

Tony's Top 10 Practice Tips

Antonio Arnone, associate professor of cello at the University of Iowa, offers ways to succeed in the practice room



A lot has been written over the years on how to practice stringed instruments effectively. There is a good reason for this, as probably 95 percent of the time you spend with your instrument is in the practice room trying to improve your playing.

Over the years, I have become more and more focused on teaching my students how to succeed in the practice room, as I believe there is really an art to practicing.

I often ask my students, "Why do you practice?" They almost always know the correct answer, saying, "to get better!" But so often you lose sight of that when you actually step into the practice room, even when you're focused.

One of my goals is to take the mystery out of practicing, in order to really accomplish the most in the time provided and then ultimately get better.

So, with that in mind, here are my top 10 practice tips for string players.

10 First things first: Get a great recording in your head.

I can't tell you how many times students have come in trying to play a piece without really knowing how it goes. In order for your hands to know what to try and achieve, your brain needs to have a clear idea of sound, shape, articulation, and intonation in order to guide the hands. That's not to say your artistic vision can't continue to develop as you learn the piece, but you need that foundation to tell your body what habits to get into from the beginning.

9 Have a goal when you start practicing.

Too many of us sit down at our instrument and just dive into a piece and hope to get something done. Before you start, make a plan of what you are going to try to accomplish in the next hour,

20 minutes, or even five minutes. Then stick to it. Then ask yourself every ten or 15 minutes if you are really making that passage better.

8 Clearly identify the problems you are having.

My students often say something like “That sucked,” after they play, or “I was really out of tune.” When you practice, you need to *be as specific as you can*. What sucked? My sound? Was I using too slow a bow? Was my bow losing contact? Was my bow speed too slow? For intonation, ask yourself, “Was I out of tune during a shift, or was my hand position at fault? Or was I just not hearing the pitches correctly?” The more specific you can be, the easier it is to fix things.

7 Separate the hands when practicing.

This sounds obvious, but it isn’t done enough. If you have a problem with the bow, just let the left hand enjoy a timeout, then isolate and fix what isn’t working with the bow.

6 Experiment.

One of my favorite (and slightly obvious) tips to remind students is that *you have to do something different with your body in order to sound different!* Wind and brass players have it hard in that it’s difficult to actually see how to produce a sound, but string players are lucky because it is so physical. Learn to choreograph your motions, like dancers or conductors often do, and this will change how you sound. Try things that might even seem crazy: Play while lying down! Violinists and violists: Bend forward and see what happens. Or cellists: Stand up. How do the physics of making sound change?

5 Ask yourself, ‘Is it better, worse, or the same?’

After trying things, it’s critical to find out what is changing, and whether it’s better, worse, or staying the same. I often use the analogy of going to the eye doctor, where they ask you about 50 times “better, worse, or the same” as they flip through different lenses. It’s a wonderful question to ask yourself when practicing and will help keep you from practicing a passage over and over and not having it get better—something almost everyone is guilty of at times.

4 Record yourself.

As I stated in the beginning, you have to start practicing with a great recording in your head. But way too often, students then think they sound like this great recording when they actually don’t. One of the hardest skills for me to learn was to really hear myself honestly and objectively. The best way to do this is to record yourself and then listen. It can be a movement or a measure. Even better is to videotape yourself so you might notice what is physically getting in the way of your expected result.

3 Take advantage of technology.

I am not a lover of smartphones, but since we all have them, use them! Not only can you record yourself easily, but you have a metronome and a tuner/drone at your fingertips at all times. I am continually amazed when students know they have bad rhythm in a section, but don’t use a

metronome to help. Tuners, and especially drone notes, also work wonders on developing your intonation. I love to suggest caution with a tuner. Don't play a note while looking at it and let it do all the work. Try finding the correct pitch of a note *without* looking at it, and then check to see if you were right! You learn more quickly that way.

2 Don't stop and fix a note, and think it will be better next time.

This is a huge one! Almost everyone is guilty of this habit. You naturally want to stop and adjust something, especially an out of tune note, but if you play it wrong and adjust it, you are teaching your hand to play incorrectly. Missing is OK, but it's critical to note where you are having the problem and then go back and do it correctly many more times than you do it incorrectly. When a student comes in and says something like "I am always flat on this note," I know he hasn't been practicing it correctly.

1 Slow things down!

Or, as someone once told me: "Don't play it faster than you can." This is the most important piece of advice for practicing. As I stated in No. 2, you must train your body to play a passage correctly a very high percentage of the time in order to have success in a performance. The best and fastest way to achieve this is to play the passage as slowly as you need to in order to be successful with it. It really works!

Mind you, you don't want to play it slowly and unmusically, but playing slower gives you the time to think through every nuance that you want to play and gives your brain a bit more time to process everything while you play. It also teaches the body the correct way to play from the beginning, so you don't have to unlearn things later.

Recently, I was preparing for a Brahms Double Concerto performance, when I happened to hear a performance of it on the radio while driving with my ten-year-old son. He said, "Oh, this is the piece you have been practicing . . . but you play it much slower."

This is really just the tip of the practicing iceberg, but I hope that these tips help you use your time in the most productive way. I learned that I had less and less time to practice as I got older, got a job, and had kids. Efficiency becomes critical the older and busier you get! With all that said, don't forget to have fun when you practice. I often even schedule a bit of "fun" time in my practice to just enjoy an old piece or play through a movement of Bach.

As difficult as it can be to improve on a stringed instrument, we should never lose sight of what drew us to these amazing and beautiful instruments!