

THE ART OF PRACTICING THE VIOLIN¹

Leopold LaFosse

Foi professor de violino na The University of Iowa de 1972 até sua morte, em 2003. Durante sua carreira, foi, por diversas vezes, membro docente de seminários e workshops de cordas nos Estados Unidos e Europa, tendo, por duas vezes, vindo ao Brasil como Professor Visitante da Comissão Fullbright. Em sua longa carreira de concertista, atuava como solista e camerista, além de ter sido spalla de 4 Orquestras Sinfônicas nos Estados Unidos.

Abstract

In this article, we present an unpublished text by Leopold LaFosse, an American violinist and teacher. This text in English has been given to us by Professor LaFosse's widow in a typewritten version. It seems to be the sketch for another one, published in *The Instrumentalist*, an American periodical, in december of 1973. The two texts are systematic transcriptions of the author's experience both as a violinist and as a teacher.

Keywords: Musical practice; violin; violin practice; Leopold LaFosse.

Introduction

Performance has the same relationship to practice as the visible part of the Iceberg has to the infinitely larger area beneath the surface of the ocean, which is never seen.

1 O texto que apresentamos aqui nos foi cedido por Maria Amélia Martins LaFosse, viúva de Leopold LaFosse, no interesse de divulgar e perpetuar o trabalho e o legado deste músico e professor de inegável importância nos cenários nacionais e internacionais. A ela, de antemão, registramos nosso agradecimento. (Leonardo Lacerda e Moacyr Laterza Filho).

It is an acknowledged fact of a performer's life that vastly more time is spent in his private studio in serious and devoted practice than in actual public performance. The same relationship exists for the serious student in relation to his practice time alone in comparison to the lesson time spent with his teacher.

For the student who has a practice schedule of three hours a day and has an hour lesson a week, the pupil is actually spending 21 times more time in practice, alone, than with his teacher. The ratio of practice to performance goes up even more dramatically in the case of a performance, since a performer may spend and usually does many months in preparation for a concerto or recital appearance, of between 30 or 40 minutes for a concerto, to an hour-and-a-half for a recital, with encores. Multiply five hours a day practice by, let us say, three months, and granting a six day week, it still comes to approximately 450 hours of preparation for an hour, more or less, of performance.

Obviously, the figures may vary to some extent, but the fact remains that the background of any solo performance or that of a group demands a great deal of devoted time and energy.

This extends to any of the performing arts: the brilliant theatrical performance of an hour-and-a-half or two may have taken months of demanding and persevering rehearsals, including revisions, and the perfecting of the final form of the performance.

The Ballet performer's life is an exceedingly exacting regime of training which often precludes any other outside activity to speak of, demanding as their art is, in terms of physical training.

The violinist is performing on an instrument upon which every note and sound, from intonation to quality, depends entirely upon him alone, with only the exception of the relative quality of his instrument, over which he has no control.

As every violinist knows, there are mechanical defects of strings, or perhaps a bow which needs rehairing, which can interfere with the best possible performance, including an instrument which perhaps needs a soundpost adjustment, or a better fitted bridge, and so forth. Primarily, however, it is the violinist alone who has the responsibility for what comes out of the instrument. I am reminded of a famous story about Fritz Kreisler, about whom it was said that the reason for his beautiful tone was the quality of his Stradivarius. On one particular occasion, he came out on stage and played the recital as beautifully as ever, and upon its conclusion smashed the violin to bits and pieces, to the great shock of the audience. In order to disprove

the story which had been circulated by a few detractors concerning the reason for his quality of tone, he had, for this occasion, purchased a cheap violin which probably had cost no more than \$25.00 in a pawn shop and quite dramatically made his point.

The old adage, “practice makes perfect”, needs one qualification: It does if you are practicing **correctly**! We all know of football and baseball coaches who are highly paid and absolutely essential to their team in refining the inherent talents of the players, in their own numerous practice sessions before games.

The violinist, spending long hours in his studio or practice room in preparation for a lesson or performance, needs to know how to make the most practical use of his practice time in order to have the best advantage of it in good results. A person can, unfortunately, spend needless, futile and frustrated hours of time in attempting to improve a passage without visible or audible improvement, and this often occurs because of a lack of knowledge as to how to go about solving the problem.

Any teacher has seen among his students a variety of types of talents, with various gifts, including those to whom certain things seem to come very easily: there are those who have a “natural vibrato;” who memorize easily; or who have a very facile technique without much effort; or perhaps they have a natural “flair” for romantic compositions in their interpretation. For these same people, to whom some things come easily without really “working for it,” inevitably comes a confrontation with a problem which takes real effort and application. To improve their capability, either in the area of their previous “ease,” or in areas which they may find difficult and awkward, necessitates a knowledge of how to go about it insofar as good practice habits are concerned as well as a logical process of building a technique.

There are several basic rules which always apply:

1. In the process of learning a new work, practice **slowly** at first. You can never execute a passage in its normal (fast) tempo, if you are unable to play it perfectly at a slow tempo. The reasons are several: first of all, our muscular or digital dexterity, as any other physical ability, must be learned in slow motion in order to “digest” it, in terms of making it a “part of ourselves.” Secondly, in hearing a passage, one must be able to hear every note clearly in one’s own mind before one can expect to be able to execute those notes or passages clearly and distinctly. The mind must have a clear concept of it first.
2. Always be absolutely accurate in intonation, rhythm and dynamics, relevant to the passage being practiced.
3. Be concerned with the quality of tone at all times. Try to keep in mind that

our practice habits will become our performance habits. Keep the objective of a beautiful performance constantly in your mind.

One might ask in addition to the above, what are good practice habits? How do I “set myself up” to practice most effectually in addition to the three points already made?

First of all: **Time**. The most precious natural resource most of us have, and the use of which will determine what we will be capable of doing tomorrow, depends on how well we prepare ourselves today. Obviously then, we need time with which to work. If the goal is to play to the very best of one’s ability as a professional performer, then I would say that four to five hours practice a day is a minimum necessity. Although some artists of yesteryear have practiced during their professional careers up to eight and ten hours a day, this should only be an exceptional last minute emergency measure for those situations in which, for example, one has to learn a complete new work in two or three weeks or forfeit the opportunity of playing at all. In the case of a person whose schedule, other than practicing, is such that practice of more than three hours a day is impossible or impractical, there is all the more reason for their practice to be done as efficiently as possible.

Some helpful hints toward the attainment of this goal of the most efficient practice would be: Try to practice in as quiet a place as possible the basic necessity is to be where you can work **undisturbed** by outside interference of any kind. In terms of length of practice: try to take a rest break of at least 15 or 20 minutes between each hour of practice--some people need a five minute break between 30 minute sessions, in order to **maintain the ability to concentrate**. Try to choose a practice room in which the acoustics are pleasant for the violin not too resonant or “live” but also not too “dry” (no reverberation at all.) **Concentrate** on your goal of the moment. Daydreaming may be a more pleasant way to pass the (practice) time, but you will only be repeating past mistakes or reinforcing lower standards of playing than those which you are working for if you don’t **listen** and **correct** imperfections as you practice.

Another valuable aid to the performer on any level is the tape recorder. It is physically impossible to hear yourself as others hear you, because of the physical and mental concentration which is necessary to the playing of an instrument. By making practice tapes of anything a phrase or portion of a composition an etude or a scale, one is able to really listen objectively to one’s own performance as though you were hearing someone else. Paradoxically, many passages which one may think are coming off well may sound to you to be dismally short of the mark and conversely, some passages may sound much more effective and pleasing than one had thought. One note of warning,

however try to use the best recorder, plus the best microphones and speakers available since, without a combination of all three components (plus the amplifier) being of high quality, a true reproduction of the performance will not be heard. In case the finest equipment is not available, then one must allow for the inferior tone which will be the result. However, even with, let us say, ordinary equipment, one may check on intonation, phrasing, rhythm, interpretation, clarity and a host of smaller technical details of which you alone are especially aware.

Finally, one must have a model, a standard, a blueprint, if you will, of the goal one is working for. It goes almost without saying, that every aspiring violinist has been thrilled and inspired by the artistry and inspiration of a number of artist performers. Whether on records or in person is unimportant. The main point is that in the listening experience of the person involved, a relationship has been established one way or another. Upon hearing an extraordinary performance, either in person or on a recording, one comes away saying "I want to play that way," or "I wish I could say the same thing in music that he or she has done." My point is that all of us need models or goals to strive for and to work towards.

Life is that way.

Music is that way.

My own effort will be to help to attain that goal.



A arte do estudo do violino

Resumo

Neste artigo, apresentamos um texto inédito do violinista e professor norte-americano Leopold LaFosse, que nos foi cedido pela viúva do autor, em versão datilografada. Ele parece ser o esboço de outro texto do mesmo autor, publicado no periódico norte-americano, "*The Instrumentalist*", em dezembro de 1973. Ambos são a sistematização de observações empíricas do autor sobre aspectos do estudo do violino, baseadas em sua experiência como instrumentista e como docente.

Palavras-chave: Prática musical; violino; estudo do violino; Leopold LaFosse.