

A **Practical** *Program* *for* **Enhancing Technique** *in Players of Stringed Instruments*

by Emanuel E. Garcia, M.D.

Introduction

A young violinist consulted me for treatment of severe performance anxiety associated primarily with solo recitals. Cold, sweaty palms, shortness of breath, increased heart rate, and a marked peripheral tremor conspired to interfere drastically with this musician's ability to perform at a level consistent with his talent.

His response to psychotherapeutic exploration, meditation, deep-breathing, and anticipatory imagery was minimal, and his refusal to resort to pharmacologic interventions (e.g., beta-blockers) compelled me to adopt a novel treatment approach centered primarily on the enhancement of technique.

The results of the program of practical exercises that I developed and supervised were impressive: not only were the effects of anxiety mitigated, but the improvement in technical facility was extraordinary enough to merit experimentation with string players generally.

My initial hopes were borne out by its efficacy in enhancing the technique of string players who did not suffer from notable performance anxiety, including violists, cellists, and double-bassists, as well as violinists. Furthermore, during the course of these preliminary trials, certain psychological benefits also became evident, which facilitated the learning of new compositions and enriched musicianship.

I am now sufficiently confident to present this method in detail in the hopes that it may benefit all string players wishing to develop greater proficiency.

The Methodology

My initial rationale for devising a method to diminish the consequences of anxiety took into account both physical and psychological factors. I reasoned that a reduction of peripheral tremor would occur if muscles associated with very slow and very soft playing were assiduously trained and conditioned—in other words, if fine muscular control were amplified so as to render less consequential the disruptions caused by “nerves.”

Because each player presents with different skills and physical capabilities, no fixed time-table need be assigned for progression through the various stages, although the order in which they are to be practiced should be preserved.

As the psychiatric consultant to a major classical music conservatory who has been involved in the development of a series of health education and injury prevention classes, I am keenly aware of the need for students to develop practice habits that are neither physically injurious nor psychologically onerous. I have, therefore, recommended that the exercises described below be undertaken for approximately 15 to 30 minutes daily, 5 to 6 days each week as part of the student's regular practice schedule.¹

Phase I: Super-Soft and Super-Slow

A. Selection of Musical Excerpt

Have the player select a *brief* composition or excerpt (one to three minutes' duration) that is deemed enjoyable and employs few double-stops, and which the player is already capable of executing well.

B. Super-Slow and Super-Soft

Play the piece extremely slowly (no faster than one-quarter to one-third of the written tempo) and as quietly as possible *without emphasis on accuracy or intonation*. Students who, for years, have trained to achieve a beautiful tone, perfect intonation, and flawless presentation of a score may find it rather difficult at first to tolerate the unpleasant scraping of bow on string as they attempt to play at the lowest possible volume. They tend unconsciously to speed up and play more loudly than instructed, so it is important to keep the player to task as he undertakes these counter-intuitive measures. One must bear in mind that the goal of this phase is primarily physical: to gain as much fine muscular control over the bow as possible, which means that slow strokes using the entire length of the bow, from tip to frog, should also be incorporated into the practice regimen. The player may need to be reassured that accuracy and technical mastery will be addressed sufficiently at a later stage.

After playing through the piece two or three times in this manner, the player should take a brief break and then repeat the excerpt adding a modicum of dynamics ranging from *ppp* to *p*, still keeping the tempo extremely slow. This may be repeated once more, after which the player may be given the opportunity to play using dynamics and tempo as she desires, but still without emphasis on accuracy.

Expect the player to find these exercises very demanding; they require great concentration, patience, and physical and mental discipline to execute properly.

It is imperative that this extremely slow and extremely soft playing is practiced consistently. Several weeks or months may elapse before the student discovers that this initial series of exercises have become demonstrably easier to execute: the core sound when dynamics are added is found to be more pleasing and robust, indicating much greater control over bowing. At this point, it is advisable to proceed to the second phase.

Phase II: Super-Soft and Super-Slow without Vibrato

The player should repeat these exercises using the same excerpt or a similarly enjoyable one, but now *all vibrato should be eliminated*, and intonation and accuracy are still NOT to be emphasized.

During this phase of practicing, it is important to include at least one run-through of the Phase I exercises daily. The player also should be encouraged to experiment with repetitions that increase the dynamic range and tempo. Nevertheless, the bedrock of this phase is extremely slow and extremely quiet playing, without vibrato and without worry about the finer points of accuracy, which will be introduced later.

Intonation will gradually and almost imperceptibly become more and more precise, and bowing more and more controlled, at which point the player will be ready to move into the next phase.

Phase III: Super-Soft and Super-Slow without Vibrato but with Perfect Intonation

By now, the player will have achieved sufficient muscular conditioning to enable him to begin to concentrate on precision of intonation. Super-slow and super-soft renditions provide the foundation, followed by gradual increases of tempo and dynamic range. On occasion, the player should be encouraged, as a form of mental and physical relief, to play with deliberate exaggeration according to whim. He should also gradually increase the tempo until it is normal, but *maintain pianissimo playing at the normal tempo!* Vibrato represents a distortion of intonation and is often a mask for minute fluctuations of pitch (as is fast playing). The deliberate slowing of tempo and the nakedness of playing without vibrato ensure that intonation is ever more finely calibrated—and that correct intonation is more consistently achieved.

Phase IV: Super-Soft and Super-Slow without Vibrato, With Perfect Intonation, and with Channeled Bow Movement

Now the player directs her attention to the placement and range of motion of the bow between the bridge and fingerboard. She should repeat the usual exercises, but must attempt to keep the bow strictly parallel to the bridge and *within a channel no wider than three-quarters of an inch* along the strings. Quality of sound should still not be a principal concern. Again, moving to a normal tempo but preserving *pianissimo* should be undertaken: the ability to play fast but quietly is an exceptional one that requires cultivation.

Phase V: Reintroduction of Vibrato and Experimentation with Tempo and Dynamics

Vibrato should now make its reappearance through all of the graduated stages: soft and slow, soft and fast, but with emphasis on precise intonation and channeled bow movement. Still, the dynamic range should never exceed *mezzo-forte* except in occasional playful excursions: dynamic restraint is to be maintained, the result of the by-now superior control achieved.

Phase VI: Putting It All Together and Making Music

The player will, by now, have discovered that he is using much less effort and obtaining a much more robust sound, along with much greater general accuracy.

He should proceed stepwise through each of the preceding phases during every practice session, but allow time to range freely using each of the specific techniques, culminating in the performance of the excerpt at the appropriate tempo and with

greatest liberty of expression. **Quality of sound may now be emphasized when the player undertakes to repeat the stages.** At this point, the player should be surprised by how much easier the excerpt can be played, and by the enhancement of the quality of sound and the ability to project that has resulted.

General Observations

A pleasant offshoot of the above program is its psychological benefits, particularly when applied to learning new music. Because the player intensifies her focus on the “nuts and bolts” of every nuance of the piece, as a result of having been forced to play extraordinarily slowly, the music is felt as an intimate part of the player. All of the musicians who have adopted the program have voiced the sentiment that they “have the music in their fingers” and can thus play up to speed (and beyond!) with great assurance, and also with much greater confidence yield to the spontaneous emotional charge of the moment during performance. They are especially pleased with a newfound ability to produce a lovely and solid sound during pianissimo and piano passages.

Variations of the above regimen are many; much is left to the creativity of the player to alleviate tedium in daily practice. For example, playing pianissimo scales at a glacial tempo and *taking care to use the entire bow on each note* (one upstroke or one downstroke per note) can be particularly effective, as is varying the degree of vibrato or experimenting with the production of different kinds and shades of tone.

But adherence to the basic tenets of the recommended regimen in a consistent fashion is crucial. To reiterate: these exercises should form a part of the daily practice regimen and should generally not exceed 30 minutes unless special circumstances (e.g., their application to solving particular problems in learning other pieces) warrant an extension. They can furthermore benefit players of *every* level of skill—from beginner to expert. Achieving basic mastery of the techniques allows application to new works with greater attention to nuances of sound quality. **All other aspects of a player’s routine musical practice should be continued without change.**

As always, if a player experiences signs of discomfort or pain, practice should cease immediately. To date, I am happy to report that those following this regimen have been without injury. Because of the counter-intuitive aspects of this program, it is recommended that students be supervised through its various stages before proceeding independently. These principles should prove valuable enough to be incorporated regularly into practice by players of all levels of skill and thus contribute to the musician’s cherished mission of fully expressing interpretive potential. *Ø*



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¹ This assumes players of reasonably advanced skill and requires downward adjustment for age and ability and tolerance level.

Summary of Regimen

1. Choose a brief piece/excerpt, making sure that it is enjoyable and already mastered.
2. Play the piece very slowly and very softly without emphasis on accuracy, intonation, or quality of sound. (15 to 20 minutes daily)
3. Play piece very slowly and very softly without vibrato. (15 to 20 minutes daily; increase tempo and volume moderately; repeat phase 2 at least once)
4. Play piece very slowly and very softly, without vibrato, but aiming for “perfect” intonation. (20 to 30 minutes daily; increase tempo and volume moderately; repeat phase 3 at least once)
5. Play very slowly and very softly, without vibrato, but with “perfect” intonation and channeled bow movement. (30 minutes daily; increase tempo and volume moderately; repeat phase 4 at least once)
6. Reintroduce vibrato and experiment with tempo and dynamics, preserving accuracy, intonation, and channeled bow movement. (30 minutes daily; repeat phase 5 at least once)
7. Make music: put it all together. (30 minutes daily; repeat previous phases and use techniques in other pieces ad lib; play excerpt as written with full expression)

Super-soft and super-slow playing should occupy at least 10 minutes of each practice session; in the initial phases, accuracy, quality of sound, and intonation should NOT be a principal concern. The above exercises should be begun only after the player has warmed up properly.