

Tadeusz Wroński on Practice: A translation of Chapter Four (“Work on Playing”) from “The Technique of Violin Playing”

Adam Wasiel, University of Sydney/ Sydney Conservatorium

Technical development as the pursuit of physical freedom is arguably one of the most important areas of violin study. Without an ability to execute movements with ease and comfort one cannot attain deep expression and communication of the often demanding and exhausting repertoire of a concert violinist. One of the most relevant and informative chapters within Tadeusz Wroński's *The Technique of Violin Playing* (chapter four “Work on playing”), contains a detailed discussion on the nature, planning and variety required within technical practice. The author reflects upon personal and pedagogical experience, extensively debates and discusses his method whilst providing invaluable suggestions important to all students and pedagogues. This free translation aims to highlight the wealth of knowledge of this somewhat neglected Polish pedagogue and his value in sparking discussion of commonly held notions concerning material, practice methods and the structure of development.

Tadeusz Wroński's *Technique of Violin Playing* is invaluable in discussing the nature and thought needed to maximise productivity within technical practice. Highlighted personal and pedagogical experiences, discussion of method and suggestions are all based upon a structured, thought out yet flexible approach taking into account complex physical and mental phenomena within violin teaching, learning and performance. Wroński's holistic approach to technique requires a degree of discipline and organization on the part of the performer, an ideal which however unattainable in its entirety, is noble and worthy of pursuit and reflection.

Technical practice is often chaotic, panic driven, unstructured and erratic in students, lacking proper work on any technical area. Just as time for technical work is frequently wasted by the knowledge that pieces are waiting and there is less and less time before an upcoming lesson, so too work on repertoire is spoilt through feeling guilty about neglecting proper technical preparation or having spent time where nothing more than a warm up was achieved. My first recommendation is that work with the violin should be thoroughly planned and one must execute practice with full knowledge that it is needed and that it saves time later when working on repertoire. One and a half hours a day is sufficient time for pure technical work. Through planning and uncompromising performance of technical exercises, one introduces a sense of inner calm and a clear conscience into practice.

This is just the first step; the next question is what one should practice in this time? Jumping from problem to problem is chaotic and unsatisfying. Daily practice of scales from Flesch's Scalesystem, despite the benefits that can be derived, is not sufficient due to a lack of work on the bow arm. One must practise trills, finger patterns, staccato, arpeggios, chromatic and diatonic glissandi, position changes (as a special problem in itself), left hand pizzicato, vibrato, fast passages, spiccato,

sautillé, ricochét, grand détaché, harmonics and much more. Numerous situations occur during practice. For example: we start practising thirds and after playing a couple of scales we feel that we are playing them better and better. We focus on this problem and when an hour of work has passed in a blink of an eye we do not have any time left to work on other problems. The next day we naturally do not practise thirds at all but focus on different issues.

Another example is when one day a violinist reminds him- or herself of the fact that for a couple of years he or she has not practised double harmonics and left hand pizzicato at all. They throw themselves on these elements, spend a lot of time over a couple of days on them only to put them away again with the sad feeling that they are not coming out as they hoped (nothing unusual in this!). From this emerges the thought that like a sportsman we should establish a comprehensive plan for technical training. Alas, at this place everyone seems to stop due to the huge amount of technical components seeming impossible to contain within an hour and a half, the view of our work as "soulful" and the idea that a formulaic and arithmetically planned approach is blasphemy. In the best situation a violinist practises a couple of ordinary scales and double stops, a few problems, some exercises given by the teacher and this is where the technical work ends.

The phenomenon that despite this approach some violinists derive good and even exceptional results is one of the great mysteries of nature. The ability to play the violin is an organic and holistic process which does not develop merely through isolated work on individual aspects, but grows as a whole. To illustrate this fact I would like to give an example from my own life. Upon graduating from the Warsaw Conservatorium in 1939 I performed, amongst other pieces, the Brahms Concerto. At that time I fell ill with inflamed nerves in my left hand and well remember my problems playing tenths in the concerto. I was left with physical injuries and even a few years after the pains had subsided I avoided tenths, fearing a return of the pain. In 1950 I began practicing the Concerto after 11 years of not playing tenths at all. I discovered that they came out with far more ease than before. I was perplexed by this fact and for the first time understood playing in a certain organic wholeness. After 11 years, my playing had developed in all sorts of ways and in this time areas had developed which had not been worked upon at all. It is clear that these elements could only develop because playing is not the sum of separate, independent abilities but an organic whole, developing holistically. We all discover this fact, the proof being when we occasionally tell ourselves "This and that is not really coming out but in a year or two, when I am playing better, I am sure it will" and often we are right.

We cannot, however, base our work solely on the wonderful talent of our organism to synthesize all elements of playing such that they spread throughout our performance. In the case of my tenths, one can be certain that if I had practised them normally over 11 years I would have played them even better! My pedagogical experience has told me that the level of organic, holistic development within playing is linked to the level of talent. The less talented the student, the more scrupulous they have to be in their practice of every "screw" and cannot forget about any area. The more talented the violinist, the more brilliant their progress appears due to any playing or doodling acting as a medium in which their holistic playing develops. If they also cared about "every screw", the results would be amazing. If we want to

achieve the most with our gifts we must observe everything in our playing and not merely drain our talent.

We should try to comprehensively highlight and assess the idea of one and a half hours of technical violin practice. Carl Flesch made an interesting discovery that better results stem from practising a certain element for a few minutes daily over a long time period rather than an hour a day over a shorter time period. It appears that practice of any specific element does not have to be long in terms of daily work but that it has to be performed every day over a longer period of time. To master a technical problem one must train it regularly in small portions over many months and years. One can derive benefits from Flesch's truth by planning daily work to encompass all elements of left and right hand technique in small portions of minutes, the sum of which equals one and a half hours. Is this possible? It is!

Wroński's Template for Technical Practice

Left Hand

Normal scales and passages – 10 minutes
 Thirds – 5 minutes
 Sixths – 5 minutes
 Octaves – 5 minutes
 Fingered Octaves – 5 minutes
 Tenths – 5 minutes
 Short trills – 3 minutes
 Chromatic glissandos – 2 minutes
 Diatonic glissandos – 2 minutes
 Changes of position and high positions – 4 minutes
 Fast runs – 2 minutes
 Vibrato – 2 minutes
 Pizzicato – 3 minutes
 Single harmonics – 3 minutes
 Double-stop harmonics – 4 minutes
 Total time: 60 minutes

Right Hand

Checking general technique (bow parallel to bridge, good bow contact) – 3 minutes
 Grande détaché – 2 minutes
 Détaché – 3 minutes
 Martelé – 2 minutes
 Staccato – 3 minutes
 Spiccato – 2 minutes
 Sautillé – 4 minutes
 Viotti stroke – 2 minutes
 Ordinary arpeggios – 2 minutes
 Bouncing and ricochét arpeggios – 2 minutes
 Thibaud exercise – 2 minutes
 Three string chords – 3 minutes
 Total time: 30 minutes
 Together 60 + 30 = 90 minutes

Before I discuss this plan I have to stop at a certain point which will bring a smile to more than one reader's face. I am talking about the uncommon two to three

minute time periods in which we could train various technical elements. What could one learn in such short period of time? Is it realistic? I regret that I cannot ask you, the reader, the following question and hear your response. The question is: Do you practise in a year left hand pizzicato for 1095 minutes? For 18 hours? Do you dedicate 730 minutes a year to practising your vibrato? 12 hours a year outside from any sporadic work on it within pieces? I am certain that a violinist using another method will not attain in yearly numbers this level of work on every technical element. Such two minute intervals lead to huge benefits and one must also consider that we encounter these elements in pieces, so that the total sum of work is much larger than the numbers I quoted. Practising according to this plan facilitates exclusive work on each technical area.

A detailed explanation of several points from both left and right hand lists is presented selectively in this translation.

Left Hand:

Point No 7: Practice of the short trill stimulates the left hand assuming that one obtains its impulsive character and energetic synchronisation with the bow hand. Compared to all different types of left and right hand movements, the energy of both arms must be identical in the short trill. I do not accommodate the long trill in my list of technical elements to be practised because it tires the hand and is very rarely encountered in large portions within repertoire. If someone has problems with it they can add it to the list, those who have no problems with it can omit it from practice.

Points No 8 and 9: Chromatic and diatonic glissandos should be practised on separate notes as well as on double stops. Like the short trill they act to calm the energy of the bow hand. Chromatic glissandos are very difficult for those who do not practise them.

Point No 10: I mention any change of position in practically every form within left hand work to draw attention to the varying ways in which one can perform them. Playing in high positions with and without shifting is mentioned however I identify it as a separate issue on account of the specific difficulties it poses.

Point No 11: Fast runs are also mentioned as a separate point however could be placed within point number one (simple scales and passages). I am concerned primarily with the feeling of impulse within runs.

Point No 12: Vibrato should be practised (if there is a need) on both long and short single notes. In the later, it has to have impulse (just like the short trill) and be aligned to the energy of the bow hand.

Point No 13: Pizzicato should be practised using examples from repertoire (Paganini, *Caprice No 24*; Sarasate, *Spanish Dances*). At the beginning practice should be soft and there should be an impulse in the hand on every note. Linking notes in

During a few minutes of martèlé practice it is necessary to go through all its different types.

Point No 5: I give three minutes for staccato practice but the amount of time depends on the difficulty this bowing presents to the individual. In my three minute proposal I assume that the performer has a basic mastery of technical elements but with staccato matters are often different. It is a stubborn and difficult bowing to master by someone who has not developed it “naturally”.

Point No 8: The Viotti stroke is well known. I reserve specific discussion of this bowing to my other publication called “The instrument of playing”.

Point No 11: I mention the Thibaud exercise after Flesch. It has the following benefits: a) it forces one to have a strong hold of the bow, b) it forces quick movements of the right hand and c) it requires a light movement of the arm and immediate contact between the bow and string.



Point No 12: Playing three string double stops often leaves a lot to be desired. The most common fault is the forceful yanking of the chord from the violin. Before this the bow often stays on the string which causes a strong snorting sound when it is moved. In minimizing the strength of bow contact, bow speed is often slowed and the chord scratches yet again. When trying to further refine the movement, often notes (either the lowest or highest) from the chord do not sound. The violinist then tries to play with a kind of arpeggio bow movement like the following line:



Another fault is attacking the string with the bow from the air which gives a brutal result. Here are a couple of points, so that three string chords sound good:

One should play all notes simultaneously, without arpeggiating;

The amount of energy used when playing these chords should not exceed that used when playing two note chords at the same dynamic level;

The energy of the arm movement should have an impulse in that the beginning of the chord should be “strong” with an immediate and very quick release of the energy. In other words, the movement of the arm should have thrust and momentum. The bow should not attack the string from the air nor begin from the string. Playing should commence exactly when the bow touches the string

The movement of the bow should be flat  or a little bent at the top 

and not  which resembles the convexity of the bridge.
The bow should move as if it were centred on the middle string

When practising chords during everyday technical work, one is required to carefully trace problems and by the end be able to perform them in every part of the bow, in any direction and in varying dynamic degrees. At the same time we're training left hand preparation which is linked to chord playing. One has to remember that according to the previous points we're only training standard types of chords but in repertoire, according to style and the musical context, the performance of chords varies from variously broken to more arpeggiated styles.

Returning to the broader picture of this chapter, everyone should analyse the points and based on them, devise their own list. One can eliminate certain points if they are already mastered or link certain points, for example fast runs and ordinary scales, or double stop chromatic glissandos and double stops. One can approach this plan differently through substituting points 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 14 and 15 with one scale from Flesch's Scalesystem, stopping oneself at 42 minutes (the sum of all the specific technical elements addressed). If someone has a good vibrato they do not have to practice it. The summary put together is as broad as possible in not leaving out anything which could be practiced, but not necessarily meaning that everyone has to train everything. The first thing to do would be to apply the summary to one's particular needs.

After a certain time, despite everything appearing to be fantastic, I discovered a certain flaw in my system. As if my thoughts were not calmed by the number of yearly hours spent training in daily two or three minute periods, in the depths of my soul there remained a certain nervousness, a feeling of insufficiency and uncertainty if this is enough! In order to calm this feeling I decided to introduce into my system of practice what I call a 'special day'. One day of the week should be devoted to practising special problems. After much practice I identified three fundamental types of special days: one devoted solely to double stops, another to shifting, ordinary scales, passages and fast runs and a final one for right arm problems. Saturdays could be devoted for this purpose. I hope, that this decision will sufficiently calm the violinist's conscience due to each of these three problem areas being trained for one and a half hours a couple of dozen times each year.

I previously mentioned that I am not a supporter of painstaking methodical work and quite rightly one could argue that I came to my conclusions contradictory to my own experience. This is true and after a certain time a thought began to bother me, that despite my plan, I am just doing the same thing in circles. The rigid tentacles of habit began to spoil the freshness and effectiveness of my original idea. Previous experience helped me further improve my system. I remembered what a positive impact every new discovery and practice of new exercises had upon my playing. I experienced this many times with Sevcik's *Op 1 Book 4*, Flesch's *Scalesystem*, Eberhardt's *Absolute Treffsicherheit auf der Violine*, Jacobsen's *Kreutzer Paraphrase Etudes* and other studies. I also remembered a quote of Professor Jarzbski who responded to a question of mine asking if I could practise according to Flesch with "of course, the left hand likes new things". I reminded myself that after a few months

work on every new position it stopped having a "striking" effect and that a return to old things again acted refreshingly on the energy and feel of my left hand. It took me a while until I found a way consisting of what would appear to be two contradictory truths:

- 1) In order to master something, you have to perform it over a very long time and every day as well as;
- 2) the hand likes change and long practice on the same problems acts like a 'break' on progress.

I give the solution below and although it can be read in a few seconds, in reality it developed in my mind over many years. My relevant conclusion is: in order to learn something well one must have the particular problem in one's "workshop" for a very long time, practise it daily but differently each day!

There's no sense for example in practising only scales in thirds in a period of five minutes each day, even if they are in different keys. It's better to practise a legato scale in diatonic thirds one day, scales in thirds (in third steps) like Flesch suggests another day, again differently another time with trills on thirds, thirds with big position changes, chromatic thirds, chromatic and diatonic glissando thirds, naturally, not all of these at once, but each day playing one of these varying forms. Other than this we can practice Paganini's *Caprice No 18* or a fragment of a Paganini Concerto. The point is to play thirds daily but to play them differently each day. This applies to all points on the technical practice list. In order not to fumble and waste time thinking about ways to practise, it would be very desirable for every violinist to devote one page in a special book to each point on the technique list and write out all possible ways to practise that element. It's enough during playing just to look at the appropriate page (where it is a good idea to mark with lines how many times the different forms have been practised) to quickly decide what should be practised that day.

Here is an example of a page from such a book:

Fingered Octaves
 Ordinary scales in 2 note legato /////
 Ordinary scales in 4 note legato ////
 Slow trills on each step of a scale ////
 Octaves from Paganini Caprice No 17 ////
 Octaves from Paganini Caprice No 13 ////
 Octaves from Wieniawski Polonaise in D Major ///
 Scales moving in thirds ///
 Passages from Flesch in fingered octaves ///
 Exercises from Sevcik Op 1 Book 4 in fingered octaves ///

I encourage all violinists to organise and use such lists and an hour spent establishing this kind of book will pay off in the future. With the passing of time one should fill the lists up and in many cases after obtaining sufficient skill in a technical element, one can eliminate any "dry" exercises and leave only fragments of repertoire.

Are there any further flaws in my system? Even if it is theoretically complete, one would be entitled to suspect that there are and any such gaps should be identified and rectified. I convinced myself that getting used to performing technical work daily before playing repertoire is not a good thing. A violinist used to this, when forced to practise without the beginning one and a half hour technical session does not feel good, is not warmed-up and lacks that which had preceded his playing over months or years. One must be able to play at once, in every situation, after every break, in the morning or evening. From this stems a further recommendation that one should practise the list once at the beginning of a day's work, another time at the end and also in the middle. Violinists should find a way that they can always play and not be restricted by prior routine and ritual.

I found another improvement to my system although humanity has known about it for thousands of years. What I am discussing here is the rhythm of rest and relaxation. Long ago people started resting on Sunday after several days work. If this were a waste of time it would have long been abandoned. It turns out however that we regenerate, relax, slow down the speeding week-load of work within our brains and clean our slate of energetic impulse in order for the following one to be new, fresh and unlinked to the previous. So on Sunday one should not practise anything technical but at most play something for ones enjoyment like a Sonata with piano, dedicating time only to musical problems. Maybe it would be a good idea not to play on Sundays at all? With the passing of time I am more and more of this opinion but what violinist could stand the nervousness (besides those born lazy) with the knowledge that they lost one day of practice in a week? (52 days a year + inevitable holiday breaks!) How effectively would one need to practice during the six remaining days for a rest on the seventh to truly be indispensable!

I want to propose a certain other activity which makes my system easier to use. It is a good thing if every evening one plans one's work for the next day so that whilst playing one does not waste time looking through notes. It is not a draining activity, in fact less tiring than the most simple beauty treatment, but odd that I have never met anyone, even amongst my own pupils, who did it! It is apparent that even some violinists who enjoy many hours struggling with pieces, have a certain "inability" and even reluctance in this regard. It truly is a shame!

Technical practice according to my system requires careful control of time whilst playing and a watch should be an inseparable friend of the violinist. When the time set for one element expires one should immediately move on to the next even if he or she feels so comfortable with the current one! Rests between elements (like relaxing a tired hand) are counted as part of work. It's a misconception to think that in the time of a short break one's brain activity stops. The truth of the matter is that the brain continues to work on sorting out material which has just been supplied to it.

In my experience as a pedagogue I have concluded that students react very well to writing out a technical training plan. I suppose that one can use it in varying levels of education. Of course the amount of technical problems will always be linked to how advanced the student is. A student exiting a class at the beginning of a school

year with a written out plan of practice together with minutes feels a bit like a patient leaving a doctor's office or like an athlete commencing a precise training plan after a conference with his/her trainer. This truly gives good results in teaching and the influence of printed or written words is strong. On top of this even if young people do not like practising they do like training and I believe in introducing this idea of "training" to instrumental work.

I would not want this system of technical work which I have proposed to be used in someone's hands as some sort of formal machine used to torture themselves and others. In order to avoid this I have mentioned many ways which make this system more elastic and flexible and I would only strongly defend the fundamental approach that one should train all elements daily and differently each day. Other approaches lead either to anarchy or to slow meandering in circles which dulls a violinist's sensitivity.

Summary Points:

Plan daily technical practice and the time allocated for each element as accurately as possible;

Practise all elements of technique daily;

Practise each technical element differently everyday;

Practise with a watch and fulfil all points precisely in your plan;

Have all "learning aids", including scale compilations, exercises, caprices and pieces, by your side so that you do not have to take a long time to find them;

Plan technical work for the following day every evening on paper;

Once a week introduce a "special day" where you spend time working on a certain set of problems;

Do not practise technique at all on Sundays;

Do not get used to always practising technique before repertoire.

Gather all possible ways of practising every technical element in a special notebook. Always augment and broaden this list with fragments of relevant repertoire to particular technical areas.

Adam Wasiel, Sydney Conservatorium

adam.wasiel@gmail.com

Reference

Wroński, Tadeusz. *Techniki Gry Skrzypcowej (Technique of Violin Playing)*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1996.