

Some hints for great practicing:

Mindless Repetition and The Illusion of Mastery

Scientific studies have proven that “massed” practicing, the act of repeating, or re-reading something over and over again, is the least useful method of practicing.

Most students have studied for a test at some point using only massed practicing. Intuitively, most students feel that repetition and re-reading is *useful*. They may actually ace the test, and then the next day, forget nearly everything studied.

That's the problem with massed practicing.

Massed practicing *feels good, it's easy, it's intuitive*, but it only gives a student the *illusion of mastery*. The resulting gains are very small. Careless, massed practicing is the primary reason teachers hear these infamous words: **“It sounded better at home.”**

Some repetition is necessary in violin playing. *After* solving a problem in violin playing, repeating a passage several times can be useful as a test, and to solidify a new learned skill in one's mind.

Most Great Practicing is non-intuitive, and feels more challenging than mere repetition.

Great Practicing is Mindful and Creative

A basic structure for all great practicing looks like this:

- 1) **Set a Goal**
- 2) **See if you can achieve that goal** (Self-testing)
- 3) **Evaluate the results.** If things don't go well, consider why they didn't go well. Perhaps a small, simple routine can be created, or perhaps we just need to practice more slowly.
- 4) **Set another Goal.**

10 Commandments of Great Violin Practicing:

- 1) **The most successful students are *self-initiated*.** They seek out knowledge, have many questions, and perform higher than base-line expectations.
- 2) Putting forth a great effort, by nature, results in setbacks and moments of failure. ***Many failures will be necessary to achieve mastery. Errorless learning is a myth.***
- 3) ***Successful students practice in a safe place, where they can be comfortable making mistakes.***
- 4) Successful students self-test frequently.
Self-testing is extremely useful when be aided by a metronome or drone pitch.
- 5) ***Focusing on learning goals is healthy.*** “I want to learn how to make a beautiful sound.”
Focusing on performance goals is often negative and anxiety-producing.
Performance goals are: “I want to play better than Sally and sit as Concertmaster.”
Achievement is not necessarily a measure of ability.
- 6) ***Cramming for 7 hours is much less useful than practicing for one hour per day, 7 days per week.***
Our brains continue to work on problems while we sleep and while we take breaks.
- 7) ***Attempting to solve problems before being given an answer is far more useful than knowing the answer ahead of time.*** Most violinistic problems can be solved through simplification, and the creation of simple, thoughtful routines. Practice slowly at first, and in small chunks.
- 8) It's human nature to equate “trying hard” with using a lot of physical effort, including unnecessary tension and gripping. ***Most violin playing requires very little physical effort.***
- 9) ***Reflection on difficult problems is more useful than constant playing.***
- 10) ***Technique is Conception.***
Technique (Practical Knowledge) and Musicality (Creativity) are not terms in opposition. They are two sides of the same coin. One cannot exist without the other.

After some experience playing the violin, maybe students and teachers can develop their own 10 commandments of great violin playing. It's a great exercise to keep track of what works best for an individual student.