Eight practice mistakes you're making right now

by Nathan Cole of natesviolin.com

Playing music is one of my great pleasures, and if you're reading this, it's one of yours too. What a joy it is to hear sound that you've created! Can you remember the sense of wonder you felt when you first began studying your instrument? Your progress very likely exceeded your expectations. As you mastered basic skills, you found that what had been complicated was now automatic. Seemingly without effort, you were able to take on more rewarding music. But now, those times exist only in your memory. With enough effort, you're able to make progress. But even then, it doesn't "stick". Instead of "two steps forward, one step back" it feels like the opposite. You may be hitting a plateau, or more dramatically, a wall! Whatever you call it, you want to know how to get past it. I'm going to tell you about eight mistakes you're making in your violin practice right now.

1. You're not succeeding.

The greatest players spend nearly all of their practice time succeeding. They rarely fail. How is that possible?

I assume that you're familiar with the phrase "practice makes perfect". And you've probably heard the popular rebuttal: "No, perfect practice makes perfect!" My first teacher had that saying embroidered and framed on her wall, in fact. Like everything else on the walls in her studio, it became part of the background of my violin study. I accepted it as gospel. But when I was old enough to think about it, I had a question: *if I'm already practicing perfectly, then why do I need to practice at all*? Some kids will do anything to get out of practicing!

So here's the secret: there is no such thing as perfect playing. There is great playing, wonderful playing, transcendent playing, but not perfect playing. And what do all of these lofty adjectives have in common? You can reach them by taking small steps, as on a staircase. Each step up is a small success, each step down a small failure. And I am willing to bet that you're taking too many steps down in your practice each day.

The fact is that the greatest players spend nearly all of their practice time stepping up: succeeding. They rarely fail. How is that possible? Imagine yourself practicing a thorny passage, and ask yourself this: does "success" to me mean playing the passage perfectly, today? Unless you're nearly perfect already, that's much too high an expectation for today's practice session. Therefore you are guaranteed to fail. The best players spend almost all of their practice time succeeding because they define success appropriately and constantly change its definition to meet the circumstances at hand. Only when they are close to a performance does success mean "presenting this piece at my full potential". And by that time, they have months of success already under their belts in the practice room. Since they know only success in their practice, performing is no different.

Now listen to how an average player might describe daily practice, and see if it sounds familiar. All the words in italics, by the way, are ones that you'll learn to ignore, because they will only impede your progress. Practice is a constant stream of small failures, with each *attempt* at a passage falling short of your ideal. How far short doesn't matter, because in your mind you are not *there* yet. You only experience true confidence in the easiest passages, and even that seems hollow. After all, those are the passages that you *should* be able to play, so why would you *deserve* confidence elsewhere?

To see this in action, take a fast passage that's currently sloppy in terms of rhythm, sound, and intonation. It even ends with a run to a high note. You judge your playing of this passage by whether you hit the last note or not. To start with, you try several times to see if you can "get it". Once gotten, you continue trying to see if you can keep it up. You figure that this kind of testing will help you in performance. Sometimes you get it just right, but nine times out of ten often you don't. That gives you a "batting average" of just .100. Not an inspiring number when performance time rolls around! With some work, you're able to "hit" the passage every other time. But that still gives you just 50/50 odds in performance. And don't forget to subtract for nerves…

So imagine a different method: before you play the passage even once today in tempo, you know in your bones that you're not going to play it ideally the very first time. So you don't! Instead, you work on the first half of the passage, the part that comes before the run. You pick a tempo at which the notes are no problem, so that you can focus on sound and rhythm. You play this way five or six times since it feels so comfortable. In fact, after five or six successes it feels natural to play it a bit more

quickly since there are no problems. You do that five or six times as well, then move on to the run at the end. You remember that the end of the run wasn't satisfying the last time you played it, so you play only the end. Again, the tempo is quite slow so that you can truly hear and feel the notes. You are succeeding at every turn. So you put this passage away for now, and switch your focus to a different passage. You'll return later today.

Now, just like the best players, your success rate is close to 100%. Of course the best players have honed all of their tools with years, even decades, of this kind of work. Without the tools for a particular passage, there's only so far you can succeed before your technical weaknesses prevent you from going further. But rather than *trying* anyway, which will end in guaranteed failure, you can work on an etude specifically tailored to that weakness. You succeed there as well, and the cycle continues. What was Yoda's best line in *The Empire Strikes Back*? "*Try not. Do or do not. There is no try.*" He was telling Luke how to succeed.

2. You're making a bad sound.

You perform how you practice. So make a great sound whenever your bow touches the string.

If succeeding in your practice is the key to everything that follows, then what is the most common cause of failure? Poor sound quality. Great players make a great sound all of the time. That goes for slow practice, fast practice, and performance. Lower-level players "save" their best sound for performance, only to find that it's not there for them when they need it. As we already covered, you perform how you practice. So make a great sound whenever your bow touches the string.

So what happens when your sound loses quality in a complex passage? I would ask you a return question: can you draw a good sound with a single bow on an open string? That's the basis for every other bow you draw, and I'll bet your answer is yes. I return to this most basic stroke much more often than you might imagine, because it's always satisfying. I need that reminder in my ear, when the going gets rough and I'm tempted to lose track of my sound.

If you can make a good sound on one bow, why not two in a row? Now two faster bows? If you can make one note ring, how about two and then three in a row? Entire performances are built on these simple steps, if you're willing to keep a good sound through all of them.

The process breaks down when you pile too many challenges on top of making a quality sound. Soon your ear is pulled away from sound and toward the note you're

playing out of tune. Or the shift you keep missing. Or your uneven string crossings. Even some of my professional students make an entirely different kind of sound when they're "practicing" for pitch as opposed to really "playing". They sound like students while practicing, hoping to sound like professionals again while playing. But I remind them that the violin doesn't care about this distinction! When you make a sound that's not your best, it pollutes your ear and it will creep into your playing at the worst possible time.

By making sound your priority, you learn to put other aspects of playing in perspective. And lest you think that this will cause you to make the same sound all of the time, know that instead you will become more sensitive to the smallest nuances in your playing. You'll open your ear to a world of colors and expressive possibilities.

3. You're working too hard.

A nice, relaxed focus is all that's required. It's neither hard nor easy, it's just playing.

By working hard, I'm not talking about putting in the hours, or making a long-term commitment to your practice. You have to do those things if you want to advance, of course. I'm talking about the physical and mental *effort* that you're expending minute-by-minute when you practice. So let's talk about two more words that need to go in italics: *easy* and *hard.*

All too often, violinists make a mental division between two kinds of material: the "easy stuff", such as warming up, playing scales, and running through familiar music; and the "hard stuff", like working on shifts, slow practice, or repetitions. Thinking this way is like eating at a diner where the only good dishes are fried food and dessert. The vegetables are unappetizing, even though you know you should probably eat some. So what do you do? Get the fried stuff, choke down some vegetables, then feel guilty and skip dessert. An unsatisfying meal all around. A practice session often works the same way. You start easy by warming up and running something through. You don't like what you hear, so you do some hard work until you can't stand it anymore. You figure you've made some progress, but you beat yourself up a little for not doing even more.

The truth is that playing the violin, the actual act of playing the violin, doesn't take a lot of physical effort. Why do you think we use the word "play"? Similarly, the best kinds of practicing don't take extreme mental effort or a sense of deprivation. A nice, relaxed focus is all that's required. It's neither hard nor easy, it's just playing.

When you stop making the distinction between hard work and the rest, you realize that all of your playing falls into the same category and deserves the same

focus. Warming up becomes more interesting, and varies from day to day. Slow practice varies as well, from *really* slow to just a bit under tempo, depending on what success means at that moment. Repetition may mean three times or twenty, depending on your available mental energy. That's right: mental energy is a finite resource, and you can't spend what you don't have. When energy runs out, rather than doubling down and trying to "work harder", what you need instead is a break! When your focus returns, you can continue playing. Just as there's no *try,* there's no *hard* or *easy*, only playing and resting.

4. Your short-term expectations are too high.

Listen to what's coming out of your instrument, and forget both your preconceptions and your value judgments. Instead, start hearing specifics.

Imagine a world without credit, where "living within your means" was the only option. A lot of problems would disappear, but so would a lot of possibilities. Used wisely, credit can help you build the future you imagine. But you have to have a solid foundation, or income, to build on. The world of practicing works the same way. A player who always "lives within her means" may play well, but she never advances, or advances very slowly, because she never imagines anything beyond her current level. So I want you to have imagination, but just as with credit, trouble comes when your imagination runs away with you. When you finance a fancy life on credit, you may pretend that you "deserve" that life, despite the fact that you don't have the income to pay for it.

Take a look at any article on taking control of your finances, and what is the first step? Figuring out exactly how much money is coming in, exactly how much is going out, and how you're spending it. It can be a painful, unfamiliar process. But it's crucial, not only in the beginning, but going forward as well. Many people realize that they've been imagining a very different financial life from the one that's staring them in the face. *I don't deserve this debt! I'm a careful spender!* In the same way, you may be unable to hear yourself with your own ears. Instead you hear a recording of sorts: a Joshua Bell recital, or an Itzhak Perlman CD, or the way you sounded last week when you were really nailing a passage in the practice room. You feel like you *should* be sounding that way instead of how you actually sound. In other words, you believe that you *are* a certain type of player, even if you're not sounding that way at the moment.

This leads to frustration when the playing that comes out of your instrument doesn't match the recording, the high expectations. Your first response is probably to make a value judgment and a vow to work harder. *I'm playing badly now, and I have to get better*. Time to break out a shop-worn practice method such as working it up with the metronome, or even worse, trying the passage several more times in tempo to see if it improves on its own (it almost never does). And even after working the passage up from a slow tempo, it can break down again and leave you feeling worse than you were before.

But what happens if you truly listen to what's coming out of your instrument, and forget both your preconceptions and your value judgments? You start hearing specifics: instead of "I'm playing badly", you hear "there is a scratch during this string crossing" or "I would like to play this note higher". Those are two examples of changes you could make without breaking a sweat. That's how you transform your playing starting today: one achievable goal at a time.

5. Your goals are too low, or they don't exist at all.

Your long-term goals should be ones that you can write down, along with steps you can take to get there.

Now your ears are open, attuned to making changes that you can make today. But those changes won't add up to much unless you have a long-term goal. This kind of goal is not, "I'd like to play this piece more in tune" or "I wish I had a steadier spiccato". Those are things that you can work on right now and see results day by day. No, the kinds of goals I'm talking about are performances, auditions, or learning new material.

One of the reasons that the Suzuki method is great for children is that long-term goals are built in from the start. The first goal is simply to earn a real violin, as an upgrade from the cardboard so many of us began with! And once you get a violin, the goal becomes to play a song (Twinkle Twinkle) in front of people. Then to get through Book One and to perform that for an audience. Then to win a spot in a special recital. And all the while, in group classes and recitals, you get to see the bigger kids playing the fun songs that you're working towards. And if you take the Suzuki method all the way to the end, there's a graduation recital after Book Ten.

But what happens when we practice as adults? Our goals, if we think about them at all, become quite abstract: becoming a better player, feeling more confident, etc. The problem with such goals is their lack of definable steps to achieve them. Your long-term goals should be ones that you can write down, along with steps you can take to get there. What do you mean by "becoming a better player", anyway? Do you mean the

kind of player who could play a Mozart concerto, memorized, with piano? Then learn a Mozart concerto, find a pianist, and set a date! That's a long-term goal. Feeling more confident would be great as well. Do you know what builds confidence? Setting a goal and achieving it while friends and family show their support.

Regardless of what your long-term goals are, see that they include some kind of performing. I've talked to enough great players to know how much importance they place on it. When you play in front of people, when you put something of yourself out there, it becomes easier to do it the next time. You also discover things about your character that you can't learn by just staying in the practice room. These discoveries, while not always welcome, inform your musicianship and make your playing a truer representation of yourself. After all, whether you play for paying audiences or just a few friends and pets, one goal should always be to share your joy with others.

6. You're not practicing for performance.

The moment you decide to get into "performance mode" is often the same moment you realize you're not prepared for a performance.

Let's say that you have a date to perform the music you're working on. Knowing when you'll present what you're practicing, even if it's an informal performance, helps motivate you to put in the work every day.

But once you're working, it's all too easy to lose sight of that eventual performance. Life gets in the way if you let it! Growing up, I would think to myself, *I've still got a month, I can take it easy with this piece for now.* We already covered the fallacy of "easy" and "hard" work, so I needn't tell you that this kind of thinking didn't help my playing. Two weeks before the performance, I would think, *I'm still in learning mode, so I'm doing everything under tempo for now, just getting the notes clean.* In other words, I wasn't using my best sound and I was building bad habits that might show up when they were least desired! Finally, with the date one week away: *OK, time to get into performance mode. No more messing around.* Does any of that sound familiar? If so, you know that the moment you decide to get into "performance mode" is often the same moment you realize you're not prepared for a performance!

So what is the proper timetable? When should you get into performance mode? As soon as you begin learning a piece. Think about a meal in the past that you planned, cooked and served. The meal day and time was set, and you chose a recipe. Once you gathered your ingredients, you didn't just begin mixing things together, then partway

through say to yourself, “from now on I’ll really prepare this for people to eat!” Indeed, you knew from the moment you chose the recipe that your guests would eat the meal, and all of your efforts were geared toward that moment.

You need the same mindset with music. Every bow stroke you play, from your very first reading of a piece, should contribute to the eventual performance. The difference between recipes and scores is that recipes are written so anyone with basic technique and tools can reproduce the final result: a meal. But the printed score from which we practice is not a recipe: it’s more like a menu. The notes on the page *are* the final product, waiting to be transformed by you into musical sounds! No instructions are given as to how you should get ready for your performance. Imagine cooking a meal with only the menu as your guide, and you begin to appreciate the task of learning a piece of music.

So without a step-by-step guide as to how to prepare your piece, how can you even get off the ground? First, always make a sound that you’re proud of. That’s why we talked about that before anything else. Next, imagine that your teacher, or another musician, is listening to you practice. Not a paying audience member who expects perfection, mind you, but someone who is interested in how a piece is put together and who wants to understand every step that you’re taking. Would you expect to see a chef spend 20 minutes meticulously dicing onions, tomatoes and peppers, only to throw the whole lot into a blender? As someone who has cooked before, you wouldn’t understand that use of time. So why would you spend 20 minutes playing something slowly with the metronome, only to play it fast and out of tune several times in a row? Yet I hear violinists practice this way all too often. Some passages need slow work with the metronome, and others don’t. Your eventual performance must guide your practice.

Then why practice scales and etudes, since they’re rarely (if ever) performed? Because some tools need honing away from the “work zone”. Imagine an archeological dig, where the goal is to extract a precious artifact from its surroundings. When a chisel needs sharpening, you wouldn’t do it right next to the ancient objects! You’d step away, sharpen with purpose, then return to the dig. Similarly, working on complex passages without properly honed technique is pointless. Continuing to hammer away at a passage can implant bad habits that will be difficult to root out before your performance. So step away and sharpen that technique with a scale or etude. Pick an etude that deals with a weakness you or your teacher has identified. Then the performance idea continues on a smaller scale: practice the etude as though you were going to perform it! That means using your best sound and relaxed focus. Then when you return to your piece, you’ll be able to resume preparing it for presentation.

7. Your problem-solving is one-dimensional.

See that your slow version contains the same direction and articulation that you'd like to have at tempo.

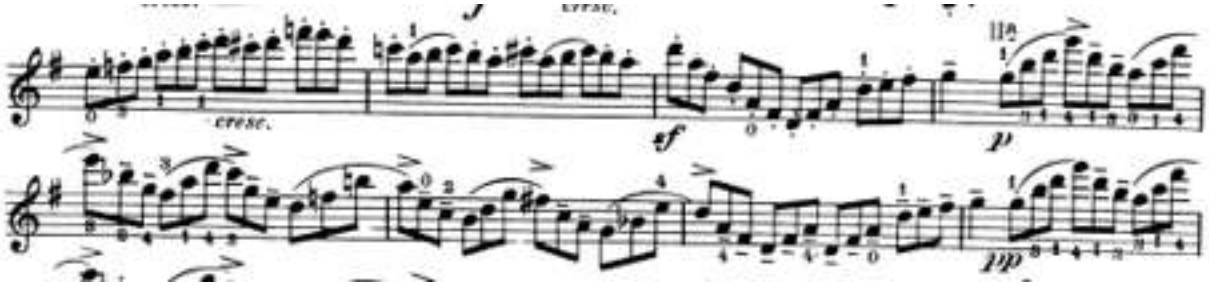
If you've been following me so far, then you're practicing with a great sound and open ears. You're not labeling things hard or easy, good or bad, but you have identified some spots where you want to make changes. Now for nuts and bolts: how do you make these changes? In other words, how do you solve problems?

You probably already use the most popular method: play under tempo. But have you thought about why you do that? Because it's easier, you might answer! But why is it easier? Remember that *tempo* means *time*. At a slower tempo, you have more time to perform the actions that make up the passage. Pilots begin their training on slower planes, for example, and only later graduate to jets where they have to make decisions more quickly and further in advance.

What's the biggest flaw in most violinists' slow practice? Even under tempo, it doesn't sound good! That's right: most of the same issues that were problems at tempo remain problems under tempo. This tells me not only that you aren't really listening, but that you're wasting precious mental energy. You must have slowed the tempo down for a reason. What was the reason? Solve that problem first, whether it's sound quality, even-ness, intonation, or whatever it may be. Then, before you bring the tempo back up, see that your slow version contains the same direction (or phrasing) and articulation that you'd like to have at tempo. By the time you are able to achieve musical playing in a slow tempo, most of your work is done. Increasing the tempo becomes a matter of fine-tuning timing, something that our bodies and minds usually accomplish quite well as long as we don't interfere with unrealistic expectations.

But not every difficulty is a matter of time or timing. Think about your bow arm. You know that there's a relationship among three variables: bow speed, bow pressure, and bow sounding point (distance from the bridge). Changing one usually necessitates a change in the others. These changes are usually not difficult to make at tempo; what takes work is building the ability to decide which sounds result from which combinations of speed, pressure and sounding point. Therefore some of your practice time on a passage should be devoted to experimentation with these variables, and not necessarily under tempo. You may come up with several good options to choose from! Or you'll find that a particular passage improves dramatically with a certain combination. And you never needed to take out the metronome.

Another pitfall in problem-solving is trying to solve too many problems at once. In fact, two is usually one too many! Take, for example, this passage from the Mendelssohn concerto, starting with the last bar of the first line:



These bars are notorious for their difficulty in performance (despite the fact that you'll no longer think of them as difficult). But so often they're practiced exactly as written, when in fact most players would be better off separating the difficulties. Listen to yourself play the passage with one bow for each note: is it out of tune, uneven, scratchy? All of the above? If it's all of the above, then start at the beginning: sound. Can you play the passage, slowly and in tune, with a great sound? If not, which note or notes would you like to change? Don't expect more than this at first: changing a single note to match the high standard of the others. Move on to other problem spots in the passage until it feels comfortable. You've completed the groundwork.

Now, you could work up the tempo with these separate bows, but for now, switch tactics and keep the tempo comfortable. Add in the slurs so that you are bowing as written. Is your sound keeping its quality? If not, is there a particular string crossing where the quality takes a dive? Perhaps your bow arm is not changing levels to match the string that you're on. After solving one problem, then another, you'll soon be playing the passage comfortably and musically, under tempo. You may have to repeat this process in the coming days, but as you get used to playing comfortably, your maximum tempo will rise without effort. Your former problems will remain just that: solved!

8. You're not getting feedback.

How do you know that your playing is as good as it could be? In the end, you need a set of ears other than your own.

You'd like to share your violin playing with the rest of the world (or at least your friends and family), but how can you know how it will be received? If only you could jump outside your own body and take the place of your listeners, all would be well!

Failing that, however, you must develop the skill of hearing yourself as your listeners hear you. We touched on this in number 4, when we talked about hearing yourself as you actually sound. But now let's get into more detail about how to develop that skill. The best way is to record yourself playing, while at the same time keeping your own ears open. Write down your impressions, both general and specific. Then, when you listen to the playback, are you surprised by what you hear? Does your impression as a listener match your impression as a player? If what you hear in the recording is just what you heard yourself playing, then congratulate yourself! You already have the tools to shape your playing however you like. If you do hear differences from what you expected, write them down and note where they occur. Then play those parts over again, listening while you play. Do you hear what you heard before, or are you listening differently now? You'll have to repeat this process over a period of weeks and months to attain an ideal ear.

But even then, how do you know that your playing is as good as it could be? In the end, you need a set of ears other than your own. For many violinists, that's a teacher. But it could also be another respected musician or colleague. Or even a music lover! The greater the range of your listener's experience, the more valuable this feedback will be.

If you'd like regular feedback from someone who performs and listens every day at the highest level, then visit me at the Nathan Cole School of Violin. You can start by watching any of my hundreds of video lessons on a variety of repertoire. Or you might read more of my thoughts on practicing, teaching and performing. Then, no matter your current level, make a video of yourself and send it to me. I'll watch and listen, and tell you the most important aspects of your playing to work on, and exactly how to work on them. You'll be able to compare your impression with mine, which will refine your ear. You can also visually compare what you're doing with what I'm doing, and we'll work together to make positive change. Between your ears and mine, you will improve more quickly than you ever thought possible!