

Practice Aphorisms by David Littrell, Kansas State University from KASTA Newsletter 2006

Slow is good. Practice new, difficult material slowly enough to have a high success rate. Your muscles need “time to think.” Stumbling because of a fast tempo simply reinforces your mistakes; you’ll learn how to play poorly very well! **A metronome is good.** Increase the tempo one notch at a time to learn to play a passage, going from slowly to *a tempo*.

Go from the known to the unknown. Play pitches or a series of pitches in first and fourth positions only, where you know how to locate the pitches. Transfer the series of pitches you hear to thumb position, to fifth-seventh positions, etc.

Cello playing is just one note after another. Any piece is really a long series of pairs of notes linked together in a chain. If the chain is broken—incorrect pitch, rhythm, etc. between the pairs or other small groups of notes—the piece doesn’t hold together.

When shifting, don’t be a jerk. Shift as slowly as possible, but still be on time.

Grapefruit hand. Porcupine under the left arm. Left hand holds a grapefruit for good finger spacing. The left arm and elbow should not sag.

Pay attention to both thumbs:

- **Curved right thumb, touches bow on side of tip**
- **Left thumb rather straight, but loose**
- **Left thumb behind second finger, even in extensions**

Half-note system New, difficult passage: eliminate printed rhythm, bowings, but *never* fingerings. Get the series of pitches and their fingerboard locations firmly in your ear and muscles. Then add the bowings and rhythms. **Five-note window** Play notes 1 through 5, 2-6, 3-7, etc., in a difficult passage with correct bow direction. **Add-a-note** Play 1st note, notes 1-2, notes 1-2-3, etc., through the difficult passage.

“Windows”—the portion to practice can be any length. Similar to five-note window. The window can be any size as to number of notes/measures/lines. Move “window” to next difficult section. [I simply fold a paper in half and cut a rectangular hole.]



High High
|: **Low** **Low** :| Good for *any* problematic shift, no matter how narrow or wide the interval. Repeat many times with various bowings and rhythms.

Printed bowings and fingerings are the law until [1] your teacher provides alternatives or; [2] you are advanced enough to make these decisions. Following fingerings and bowings is part of your training and is essential when you play in an orchestra or chamber music ensemble. There is certainly more than one way to finger and bow any passage, but using an expert’s suggestions helps you to learn the logic behind fingering and bowing.

“Page 27” and “Page 15” are verbs. You need to “page 27” (rhythmic and bowing variations) or “page 15” (bowing patterns) difficult passages. See Dr. Littrell’s scale book.

To increase tone production and emotional content:

- **Play a passage at a *mp* level. Repeat it at a *mf* level, then *f*, then *ff*.**
- **Substitute numbers for dynamic levels (2,5,7,9). Play the passage at level 3, now at 8, now at 6, etc. What do you need to change with your bow and right arm to produce these changes?**

There is no such thing as being “a little out of tune.” You must hit the bull’s eye. Being “a little out of tune” and “a lot out of tune” is the same thing. Especially when you shift and extend, you must practice hitting the center of the pitch. It’s a bad habit to wiggle and slide the finger around to find the pitch—and very annoying to the listener.

Right Arm: truck test; armchair; dogleg. Basic posture at the frog on the D string: A truck travels on a flat highway (your forearm) and then curves *and* goes downhill at your wrist. A dogleg is formed at the wrist. When you sit in an armchair, your hand hangs naturally from the wrist and the fingers are spaced in a relaxed manner. This is also the basic position of your hand in relation to the wrist and your finger spacing when holding the bow.

Left Arm and Hand: elephant “ploppy” fingers to cling to the fingerboard; play on fingertips with curved fingers in order to play fast. Fingers that feel as heavy as an elephant, caused by the back and arm pulling back, provide the weight needed to hold down the strings on a cello and bass. Collapsed joints are like a collapsed arch: the weight is lost and you can’t play fast passages with any speed or clarity.

Bow track: no gutter balls; stay in your lane; narrow mountain path = a direct result of a bow that is at a right angle to the string. A bow at a right angle has a much better chance of staying in the same path (bowling lane, highway lane, narrow path with a cliff on both sides) than if it is not at a 90° angle. Achieving this is a long, deliberate process. Wipe off the strings and then strive to leave no more than a ¼” of a rosin track when your eyes are closed.

Don’t practice stopping. Stopping every time you make a mistake, even for a moment, is a bad habit. Of course, you need to stop and fix mistakes, but you also need to practice without allowing yourself the luxury of stopping. Stopping is a habit that creeps up on you until you no longer realize that you’re doing it. It is annoying to the listener, who is usually the teacher.

Strength through flexibility. An airplane wing and a tree branch are designed to bend, yet they are strong. Our joints and limbs will have strength only if they are loose and flexible, not if they are stiff from cramped muscles and postures.

A pencil is your friend in the practice room.

***piano* ≠ puny.**

Many of these ideas are derived from those of Phyllis Young, Margaret Rowell, Irene Sharp and many others.

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