repertoire as separate as possible.

This aspect of technical practice, technique no. 5 (above), could certainly comprise a whole paper on its own. It is here, in this part of technical practice, that a student can learn to be very creative. This can become a most enjoyable and lively part of practice in which the students can feel like they are composing their own music.

e)



- a) This is an excerpt, bars 300-303, from the Finale (Presto section) of the Beethoven Violin and Piano Sonata No. 7. I have inserted an arbitrary fingering for the purpose of this example. A different fingering would lead to different exercises.
- b) The first difficulty is the shift to fifth position and the necessity to keep the left hand in shape. One could expand upon this by including common chords in octaves on one pair of strings, or, by reversing the fingers it could be practised in seconds. See d) and e) below for an example of reversing the fingers.
- c) This illustrates another approach to mastering the shift to fifth position and ensures that the first and second fingers stay in shape, one tone apart.
- d) The second difficulty is the expanding hand shape in sixth position. Note the aural distance from the extracted difficulty in the repertoire passage (a). A student practising this exercise would not associate it with the Beethoven Sonata.
- e) This is the reversed finger version of (d).

After mastering (b), (c), (d), (e), always varying with rhythms, bowings, vibrato, tempo and so on the student will find that the passage in the Beethoven Sonata is no longer difficult. The problem has just “disappeared”. And this approach has left the Beethoven fresh in the student’s mind and heart, untarnished by the practice time put into mastery of this technical difficulty.

The more common approach, viz. to repeat the bars unchanged several times whilst practising the Beethoven Sonata, leads to the common problem that the student never really conquers this difficulty in the work. This creative process, as described in category 5 of technical work, can be very well-applied to technical work categories nos. 1-4 (see above) as well. One should never allow any practising of any material to be mentally boring or mindlessly repetitive.

So much can be taught through the materials of technical work, nos. 1-5, listed above.

- Postural problems can be more easily addressed in technical work where one can remove the feeling and emotional involvements of music-making. A drier environment is very useful for correcting postural faults.
- Intelligent intonation in which one remembers and tunes to the tonic and dominant in the key is properly established in scales and arpeggios.
- The basic hand shapes for the spacing of the fingers into tones and semitones, and fingerboard geography, where one learns the “landmarks” for the different positions are properly addressed in scales.
- Finger exercises, as required, and vibrato exercises fall into the province of technical work.
- Developing good and versatile bowings and a good sound applies to scales, studies and open string exercises.

All of these skills and many, many more are most easily dealt with through separate technical work.

Of course, all that I have said today is not to say that there won't be any "crossovers". For example, technical work must be practised with a beautiful sound; shifts can be practised in varying musical styles. One can teach the basic action for vibrato, but its many musical variations must be learnt in application in repertoire. So, obviously, the choices one makes, for example, which vibrato?, which bow stroke?, which fingering or shift?, need to be thoroughly discussed, and it is perfectly valid to do so. These issues are really musical considerations and are small adjustments to existing skills rather than major acquisitions of previously-unknown techniques. The development of musical discernment and technical development are obviously unified when one urges students to, for example, listen to recordings in order to hear various vibrati. To have a favourite sound in mind is a great advantage when learning vibrato. Thus the development of technique is not unmusical, only detached from repertoire studies.

I always tell my students of the musical skills that will be possible once they have learnt certain techniques – thus motivating and involving them in the process of building technique.

Galamian's scale system, with all its rhythmic invention, is an example of the application of lively mental processes to the practice of scales. The lengths to which he was prepared to go in his scale system to prevent boredom, as the antithesis of the ideal thinking process required on stage, is salutary indeed.

I want to conclude with an anecdote of my own which is more of a tribute to my childhood mentor, Robert Pikler. He used to refer to scales as "our morning prayers". He would pop his head into my year-7 Conservatorium High School classroom and ask me, in front of my class mates, "have you done your tirds, dis morning, Bess?" If the answer was, "No, Mr Pikler" he would ask me to, "come along and we will do our tirds together".(Titters from the boys in the class as I left the classroom!) He, of course, insisted that the scales be played beautifully, with good bowing and a good sound. I am indebted to him for countless hours of practice sessions on all manner of technique as well as for the reverence and insight he brought to the study of repertoire.

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