

Viola Wisdom from Ellen Rose

How to Practice

Always have goals when you practice. The natural goals of practicing fall into three areas:

1. To improve general performance capability,
2. To improve particular skills. and
3. To learn and improve performance on particular musical works.

Write your specific goals down. The structure of your practice time should reflect these goals. You must formulate a smart plan! Practice with a daily, weekly, and monthly plan. Daily practice consists of building blocks. Take note of where you stopped one day so that the next day you can continue from where you left off. Small Post-Its on particular pages are very handy for keeping track of how and where to continue on subsequent days.

With graph paper, write the days of the week across the top and each assignment going down the left side:

| | Time | M | T | W | Th | F | Sa | Su |
|--------------|------|---|---|---|----|---|----|----|
| Scales | | | | | | | | |
| Arpeggios | | | | | | | | |
| Double-stops | | | | | | | | |
| Etudes | | | | | | | | |
| Pieces | | | | | | | | |

Assign a time for each task, and check it off when finished. Use a kitchen timer to ensure that you have put in all the required work. As you progress, time assignments may change, but do not scrimp on the basics—scales, arpeggios, and double-stops.

All the music you will perform consists largely of scales, arpeggios, and double-stops. Working on these in the form of exercises teaches your fingers how to move. Being able to play in all 24 keys means that you will know the fingerboard. Then, when you encounter those structures in music (which happens all the time), you will be prepared.

The most basic skills of playing are intonation, rhythm, and articulation. By practicing the exercises in this book, you can address all three of those skills. But, it is important that you make use of the modern equipment to aid in this process.

Use a recorder. If you do not have one, buy one—**do not** use the recorder on your phone! Invest in a high-quality recorder; you are investing in your future as a musician. The recording gives you an objective view of your playing that you can evaluate to identify areas for improvement. Use it to check not only intonation but clear articulation.

Use a metronome. You may think you are playing in a steady and regular rhythm, but you need to compare your rhythm to an objective source. You will also want to use the metronome to gradually increase the level of difficulty in the exercises.

Use a tuner. Compare your intonation to the tuner, not only to tune a single note, but to tune intervals, particularly fourths, fifths, and octaves. Precise intonation is essential to mastery.

Use some of your time to practice performing a piece. Do this at least one month before the deadline. During this segment, it is imperative that you do not stop, as this would not happen in the actual event. Record yourself and listen back, taking notes. Is it performance ready? What needs work? Do the same exercise the next day. Did the performance improve? If so, how much? Note again passages that need work. If there is a passage that is particularly troublesome, take it apart and turn it into an exercise, folding it in with the scales, arpeggios, and double-stops that you begin each practice session with. Repeat the practice performances until you have assessed that the piece is ready for public presentation.

Practicing involves both left- and right-hand issues, including ways to use the tuner to train your ear along with your fingers. Recording the result of your work will provide perspective on the effectiveness of your practice, which you should constantly assess. It is not mere time, but effective use of practice time that produces results.