



17 Practice Tips That Will Instantly Save You Time and **Skyrocket** Your Progress

By Michel O’Gieblyn

Save Time,
Boost Your Productivity
And Have Fun Doing It

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Hi I'm Michael from ViolinExcerpts.com, which if you haven't checked it out yet, is an online, educational resource dedicated to helping violinists prepare for and have a positive audition experience.

And I'm going to share with you 17 concrete tips and tools that I use while practicing, that certainly can be applied to any string instrument. Some of them, I'm sure you've heard of before, but I bet you haven't heard of all of them, because some of them are kind of crazy.

These 17 tips and tools are little practice hacks that will help you:

- Diagnose** and **Expose** Problem areas.
- Isolate** hands to fix inefficient movements.
- Change your **perspective** of "difficult passages."
- Plan your phrasings to **play more musically**.
- Challenge** your brain and hands to work harder now, so that passages seem easy later.
- Increase your **productivity** in the practice room.
- Save you **time**.

Because, after all, wouldn't we all like to have more time to watch more cat .gifs, or take longer naps or...

It's helpful to think about these practice tools like the training a marathon runner does when preparing for a race. They make their training environment much harder by preparing in a high altitude where the air is much thinner. When it comes time to run the race in a normal altitude, it seems like a breeze.

They have a huge advantage over the competitors who have only run shorter distances, all at the same altitude, and are running all 26.2 miles for the first time on race day.

17) Rhythms

What: Change the printed rhythm to a variety of other rhythms. Lengthen one note, and condense the others. (Short-Long, Long-Short, First note of group of four, second note of group, first note of group of eight, etc..)

Why: Great for tricking your brain and hands to move faster than they want to, or think they need to.

When: This typically works best with fast passages, or passages with constant 16th notes.

Example: Prokofiev: Romeo and Juliet, "The Fight"



16) Changing Planes.

What: The bow has to play on 7 different planes. Pause briefly before changing planes, and shifts.

Why: This is for the right hand to clearly define which plane you're on. It cleans up string crossings, and prevents accidental double stops.

When: Best used for passages with a lot of string crossings, or a combination of string crossings and shifts.

Example: Mozart: Symphony No. 39, Mvt. IV m. 22



15) No Left Hand (Open Strings)

What: Practice a passage with only the open strings, leaving the left hand out.

Why: This helps diagnose where problems are coming from. If the string crossings aren't clear, practice just the open strings to clean up the passage before adding the left hand again.

When: Use anytime a passage you just played is not clear. Especially when there are difficult string crossings.

Example: Mozart 39, Mvt. IV m 24
(Original)

(Open Strings)



14) No Right Hand

What: Practice a passage without the right hand

Why: Strengthens and improves the left hand, (even when in pp). However, feel the bounciness of the string, and think about the upwards motion, not necessarily “thudding” your fingers downwards. Simon Fischer goes into greater detail about this kind of practicing in his book *Basics*.

When: Difficult passages (especially in a soft dynamic)

13) “Look Mom, No Hands!”

What: Sing it, or think about it. (Plan your phrasing)

Why: You’re not just a violinist- be a musician who plays the violin. Plan your phrasing ahead of time, and see the bigger picture.

When: All the time, but especially in lyrical passages or “easy passages”

Example: Mozart Symphony No. 39, mvt I Allegro
(Sing this whole line as one phrase, arriving at the A-flat)



12) Measure your shifts with “Ghost notes”

What: Adding a guide note that creates a foundation for shifts. Play this note you just added before playing the note you are landing on. Practice with it in (actually playing it), but make it disappear later.

Why: Improve the accuracy of a shift.

When: Use when shifting from a lower finger to a higher finger (1 to 3, or 2 to 4, not 3 to 3)

Example: Brahms Symphony No. 4
mvt IV 33-88 m. 56



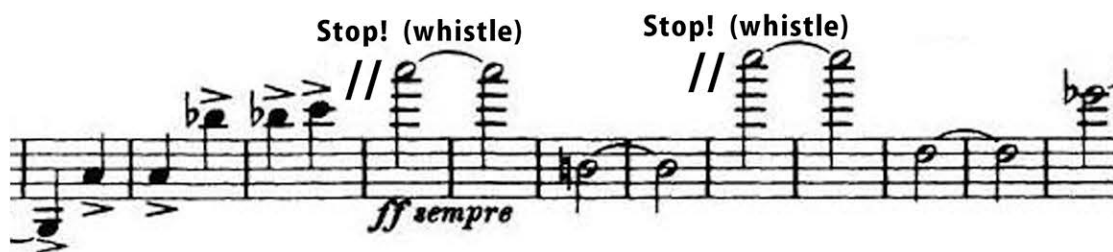
11) "Whistle while you work"

What: Whistle (or sing if you can't whistle) the note before playing it. Gradually stop whistling, and just think about the pitch before playing it, and finally remove the pause completely.

Why: Some shifts are not measureable. Improve your intonation on big shifts by being 100% critical of the accuracy. It makes sure you are hearing the note, and not just throwing your hand around the fingerboard and hoping for success.

When: Whenever you have large shifts, or when you have intonation problems in general.

Example: Brahms Symphony No 4
mvt III m. 315



10) Reverse Engineer it!

What: Start with the last note of a passage, add the note before it, then add another note before it, and another etc.

Why: Practicing from the end and backing up incrementally builds confidence that you know where the passage is going, and forces you to practice the harder part more than the easier part.

When: Passages that are harder at the end, than at the beginning. Usually passages with scales or arpeggios that end with a loud, high note.

(Original)



(Reverse Engineer It)



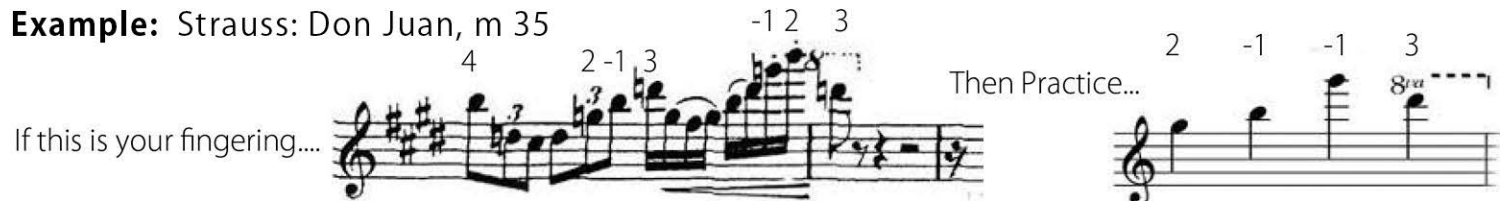
9) Practice Frames

What: Practice only the shifts, or the “skeleton” of a difficult passage.

Why: The shifts are the hard part that you’re messing up.
It’s like building a building: Put the beams up first, then add the floors and walls later.

When: For passages with a multiple shifts.

Example: Strauss: Don Juan, m 35



8) Change the Bowings: Practice Separate Notes Slurred

What: Practice separate notes slurred. Either groups of 4, 8, or whatever you want.

Why: Hear the phrasing differently. Stop freaking out about bow stroke for a minute and see the bigger picture. This usually also increases the speed of the left hand.

When: Difficult passages with all separate notes, especially off the string bow strokes.

Example: Schuman Scherzo (slurred)



7) Practice slurred notes separate.

What: Practice slurred notes separately.

Why: Clean up runs, no glossing or fumbling over any notes. Also makes your brain work harder than it needs to.

When: Anytime, but especially when you have scale or arpeggio-like runs.

Example: Prokofiev: Classical Symphony, Mvt. I (8m before Reh. H)



6) Practice Melodic Intervals as Double Stops

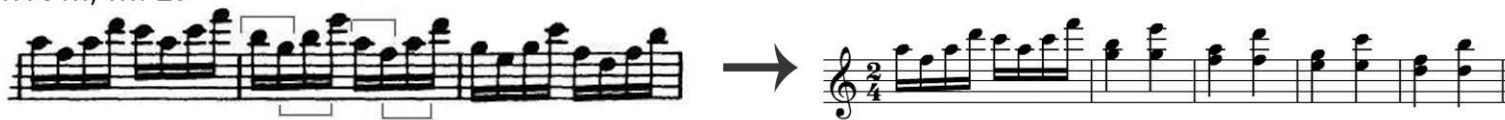
What: Practice melodic intervals harmonically.

Why: Improves intonation by hearing the harmony. You also are literally practicing twice as fast.

When: Practice when intervals can be played as double stops, especially when in a sequence.

Example: Brahms Symphony No. 4

mvt III, m. 29



5) Creative Metronome Work

What: Practice with a metronome. A metronome is hugely important, but there are other creative ways to use it than just on the beat. Pretend like it is another musician that is accompanying you, really listen to it, spend time with it, and get to know it. Put it on off beats, or 1 beat for every 2 measures.

Why: Improves your rhythm. Period.

When: As much as possible, but be strategic about it's use, don't just have it on if you're not paying attention to it.

Example:

Off beats: Mozart 39 mvt IV opening

Other rhythms: (3 against 2) Brahms 4 mvt II 30-40

Every 2 bars: Mendelssohn Scherzo (metronome at 40BPM)

4) Practice piano passages forte

What: Practice piano passages forte, same bowings.

Why: You need the same core to the sound in piano passages as in forte. Once you can play it forte, just pull back off it. This also helps bow distribution, as it forces you to save more bow when playing forte.

When: Piano or pianissimo passages, especially lyrical ones.

3) Play the subdivision

What: Instead of having a metronome beat the subdivisions, practice playing the subdivisions yourself.

Why: You become the metronome when you have to play them, and you will be less likely to rush through a passage after hearing the subdivisions played out.

When: Anytime you are rushing (or dragging)-usually when passages contain dotted eighth-16th note rhythms, or similar rhythms.

Example: Brahms Symphony No. 2 mvt I, Reh. E



2) Practice it Backwards.

(A.K.A. "Put your thing down, flip it and reverse it")

What: Practice passages and intervals backwards

Why: If you are having intonation issues, it's possible that you are too accustomed to hearing the intervals incorrectly. Try reversing the intervals to hear it differently.

When: Intervals are not in tune.

Example: Schumann: Symphony No. 2 mvt II Scherzo m. 13-14



1) Teach Your Right Hand the Fingerings.

(Thanks to my colleague Rachel Fellows for this one)

What: Practice the fingerings for difficult passages with BOTH HANDS. Start with both hands on the strings. Both hands must do the fingerings and string crossings.

Pick up the bow, and tap the fingerings with your right hand on the stick and frog. (You *can* do this while playing with the right hand, but be careful not to drop your bow, and also be forewarned that it probably won't sound great because you are really giving your brain a workout).

Finally, just think about the fingerings in your right hand while playing normally, without tapping.

Why: Systems work better when all parties know what's going on. So if you're learning a difficult passages, let the right hand be more involved in learning what the left hand is trying to do. Pianists use this mirroring technique a lot because both hands essentially move the same way, but string players can get the same benefit, even though our hands are doing two different things

When: Best used for difficult passages with tricky fingerings. It's especially useful after making a change to your fingerings, so you don't revert back to your old ones, or a combination.

About the Author:

Michael O'Gieblyn has been a member of the Memphis Symphony Orchestra since 2012. He is also a substitute violinist for the Nashville Symphony Orchestra and the Louisville Orchestra.

Michael graduated with honors from Carnegie Mellon University where he studied with Cyrus Forough, and also received a Masters of Music degree in violin performance from Belmont University as a student of Elisabeth Small.

You can learn more at www.michaelogieblyn.com, and for more great practice tips and audition preparation, visit www.violinexcerpts.com.
Be Well, and practice well.

17 Practice Tools That Will Save Time and Skyrocket Progress

1 Rhythms

What: Change the printed rhythm to a variety of other rhythms.

Why: Tricks your brain and hands to move faster than they want to, or think they need to.

2 Planes

What: The bow has to play on 7 different planes. Pause briefly before changing planes, and shifts.

Why: Cleans up string crossings, and prevents accidental double stops.

3 Open Strings (No Left Hand)

Why: This helps diagnose where problems are coming from.

When: Anytime a passage you just played is not clear. Especially when there are string crossings.

4 No Right Hand

Why: Strengthens and improves the left hand, (even when in pp).

When: Difficult passages in a soft dynamic

5 Sing it

Why: Plan your phrasing ahead of time, and see the bigger picture.

When: All the time, but especially in lyrical passages or "easy passages"

6 Add "Guide Notes" for Shifts

What: A guide note creates a foundation for shifts. Practice with it in, but make it disappear later.

Why: Improve the accuracy of a shift.

7 Whistle for Better Intonation

What: When you have a big jump, whistle (or sing if you can't whistle) the note before playing it.

Why: Some shifts are not measureable (can't add a "guide note"). Improve intonation by whistling the note before playing it.

8 Reverse Engineer it

What: Start with the last note of a passage, add the note before it, then add another note before it, and another etc.

Why: Practice the harder part more than the easier part.

9 Practice the Skeleton of a passage

What: Practice only the shifts of a difficult passage.

Why: The shifts are the hard part you're messing up.

10 Practice Separate Notes Slurred

Why: Stop freaking out about bow strokes for a minute and remember the bigger picture.

11 Slurred Notes Separate

Why: Clean up runs, no glossing or fumbling over any notes. Also makes your brain work harder than it needs to.

12 Melodic Intervals as Double Stops

Why: Improves intonation by hearing the harmony.

When: Practice when intervals can be played as double stops, especially when in a sequence.

13 Use a Metronome Creatively

What: Pretend like it is another musician.

Put it on off beats, or every 2 bars.

14 Practice *Piano* passages *Forte*

Why: You need the same core to the sound in *piano* passages as in *forte*. Once you can play it *forte*, just pull it back a little.

15 Play the subdivisions

Why: You become the metronome when you have to play them, and you will be less likely to rush through a passage after hearing the subdivisions played out.

16 Practice it backwards

Why: If you are having intonation issues, it's possible that you are too accustomed to hearing the intervals incorrectly.

When: Intervals are not in tune.

17 Mirror Your Hands

What: Practice the fingerings for difficult passages with BOTH HANDS on the strings.

Why: Let the right hand be more involved in learning what the left hand is trying to do. The left hand will thank you later.