

Practical Practice

by Edward Kreitman

There is a running joke among the faculty at the Ithaca Suzuki institute that there are really only two lecture topics that interest parents—practicing and motivation. Every year at the faculty meeting, as we prepare the final schedule of events and lectures, we try to come up with as many clever titles as possible to disguise the perennial favorites. How do we know that there really are only these two topics? Regardless of the title of the talk, at the end of the session, a parent will invariably raise a hand to ask the question “But how do I motivate my child to practice?” Sound familiar? Maybe you were that parent, or perhaps you have been in the room when this has happened. Last summer, as I thought about the parent talk that I would give at the American Suzuki Institute at Stevens Point, I decided to cut to the chase and simply call my talk “Practical Practice.”

My years of experience teaching the Suzuki Method have allowed me the opportunity to observe the practice habits of families that were highly successful with the Suzuki approach, and of those that were not so successful. I’d like to share some of those ideas and techniques with you.

Ask any student if they like to play their instrument, and I’ll bet that you get this common response: “I like to play, but I hate to practice.” That’s fair enough. It’s very important for us to recognize the difference between playing and practicing. Playing is the fun stuff we do with our instrument. Group classes, playing for friends, solo recitals, group concerts, and playing for our own enjoyment fall into this category. Practicing is the work that we do to develop skill at our instrument and to learn new repertoire. In short, playing is fun; practice is work. But practice is what allows us to enjoy playing at higher skill levels, with better musicianship and with more confidence.

I think that there are three key elements to creating successful practice patterns. They are

- I. Schedule
- II. Environment/Attitude
- III. Content

Let’s take a look at each one of these and come up with some practical suggestions for each category.

I. Set up a schedule that will support consistency in practice.

There is a very clever anecdote that I believe is attributed to Jascha Heifetz. When asked once about his practice habits, Heifetz is reported to have replied: “If I don’t practice for one day, I know it. If I don’t practice for two days, the critics know it. If I don’t practice for three days, the audience knows it.”

Dr. Suzuki said it all in his brilliant and clever motto, “Only practice on the days that you eat.”

There is an interesting pattern that I have observed in my own and my students’ practice habits. If you establish a habit of practicing every day, then miss one, you will feel the effect of that day off when you return to your practice the next day. If you miss two days, you will feel it even more when you return. But surprisingly, the difference between three days missed and six days missed is very slight, and once they resume regular practice again, most students are back where they were in just a few days.

This syndrome makes a good argument for *daily* practice as a regular schedule. Students who are constantly missing one day are the ones who pay the biggest price for their inconsistency, as they never seem to get any momentum going in their playing. Yet this syndrome also makes a good argument for not practicing on family vacations. For a

multitude of reasons, I have long encouraged my students to leave their violins at home when traveling with their families.

First of all, I don’t think any real harm is done in terms of losing technique at the instrument. Mostly, though, the whole idea of a vacation is to get away from your life for a few days! I doubt that much is really accomplished by making a child practice in a hotel room while he or she looks longingly out the window at the other kids in the swimming pool. This is not to say that there aren’t appropriate times to travel with your instrument. I know one family of violinists who provide all the entertainment around the campfire whenever they go camping. But remember, that’s because they’re playing, not practicing. Unfortunately, I have heard too many other horror stories of violins being left on airplanes and in hotel rooms and of damaged instruments that were packed in luggage. What seems to happen most often of course is that families lug the instruments all over creation, then never get them out to play after all.

In order to develop skill at an instrument or sport, we must plan to do it every day. If you only plan to practice five days a week there will be many weeks when you are sick one day and have another day of unexpected circumstances that will prevent you from practicing. Suddenly, you now have a week with only three days of practice. This kind of sporadic investment in developing skill is very ineffective and simply won’t pay off in the long run. If, however, you plan to practice *every* day, there will be many weeks in which you will be successful, and that’s great. Because of that, on the weeks when your practice patterns get interrupted, you will still have enough time in to keep making progress.

When interviewing new students, I suggest that the parent schedule “activity time” prior to beginning lessons. Parent and child plan a time each day to do something together—color, read a book, work a puzzle—just to get in the habit of spending time together. For beginners, I often find that the biggest challenge is for the parent to figure out how and when they are going to create a space in their day for the practice to happen. When lessons start, the “activity time” that has been established then becomes the time devoted to practicing the violin.

II. Create an environment and attitude for practice that will support constructive work.

If we are really to understand practice, we need to look at the big picture. When students who are 4 or 5 years old begin their work in Book 1, I hope that one day they will be playing Mozart concerto at age 12 or 13. I know this is possible and hope it will be the reality. But my biggest concern is this: when all is said and done, what will the child and parent remember of the time they spent together with the instrument? Will the glow from a wonderful recital or the fun times at music camp be overshadowed by memories of too many negative daily practice sessions?

This was made quite clear to me recently when one of my young students arrived for his lesson. Brad was a second grader working on Vivaldi A minor concerto. He was a hard worker who never seemed to struggle with anything and he possessed a personality that made him a joy to teach. On this particular day when he arrived at the studio with his mom, I saw that she had written the word "chump" across her forehead in lipstick. When I asked her what that was about, she said that I should ask Brad. It turned out that during practice time Brad was treating his mother with little respect and making her feel like a chump for even being there.

What we needed to clear up at Brad's lesson was something that is important for every family: in the Suzuki triangle there are not two students—the child and the parent, and one teacher, but two teachers—the parent and teacher, and one student—the child. I don't usually have a problem with the parent feeling empowered as the home teacher, though it is very often the child who lacks the vision of his parent as home teacher. It is essential that the child understand the parent's role in the practice sessions at home and learn to treat the parent with respect and dignity just as the child treats the teacher at the lesson.

Often the family dynamics from other situations come into play in the practice time. The child is fully aware that the parents are invested in this violin thing, so the child knows how to push the parents' buttons. Very often a

child's misbehavior in practice has nothing at all to do with the violin—it is just that the practice time becomes the battlefield for all of life's other conflicts. We can easily imagine the 7-year-old girl saying to herself, "All right, I'll wear the yellow dress to school, but just wait till violin practice. You'll pay for it then."

I have actually come to believe that atmosphere in the practice time is more important than the results achieved on a daily basis. I want my students to enjoy the time they spend together with their instrument. So few of these students are going to grow up to be professional mu-

sicians, that we should make sure that when we look back ten years from now, all of us—teachers, parents and children—remember this time fondly, not sadly or regretfully.

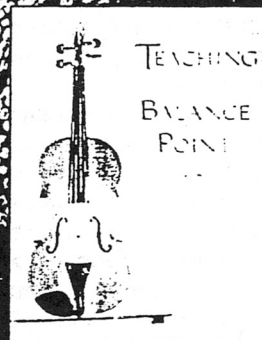
Of course, this also means that the practicing parent needs to be kind in his or her corrections. I have often asked parents to tape record a practice session for me to listen to. I have never had a parent bring one in. Parents tell me that they would be embarrassed for me to hear the way they act and talk in their practice sessions at home. So just as the child must be respectful of the

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parent, treating the parent as they would the teacher, the parent must also assume the role of home teacher with dignity, and try to use the same tone and kindness as the teacher does at the lesson.

So getting to work. I think we try too hard to make practice time fun. Practice isn't fun, let's face it. Practice is work, but there is no reason why the work can't be enjoyable. We also want to make practice time productive. I'm always amazed at how perceptive children are about the content of their lessons with me. They know when they are improving and they feel good about their accomplishments. They are also sensitive to lessons that are not as productive, and we all have to accept that such lessons do occur from time to time because of illness or lack of preparation. I try to keep my private lessons focused on the work with a very pleasant atmosphere prevailing in the studio. Group classes tend to be more fun because this is our opportunity to get together with friends and enjoy making music together.

III. Make practice time productive by including a consistent content.

Every practice session should include the following components:

- Warmup
- Review
- Working piece
- Choosing notes for new repertoire.

Warmup

For very beginning students the warmup part of practice consists of posture exercises, working on bow hold, and practicing the twinkle variation rhythms on open strings; For students a little further along in the repertoire, warmup will involve tonalization skills. These students should practice finding the resonant ringing tones and developing skill at balancing bow weight and bow speed to create the most beautiful tone on the instrument. The Suzuki method is unique in that it provides tonalization exercises throughout the repertoire for this purpose. I typically start a lesson by hearing Chorus from Judas Maccabeus, Gavotte in g minor, the slow section of a Seitz Concerto, or the opening of La Folia just to work on tone

development. When students move into the later books in the repertoire, we begin work on scales, arpeggios, and etudes. For these advanced students, the warmup component of the practice session will include these valuable exercises.

Review

The concept of review is one of the most important and misunderstood aspects of the Suzuki method. I think that many teachers and students acknowledge the review process, but don't truly understand or believe in the benefits of review. Let me state this emphatically: we do not review so that we can remember the notes to pieces we have previously learned. We do not review so that we can play together in group class. We review because it is the Suzuki way to develop real skill at the instrument (the traditional way is to stand and play scales and exercises for hours on end).

Wise parents and well-trained students understand the value of reviewing for skill and put that understanding to work for them. If you are not sure whether your student or your child is reviewing properly, just ask yourself these two questions: Can my child play through all the pieces in the current book? Do these pieces sound better today than they did the day he or she passed them at the lesson? If the answer to either of these questions is no, then the child is not reviewing properly. Many parents complain that it takes too much practice time to play through all of the old pieces and that doing so doesn't leave enough time for learning the new piece. The fallacy of such thinking is simply this: 80% of each new piece is based on the techniques learned in the previous ones. If a child reviews carefully and develops skill at the old pieces, that student will find that he is bringing a tremendous amount of skill to each new piece he learns. This skill then reduces the amount of time needed to master each new piece. A student who reviews carefully should only need to work on the 20% of the new piece that requires new technique. I like to tell my students that they gain knowledge from their new piece, but develop skill by playing their old ones carefully every day.

Working piece

When it comes time to tackle a new piece, we need to keep a few important

ideas in mind. Because the working piece is new, children naturally want to spend a lot of time playing it. But as suggested above, we need to remember that practice time is not the time to play, but the time to work out the details of the new piece. Once the child has chosen all of the notes to the working piece, the next step should be to play through it while taking note of the passages that need work, and those that are already in pretty good shape.

A few years ago I spoke with Lina Bahn after her performance of the Tchaikovsky concerto with the Chicago Youth Orchestra. I asked her how many hours a day she was practicing to prepare for such a phenomenal performance. Her reply shocked me: "Only about 45 minutes a day." The look of disbelief must have been written all over my face. Her mother, who was standing nearby, confirmed Lina's response. How can that be, I asked. Lina explained that it really was possible, but that there were two things that I needed to understand. First of all, she had spent many years practicing several hours a day to get to the level of playing Tchaikovsky; secondly, she never ever wasted her practice time working on parts that she could already play. When she was learning the piece, she only practiced the sections that needed work.

Quite often, young students make the mistake of spending their practice time on the parts of the piece that they can already play, shying away from the difficult passages that require more work. In order to make progress on the new piece, it is important to have a game plan for working on those passages that seem difficult at first. My definition of skill is simply this—to be able to perform something consistently with ease. Three steps are involved in the development of skill. I call these three steps the three C's of developing skill.

They are:

1. Comprehension (understanding the task)
2. Cooperation (getting your physical body to cooperate with what your mind comprehends)
3. Constructive repetition (repeating the task after you have achieved cooperation)

Comprehension

In the first step, comprehension, we have to make sure that students truly un-

derstand what it is they are being asked to do. Students can gain comprehension from observation of the teacher, parent, or another student; through verbal instruction; or through listening to the recording. How the students access the information is not important; what is important is making sure that they understand exactly what they are trying to do.

Cooperation

In the second step, we are asking our students' physical bodies to cooperate with what their minds understand in the first step. In this step of practice we should allow the student only three tries to "practice *until* you get it right." If the student does not demonstrate perfection by the third try, then one of two things is wrong. The student may not understand what he is trying to accomplish, in which case we should return to the comprehension step and ask the child to explain exactly what he is going to do in this exercise. Alternatively (more likely the case), the student is trying to go *too fast*!! Children do not understand that their bodies cannot move as quickly as their minds can, so they quite often attempt to play passages at unrealistic tempos. This issue alone presents so many possibilities for discussion that a separate article on this topic is warranted.


Constructive repetition

Once the student is able to achieve the task in step two, it is time to continue to the third step of constructive repetition. Here our task is to "practice *when* you get it right." Many correct repetitions of the task will set it in the child's brain and fingers ensuring competency the next time the task is attempted. My colleague and friend Edmund Sprunger likes to say to a child who has learned all of the notes and bowings to a piece, "Now you are qualified to practice."

One final idea to keep in mind when practicing is that we really have three areas of concentration when we get our instrument out to practice. I describe these three areas to my students in this way. First we need to learn what we want to play, then we need to decide how we would like to play it. We also need to understand how the instrument works so that we have the technique we need to express ourselves musically. My teacher, Almita Vamos, likes to describe

the first two areas of playing as "facts and opinions." The first step is to learn the facts, these are details about the piece that reflect the composer's intent or wishes—aspects over which we have no control. Notes, rhythms, the composer's dynamic markings, and articulations are facts. Bowings, fingerings, and other musical expressions that we wish to add to the music are opinions. Another way to consider this distinction is to think of what you need to play, and how you are going to play it. Once you have learned the piece and have made some decisions regarding how you would like it to sound, you must also consider what types of techniques at the instrument are required to produce these sounds. We need to be clear in our practice time, about whether we are working on learning about the piece or how the instrument works. Sometimes we practice a passage just to get the notes. Next time we work on perfect intonation. Next time on quality of sound. Next time on articulations or bowings. This distinction can be confusing for some children

and parents, however, and that's why it is a good idea to have some special exercises that address specific techniques. Scales can be used for developing intonation. Tonalization exercises for developing tone or vibrato.

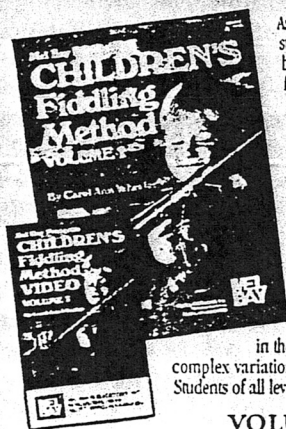
My final advice to all Suzuki parents who are working together with their children is simply this: Don't think of practice as something that you have to do so that something else will happen. Think of your daily practice as something that you have chosen to do with your child and then enjoy it. And remember.. life is not a dress rehearsal. 

Edward Kreitman is the founder/director of the Western Springs School of Talent Education. He maintains a private studio and a long term training program at the school. He received his undergraduate degree from Western Illinois University, studying Suzuki pedagogy with Doris Preucil and Almita Vamos. In 1986, he studied at the Talent Education summer school in Matsumoto, Japan. He is an SAA Teacher Trainer, and has served on the SAA Board.



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