

Creative Woodshedding

Avoid drudgery to make better
use of your practice time

BY JAMES REEL

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WHY DO PEOPLE GIVE UP PLAYING after just a little study? Usually not because it's hard. Not because they hurt themselves. Not because instrument rental and lessons are too expensive.

No, the problem for most people is practicing. They want to play great, beautiful music, but what gets in the way is the daily drudgery of practicing. It's like having a chance to go back in time to help Antonio Stradivari create an instrument, but spending most of your visit watching the varnish dry.

It shouldn't be that way, says Philip Baldwin, assistant professor of violin and viola at Eastern Washington University.

"Good practicing is creative practicing," he insists. Practicing shouldn't be dull. But how do you make it more creative?

Baldwin offers plenty of tips on how to avoid mindless repetition.

First, he advises, establish a flexible set of priorities for practicing a new piece. Decide which elements you need to be working on, and which of them are most important. The order of importance can change depending on your technical and musical abilities and performance demands. If you have to play something without a lot of preparation, for example, you need to get control of the notes, rhythms, and intonation before anything else.

"It's really important not to get the cart before the horse," Baldwin warns. "A lot of students tend to focus on just their favorite thing. If intonation is what they deem most important, they'll focus

on it to the extent that they may not consider their physical movement. And if they're absolutely rigid physically, they won't hit the notes every time; rigidity destroys good playing."

So your priorities should include some balance of getting the correct notes down, working out the rhythms and bowings, watching your position and posture, being careful with intonation (more on that later), working on shifting (with a relaxed left thumb, repeat each shift five times or more, up and down), watching bow division and articulation,



and paying attention to vibrato and tone, all while developing an interpretation of the piece. That's just for starters.

TIME MANAGEMENT

Before you get nervous about what else you're supposed to accomplish during "creative practicing," Baldwin would like to remind you that you can get a lot of good work done if you manage your time smartly.

Use a tape recorder or video camera to record a segment of your practice, then play it back and note the time of every change of

activity, and decide if that pattern has helped you make any progress. If not, change it.

Set a kitchen timer at the desired period you think it will take to accomplish a practice-

Good practicing is creative practicing.

—Philip Baldwin

ing goal. One minute? Five? That depends on what you're working on, but don't spend more than five minutes at any one thing. "Having to accomplish the goal in a certain time frame adds focus and makes you work faster," says Baldwin.

Place a Post-it note at the beginning and end of the passage you're practicing, so you won't be tempted to waste time by reading beyond the end. Be sure to start with the cor-

rect bowing and position, and don't go on until you've performed the section accurately several times.

But don't use that technique for every single passage you practice. In the midst of one section, stop playing and perform a different, difficult section once only, then return to your regular practicing. That keeps you from getting bogged down in repetition.

Speaking of time, repeat a new activity for 60 seconds without judging yourself. "Sometimes students are afraid to try a particular bow stroke, posture, or part of the bow because they are afraid it will sound bad," says Baldwin. "Little is lost if only 60 seconds are devoted to it, so be brave and take a risk."

MAKE YOUR MARK

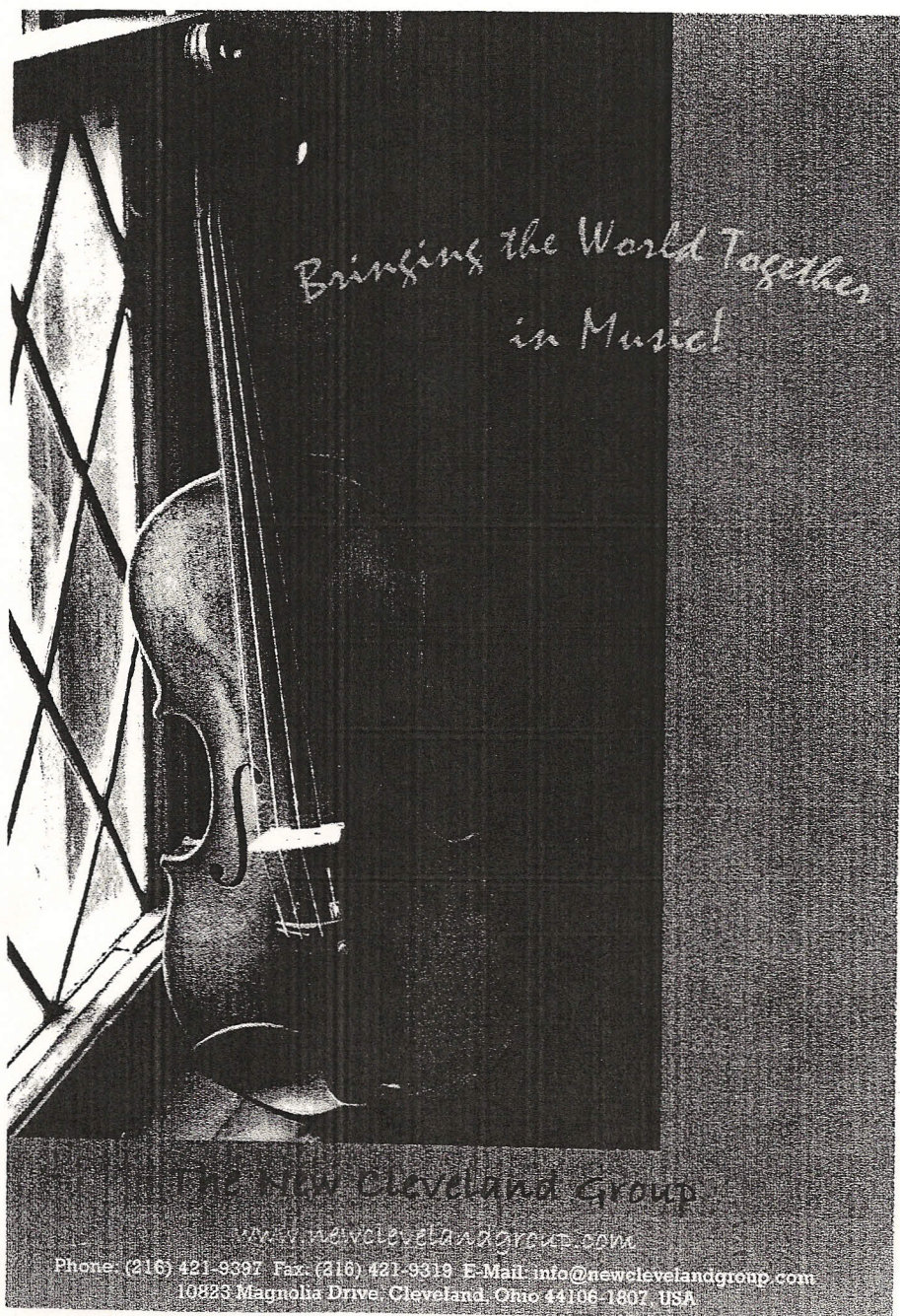
Most important to using your time efficiently, Baldwin says, is marking your music. Mark bowings and fingerings in the score as soon as you decide on them; mark reference bowings so you can start in the middle of a phrase; use colored pencils for specific kinds of markings; use brackets to identify practice spots; mark tempos. Keep pencils handy, and use them! Then you won't waste time figuring out the same things again and again.

"A lot of students think it's their teacher's job to mark things in their music," Baldwin sighs. "Students don't feel they have the right to change teachers' fingerings or bowings, which probably is not a bad instinct. But there's nothing wrong with marking a reminder bowing, or clarifying a direction. I have to tell my youth orchestra to write in 'staccato' or circle 'piano'; if I don't train them to do that, they won't do it. Maybe it's something about the sanctity of this beautiful page of music. If I have a nice edition I don't want to get sloppy with, I photocopy a page and do all my messy erasing on the copy; then when I get it to what I want it to be, I transfer the final marks to the original."

CLEAR THE WAY

To learn notes efficiently, Baldwin advocates what he calls the "Zamboni Effect." Zamboni is the make of the machine that cleans the ice at a skating rink.

"It eliminates all the grooves," Baldwin explains. "In music, the grooves are the mistakes or the miscoordinations that we make



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The New Cleveland Group
www.newclevelandgroup.com
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when we play. By completely reorganizing the way the music is practiced, your brain can learn in new ways; it's not stuck in its old ruts."

To achieve the Zamboni Effect, take a passage you need to practice; rewrite it, eliminating the printed rhythm; and play the notes one at a time. Example 1 (see page 22) is an excerpt drawn from the opening of Mozart's Violin Concerto No. 5 in A major.

Example 2 is the first sweep of the Zamboni: removing the rhythms. Examples 3 through 5 take the process further.

"The most evident problems," says Baldwin, "are rhythm and bow control. The rhythm is primarily a left-hand problem, while the bow control is obviously a right-hand problem. The best way to conquer this passage is to separate the functions of the hands and to learn each independently.

"To learn the left hand, first, remove the rhythm and practice the notes as equal quarter notes or half notes, using a drone pitch wherever possible." (See Example 2.)

Then, says Baldwin, apply one of the useful rhythms shown in Example 3 to the pitch collection of the passage. Example 4 illustrates applying rhythm No. 3 to the Mozart excerpt. Experiment with other rhythmic patterns, or even try alternating patterns, to keep your practicing fresh.

"I also find that changing the metric grouping helps a great deal," says Baldwin. "For instance, regroup patterns of fours into triplets or quintuplets, or shift the metric accent to the second, third, and fourth note of a group." (See Example 5.)

Once you've mastered the notes, you can address the right-hand problems.

TRAIN YOUR EAR

Baldwin also advocates using practice time to train your ear. Take a high passage down an octave. Sing through a passage for pitch and musical contour. Close your eyes and just listen to a passage in your head. Sing and play at the same time.

Having a good ear is essential to working on good intonation. Baldwin suggests that you use drone pitches to check the harmonic integrity of your intonation; you could even record a series of drones with a metronome pulse, and play back to the recording.

"Intentionally miss a note or shift sharp or flat," Baldwin says. "If you can miss it, you know where it is." And practice something called "visual intonation"—visualize the

spaces between notes with the various fingers, so you can create each note accurately in your head before moving your finger on the string.

There are many ways to work on coordination between the left and right hands while making practice less repetitive. "If you assume the problem is in one hand," says Baldwin, "check the other for the solution."

Don't get so focused on the physical aspects of playing that you forget about your mind and heart.

He suggests that you play a slow passage quickly, or a fast passage slowly. Practice the hands separately.

Change the tempo, but never go faster than you can play perfectly. Try a musical version of sprinting—practice short segments, and then join them. Use light left-hand fingers and keep them close to the strings. Release the thumb pressure of either hand. If you're playing notes in groups of four, say "one-two-three-four" as you play. Group notes into units and think only of the unit, not of the individual notes. And if an open string follows a fingered note under a slur, use a mild left-hand pizz to help rhythimize the bow.

THE BIG PICTURE

But while practicing, don't get so focused on the physical aspects of playing that you forget about your mind and heart. Baldwin suggests that you spend some practice time analyzing the music's chord structure, writing in enharmonic equivalents, analyzing bow placement and distributions, memorizing, even playing a passage backward to keep your brain working.

And in terms of your emotions and those in the music, vary the mood of a section, vary the dynamics, vary your practice environment, vary the time of day you practice, do mock performances for a tape recorder, and do real performances for anybody nearby, even your dog.

At all times, keep your mind in motion, right from the beginning of your practice session. Baldwin is especially fond of a line from Robert Gerle's *The Art of Practising the Violin*: "Think what you need to accomplish specifically during the day's practice: three minutes spent thinking about your practicing before you start are worth three hours spent in aimless repetition, during which you only learn the bad better."