

# “Practically Perfect Practicing”

## Ten Points for Good Practicing

Robert Jesselson  
University of South Carolina

	Score
<b>1. Proper Environment</b>	
<b>2. Regular Practice</b> <i>“It is better to practice one hour a day, but every day, then to make a great spasmodic effort and then stop”.</i> Ernest Bloch, composer and director of Cleveland Institute <i>“Don’t wait for the spirit to move you; sit down and start whether you feel like it or not”.</i> Gordon Epperson, American String Teacher journal, 1978	
<b>3. Disciplined Practicing</b>	
<b>4. Practice Musically</b> <i>“One should never make any music, not even sound one musical tone, without a musical intention preceding it.”</i> Artur Schnabel	
<b>5. Mental Practice</b> <i>“What is required is...for the pupil...to visualize the whole without music - that is, to see in his mind what is written, without either notes or instrument.”</i> Theodor Leschetizky, pianist	

<p><b>6. Relaxed Practicing</b></p> <p><i>"One must practice slowly, then more slowly, and finally really slowly."</i></p> <p>Camille Saint-Saens</p> <p><i>"Between every effort in your playing and during every pause, deliberately return to a state of relaxation and softness in all your joints."</i></p> <p>Yehudii Menuhin</p>	
<p><b>7. Set Goals!</b></p> <p><i>"Three minutes spent thinking about your practicing before you start are worth three hours spent in aimless repetition".</i></p> <p>Robert Gerle</p>	
<p><b>8. Successful Practice Strategies</b></p> <p>Six Practicing Techniques</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Rote Practicing</li> <li>2. Ear Practicing (Aural)</li> <li>3. Mental Practicing</li> <li>4. Imitative Practicing</li> <li>5. Discovery Practicing</li> <li>6. Memorization Practicing</li> </ol>	
<p><b>9. Be your own teacher/critic</b></p> <p><i>"An artist who lacks the power of self-criticism accomplishes but little. It is good if your work stands higher than your opinion of it; bad if it is on the same level. But it is a great disaster if your work stands lower than your judgement of it."</i></p> <p>Leonardo Da Vinci</p>	
<p><b>10.</b></p>	



# The How-to-Practice Flow Chart

Robert Jesselson

String players spend an enormous amount of time alone in rooms practicing. Successful musicians learn how to practice effectively and efficiently, accomplishing the greatest amount of work in the least amount of time. Although some people figure this out intuitively, most students must be taught how to practice well. Good teachers will often use a considerable amount of lesson time to demonstrate various practice techniques. The best teachers help their students to become self-learners, so that the time spent practicing is used creatively to solve problems, expand techniques, and learn literature.

The process of practicing really consists of a series of very logical and sequential steps that each must be successfully completed before going on to the next one. This process is similar to that of a computer program that solves a problem by following a flow chart of tasks or computations. The How-to-Practice Flow Chart, pictured above, guides students in breaking down a piece of music through specific activities while practicing. When a task is successfully completed, students follow the *yes* arrow to the next activity. If a task is not successful then students must repeat it, or follow the arrow *no* back to the previous activity in order to solve the underlying problem.

The most essential part of the flow chart, and the part that most students ignore or fail to take seriously enough, is the right side of the diagram. This contains the essence of good practic-

ing: tearing apart the difficult spots, analyzing them, and then using a so-called bag of tricks to firmly solve the problem.

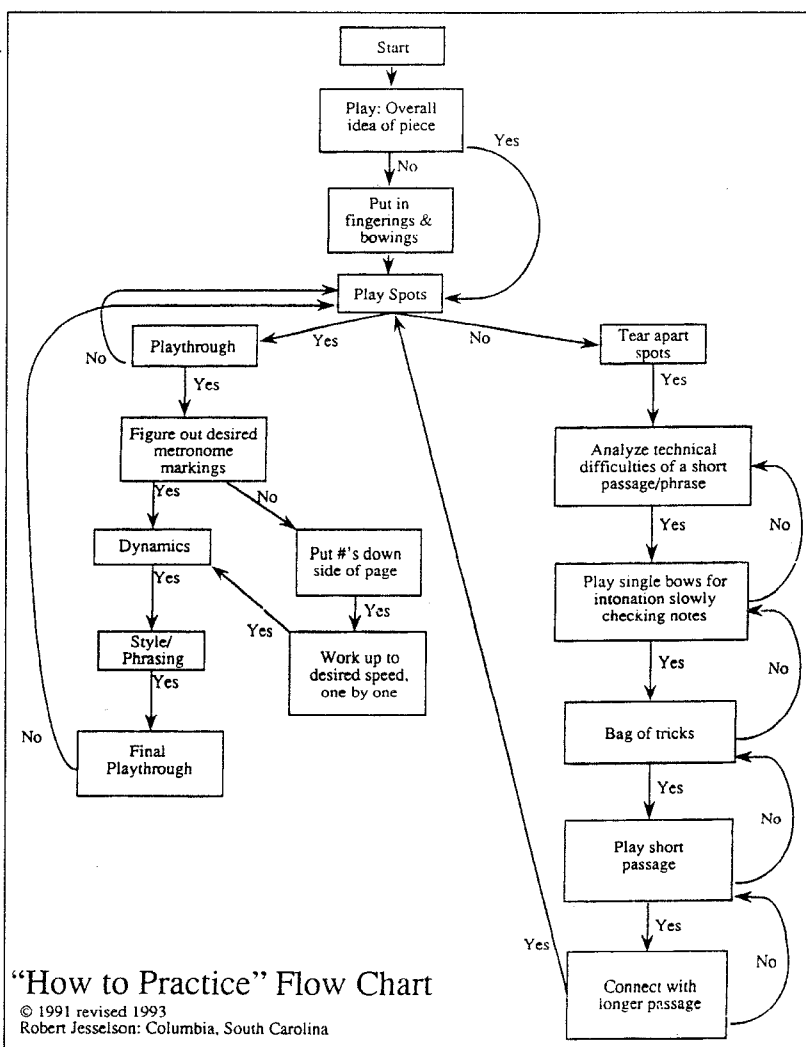
Practicing a difficult piece is like building a railroad line through hilly terrain. First the land must be leveled in order to create a flat surface on which to build the foundation; only then can the tracks be laid. In a piece of music, difficult technical spots often must be leveled by practicing them until they can be played as competently as the easy spots. Until the difficult spots have been mastered playing through the piece is pointless and is inviting a certain train wreck.

In order to understand this flow chart, assume that students are beginning to play the Duport Etude No. 13 for the first time. This etude works well with intermedi-

ate-level students who are just beginning to understand thumb positions and are integrating their playing in the upper and lower registers of the instrument.

## PLAY: OVERALL IDEA OF PIECE

Beginning at the top of the flow chart, students will want to read through the piece first in order to get an overall idea of the work and to get a preliminary feel for the techniques and the difficulties involved. This Duport etude is a good piece to work on for basic tone production, some string crossings, and for exploring the full range of the cello.



Once students have an overall idea of the piece, they should write fingerings and bowings into the part. I encourage students to write more fingerings and bowings than they may actually need for two reasons. First, they are forced to stop playing for a moment and to pick up a pencil and write, rather than continuing to play on indefinitely. Secondly, they can start and stop at various odd places throughout the piece rather than at just a few favorite places. They then know that they must start down bow with the first finger at measure 23, for example, and that this is a good place to start practicing the next phrase.

### PLAY SPOTS

By this point students surely know where the most difficult spots in the piece are located. This etude has three challenging sections that will need to be singled out for particular analysis and study. Most of the rest of the etude will be more easily accessible if students are truly ready for literature at this level. Teachers must take seriously their responsibility to select the correct music and to choose pieces for students that are appropriate to their technical and musical level. The music should be challenging without being impossible to play after a reasonable amount of practice.

My general rule is to choose etudes that are at or slightly above students' playing level, but to choose performance pieces that are at or slightly below their levels of technical competence so that they will eventually be able to perform their pieces comfortably and in control. If students are working on the same piece week after week without significant progress, they are either not practicing it correctly or the piece is really too difficult to master at the moment.

### TEAR APART SPOTS

After identifying and bracketing the three difficult spots, students will need to analyze the problems involved. Often this will require help from a teacher who can break down a complicated series of motions into simple, chewable bites. For example, the spot from measure 23 to measure 39 really contains several different types of problems. The first part, up to measure 32, consists of scales and broken thirds. The students should identify the neck positions involved in the first two measures of the passage—First, Second-Extended, Fourth, and Sixth-Extended. (See Example 1.) They should then play each note with a single long bow, checking appropriate notes (D, C, E, G, A, etc.)

### BAG OF TRICKS

Next students will pull out the bag of tricks for just this section of the passage. The bag of tricks is the most important part of the entire process. It consists of a series of rhythmical exercises to be applied to a short passage. The simplest of the tricks is: duple rhythms, triplet rhythms, and sixteenth notes played *detaché* in

#### Example 1

Example 1 shows musical notation for measures 23 to 39. The notation includes fingerings (1, 2, 3, 4, etc.), bowings (cresc., p, f, poco, restez), and dynamic markings (f, p, cresc.).

#### Example 2

Example 2 shows musical notation for measures 32 to 36. The notation includes fingerings (1, 2, 3, 4, etc.), bowings (etc.), and dynamic markings (f).

order to clearly hear the pitch. (See Example 2.) Other tricks can include dotted rhythms, asymmetrical bowings, displaced accents, and any of hundreds of other rhythmical variations.

The pedagogical reason for these tricks is to place the player's attention on the bow arm for each different rhythm, thereby taking the mind's focus off of the left hand. If the left hand is secure then the varying rhythms will not be confusing. If the left hand is not secure then the rhythms will affect the intonation and security. In using the rhythms, students should start simply and increase the complexity of their exercises. If the left hand breaks down, players should move back to the previous rhythm, or even back to the previous step ("Single bows, checking for intonation"). After a point, the left hand will know what it is supposed to do without conscious effort.

The process is essentially the same for the rest of the passage, although the technical problems change. In the higher registers students must be aware of the intervals—major or minor seconds between the first and second fingers, and major or minor thirds between the first and third fingers—and be able to analyze the shifts. Teachers might take a moment during these analyses to point out other aspects of the music, such as chord structure and music theory. For example, if students are aware of the Lydian scale in measure 31, they can associate otherwise dull information from their theory classes to something that they are actually playing.

The next part of the passage is the most difficult (mm. 32–36). It involves considerable analysis of the thirds on the A

string and those on the D string, as well as the octave between the thumb and third fingers. It also requires an understanding of the varying placement of the fingers within the thumb position, and the use of a classical shift by the guide finger—in this case the first finger on the D string—with articulation by the second finger. Once the basic analysis is done, the passage is easily solved by the same process: playing single bows checking for intonation, and then using the bag of tricks.

### PLAY SHORT PASSAGE

After the passage has been analyzed and practiced in sections, it can be put together at a slow tempo. If it does not work then students must go back one, two, or even three steps in the process. If it is playable, then the next task is to hook it up with the previous passage, and finally with the succeeding passage.

### PLAYTHROUGH

After all the problem spots have been solved students should try a first playthrough. This means a non-stop performance of the piece, come what may. If the playthrough is not technically satisfactory, with all the problem spots played correctly in context, then students should return to working out the spots that have broken down.

If the playthrough went well, the next step is to decide on a goal tempo for the piece—that is, a metronome marking for the piece that seems to be musically appropriate. Have students write this tempo at the top of the page and put a box around it. Then figure out the actual tempo that is technically possible at the moment and write that metronome marking underneath. After each playthrough the metronome marking can be raised by one notch. If students come to the lesson and say “I forgot to write down the metronome markings, but I can really play it faster than the last number that is down there,” insist that they still play it at the number written down on the page. Most students think that they can play something faster than they realistically can, and when they play poorly in the lesson, the reason is often because they are not aware of their own limits.

The difficult spots will probably need to have their own metronome markings written down on the side of the page. They need to be worked up from a considerably slower tempo until they finally reach the tempo of the rest of the piece.

### DYNAMICS, STYLE, PHRASING

The question of when to start working on dynamics, style, and phrasing is a subject of some philosophical and pedagogical variance. For some teachers these musical qualities should be brought into play as early as possible in the learning process. My personal observation is that until the student has the technical competence to play the notes, the musical elements can get in

the way by obscuring the real problems. Students may attempt to produce a beautifully shaped phrase, but if the performance contains wrong notes or is full of stop-starts, it is ineffective.

Naturally some technical solutions are intimately associated with musical decisions, and sometimes technical problem even require a musical solution. As the great pianist Artur Schnabel said, “One should never make any music, not even sound one musical tone without a musical intention preceding it.” Issues such as the correct bow stroke and a good sound must be addressed early in the process. Students are deceiving themselves when they think they can play a piece well with just good dynamics and correct phrasing if the underlying technique is not solid.

### FINAL PLAYTHROUGH

At this point students may be ready for a final playthrough. This should be the culmination of their work on the etude. In a final playthrough the rules are: no talking and no stopping, even if students play a little blip or mistake. It should be treated like a real performance. How students deal with small mistakes is an important test and preparation for future performances: it is essentially a practice session for concert situations. If the playthrough has too many problems then students must go back to earlier parts of the practice process, repairing the mistakes and returning for another final playthrough.

### A MEANS TO AN END, NOT THE END ITSELF

Any structure such as this flow chart is subject to infinite variations based on the specific needs of a particular piece of music, different personalities, and the problem-solving creativity of the musician who is practicing. The flow chart is intended only as a guide toward improving the process. Using the How-to-Practice Flow Chart has helped my students organize their practicing. Some of them have put it up on the wall of their practice rooms in order to keep them from noodling passages and to remind them about disciplined practicing. Remember that the tell-tale sign of good practicing is not how many hours players put in, but whether they get results. The old saw says: “Practice does not make perfect; perfect practicing makes perfect.” **AST**

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*Robert Jesselson is professor of music at the University of South Carolina, where he teaches cello, plays in the American Arts Trio, and is director of the USC String Project. His performance degrees are from the Staatliche Hochschule für Musik in Freiburg, West Germany, the Eastman School of Music, and Rutgers University, where he studied with cellist Bernard Greenhouse.*

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Editor Robert Jesselson School of Music University of South Carolina  
Columbia, SC 29208