


Mental Practice

Some Guidelines for Musicians

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By Malva Freymuth



Violinist Fritz Kreisler was renowned among his colleagues for his astonishing mental capacities. He would tell how he had learned an entire concerto by studying it silently while riding the train en route to the concert at which the piece was to be performed. As the story goes, he arrived and performed beautifully without the benefit of one rehearsal! Kreisler would say, "I practice only as I feel the need. I believe that everything is in the brain. You think of a passage and you know exactly how you want it."¹ He believed that excessive practicing "benumbs the brain, renders the imagination less acute, and deadens the alertness..."²

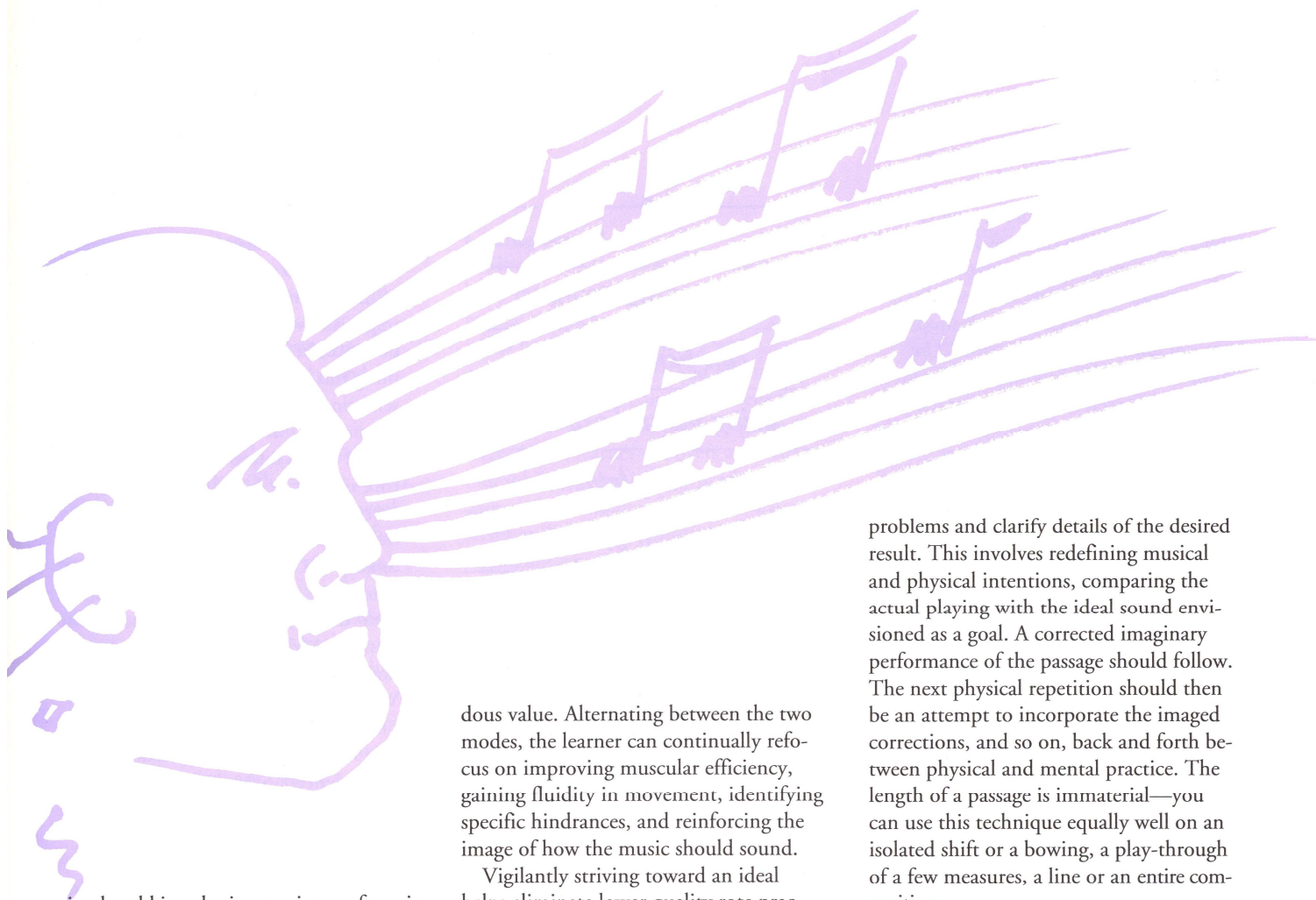
Granted, Kreisler's way of practicing was extraordinary, and perhaps he had something akin to photographic memory. But even without such astonishing capacities, virtually every musician can benefit from using mental practice as a

Malva Freymuth is lecturer in violin at the University of Hawaii (Manoa) and a violinist with the Honolulu Symphony.

supplement to physical practice. And, while the amount of practice necessary varies with each individual, Kreisler's point is well taken when we realize that excessive practice is damaging and can even result in physical injury.

Mental Practice Defined

What is mental practice? How can it be used, and when? Mental practice is a process of creating an accurate mental image of a physical action, with the intention of affecting one's physical performance of the task in question. In part, this involves mental recall of the sensory feedback gained through physical execution of the task. Watching or listening to others perform can provide added sensory information. Mental recall is not limited to visual images; it can be applied to feedback from all senses. For example, as musicians, we can usually recall the auditory,



visual and kinesthetic experience of music making in fairly vivid detail. When this type of recall is practiced, a heightened awareness of all sensory feedback can be cultivated. Furthermore, mental practice improves long-term memory of relevant feedback, and can be used in both early and late stages of learning.

Most would agree that the goal of practice is to achieve complete integration of body (the technical mechanism), mind (the director of events) and spirit (musical inspiration), culminating in music making that transcends technique. Mental practice is an invaluable tool in achieving the efficient and fluid technique that is free from excessive muscular tension and supportive of unhampered artistic expression. It also helps us set high artistic standards and goals, as well as produce a clear image of the ideal sound we are striving for.

Although many musicians spend time away from their instruments silently studying scores or performing mentally, using mental practice during physical practice sessions can also be of tremendous

value. Alternating between the two modes, the learner can continually refocus on improving muscular efficiency, gaining fluidity in movement, identifying specific hindrances, and reinforcing the image of how the music should sound.

Vigilantly striving toward an ideal helps eliminate lower quality rote practice. The ideal sound may be destroyed by hammering away at learning a new piece without musical sensitivity or beauty of sound. Without mental practice in all stages of learning a piece, a learner inevitably remains at a lower artistic standard for a longer period of time. Premature and imperfect levels of playing must be balanced and shaped by continual inner reinforcement of final goals.

Regardless of whether you are practicing something new or reviewing and polishing, you should always approach playing your instrument with clear intent and alertness. For example, in learning a certain passage of music, a section might be played physically with full awareness of kinesthetic, auditory and visual feedback. Then, the passage can be repeated mentally, with accurate and vivid recall of all sensory feedback. If the passage was played well, this mental repetition will serve to solidify the experience and help file it in long-term memory.

If the passage was unsatisfactory, further mental review can be used to analyze

problems and clarify details of the desired result. This involves redefining musical and physical intentions, comparing the actual playing with the ideal sound envisioned as a goal. A corrected imaginary performance of the passage should follow. The next physical repetition should then be an attempt to incorporate the imaged corrections, and so on, back and forth between physical and mental practice. The length of a passage is immaterial—you can use this technique equally well on an isolated shift or a bowing, a play-through of a few measures, a line or an entire composition.

Strategies such as practicing specific groupings of notes in rhythm lend themselves particularly well to mental work. During each rest, think ahead, mentally hearing and feeling the next unit before playing. Each of these stops should also serve as a check point for scanning the body and releasing excess tension. Practicing in this way helps train the mind to think faster than the body; all the while, the body remains relaxed, flowing and responsive to the commands of the brain. It also forces performers to really know the passage; they can't depend on the momentum of what was played previously to carry them through a tough spot.

Applying Mental Practice

Mental imagery may be applied in a variety of ways. It is useful during all stages of learning, and is most effective when continually alternated with physical practice. Perspective (internal/external), rate (slow motion through speeded up), and focus (on auditory, visual and kinesthetic feedback) can all be manipu-

lated as appropriate. Since imagery skills improve with practice, the following techniques offer a systematic guide to the components of mental rehearsal. For initial practice of each aspect, a simple musical phrase or sequence should be chosen. As accuracy and facility improve, imagery can then become an integral part of daily musical practice.

Visual

These exercises can use an internal perspective or an external perspective. An external perspective may be practiced by reproducing what is seen in a mirror or on a videotape. Which perspective do you tend to focus on? Might it be helpful to change the perspective?

- ◆ Focus on how the fingers, hands and arms look in relationship to the instrument; then close your eyes and maintain a mental image of this.
- ◆ Practice mentally reproducing an action, such as a shift or fingering.
- ◆ Look at a measure of printed music, close your eyes, and maintain a mental image of that measure. Then try reading a line, scanning a page, and so forth.

Auditory

Audio recordings can be a useful supplement to the learner's own playing.

- ◆ Work on accurate mental reproduction of pitch, rhythm, volume, dynamic changes and tone color (including variable speeds and widths of vibrato if appropriate). Remember to continually alternate between the sound and its mental reproduction.
- ◆ Practice manipulating the above components in your mind—experiment with “hearing” the timbres of other instruments as well.

Kinesthetic

In focusing on the physical sensations of your actions, be aware of how keeping the eyes open or closed affects your concentration, accuracy or intensity of the experience. During mental reproduction of the action, experiment with leaving the eyes open or closed.

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- ◆ Focus on only one hand, arm or joint at a time. Simply send awareness into that area, scan it for excess tension, and create a sense of warmth and relaxation. Imagine your breath sending golden light into the chosen area.
- ◆ Complete a simple action involving the chosen body area, and immediately recreate the action mentally. Be aware of changes in tension, pressure, joint angles, relative positions of the limbs and the texture of the instrument.
- ◆ Alternate repetitions of the action and its mental counterpart, and attempt to create an increasing sense of ease and facility throughout.

Emotions and Breathing

Emotions and breathing are inextricably linked. Changes in one will affect the other.

- ◆ Whenever possible, check to make sure that your breathing is full and easy during these exercises. Inhibiting breath and increasing overall muscular tension is a common tendency, particularly when encountering a challenging task.
- ◆ Be aware of how you interact with your instrument and the music you play on an emotional level. Can you project intensity without excessive

work or muscular tension?

- ◆ Choose a particular emotion that you would like to convey in a simple phrase of music. Imagine the sound that might allow you or an audience to experience the chosen feeling. Still imagining this sound, think of the physical sensations involved in playing it, making sure that the image “feels” easy and free of excess tension. When the picture is clear and vivid, allow it to direct a physical rendition of your imagined ideal. In this exercise, strive to keep the image in the foreground of your mind, rather than letting feedback from the physical action take over. The mind should be directing the action, not vice versa!

When learning something new or unfamiliar, it may be difficult to concentrate on the full range of sensory feedback being experienced. Selective attention on various components of the complete action may be necessary. For example, in learning a passage, you might choose to concentrate primarily on the feel and the sound of the left hand, then the right hand (or vice versa), then gradually integrate the two and expand awareness to include increasing amounts of feedback. Naturally, the choice of where to focus awareness depends on the needs of the individual and on the music that is being learned. Eventually, performance should become sufficiently automatic that concentration can be focused on the flow of the overall movement and sound rather than on innumerable simultaneous details.

Sometimes, the source of a difficulty may be very subtle or go by too quickly to pinpoint. In this case, slow-motion imagery or an intentional exaggeration of the problem may provide the information necessary in making an appropriate correction. Another possibility is to adopt the viewpoint of an outside observer, mentally watching a performance as a coach or teacher would. This may bring some necessary objectivity to performance assessments. This can also be supplemented by recording a performance (audio or video) and using the

playback as a source of feedback: as you watch or listen to the tape, re-create how it felt to play the music in question, and compare how you would like it to feel and sound. It can be surprising how much food for thought this provides!

Some Additional Benefits

In addition to its inherent benefits, mental practice allows the learner to rest, alleviating muscle fatigue and overwork. The learner can continue thinking about the music and plan practice strategies even while stretching and loosening his muscles, restoring circulation by self-massage or some short vigorous exercise. One word of caution—since eventually the mind will tire as well, regular breaks should be taken entirely away from one's music *before* concentration deteriorates. Quality of practice, not quantity, is the key to optimum productivity.

While playing and performing, mentally anticipating the music helps to create a feeling of musical direction, a sense of one note leading to the next. Furthermore, it creates the fluidity of motion required for an efficient technique. Tension is a natural result of not knowing what is coming. This is often experienced as an insidious form of isometric tension: opposing muscles are tense, essentially fighting each other, and causing some degree of rigidity. "If the muscles receive orders from the mind belatedly, they react to the emergency in a panicky and jerky manner; the sudden contractions soon degenerate into stiffness...preventing the fluid, well-prepared and relaxed movements indispensable in fast playing."³ Over time, this extra tension can result in injury as well.

Hopefully, the musician will be able to use mental practice as a preventive measure, increasing awareness and control over detrimental habits. For the injured musician, however, mental practice is valuable for keeping mental skills sharp and even learning new music (*a la* Kreisler) during rehabilitation. It also can and should become an important tool in the rehabilitation process itself.

Getting Started

Since internal awareness of mind and body interaction is a key aspect of what mental practice and imagery is all about, it can become the means by which learners identify unnecessary and potentially destructive thought and movement patterns, their origin and possible alternatives. As the learner discovers and releases old, inhibiting habits, new options are gained. Refining patterns in this way is a never-ending process of discovery. Changing emotions and life circumstances will both affect and reflect this journey of growth. Only commitment, practice and experience call forth definite, lasting changes.

Like any skill, mental practice improves with systematic and consistent repetition. The learner becomes more sensitive to the interdependency of mind and body, and increasing amounts of feedback are brought to a conscious level of thought. At first, though, mental practice can actually seem more difficult and take more time and effort than rote physical practice. It is an extension of imaginative power requiring unbroken concentration. Learners may find it surprisingly draining to project an imaginary focus of the utmost beauty of sound and musical emotion imaginable, to keep that "vision" always near, and to strive with every repetition to come a little closer to the goals.

The results are worth every ounce of effort involved. Proficiency in imagery allows the individual to practice anytime, anywhere, with no risk of physical fatigue or injury. For musicians on a restricted playing schedule, or for those recovering from injury, mental practice is an indispensable tool. Every musician's technique and artistic development can benefit from conscientious application of mental practice skills.

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NOTES

1. Boris Schwartz, *Great Masters of the Violin* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1983), 304.
2. *Ibid*, 304.
3. Robert Gerle, *The Art of Practicing the Violin* (London: Stainer and Bell, 1983), 16.

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