

# Next Level Violinist

| PRACTICING |



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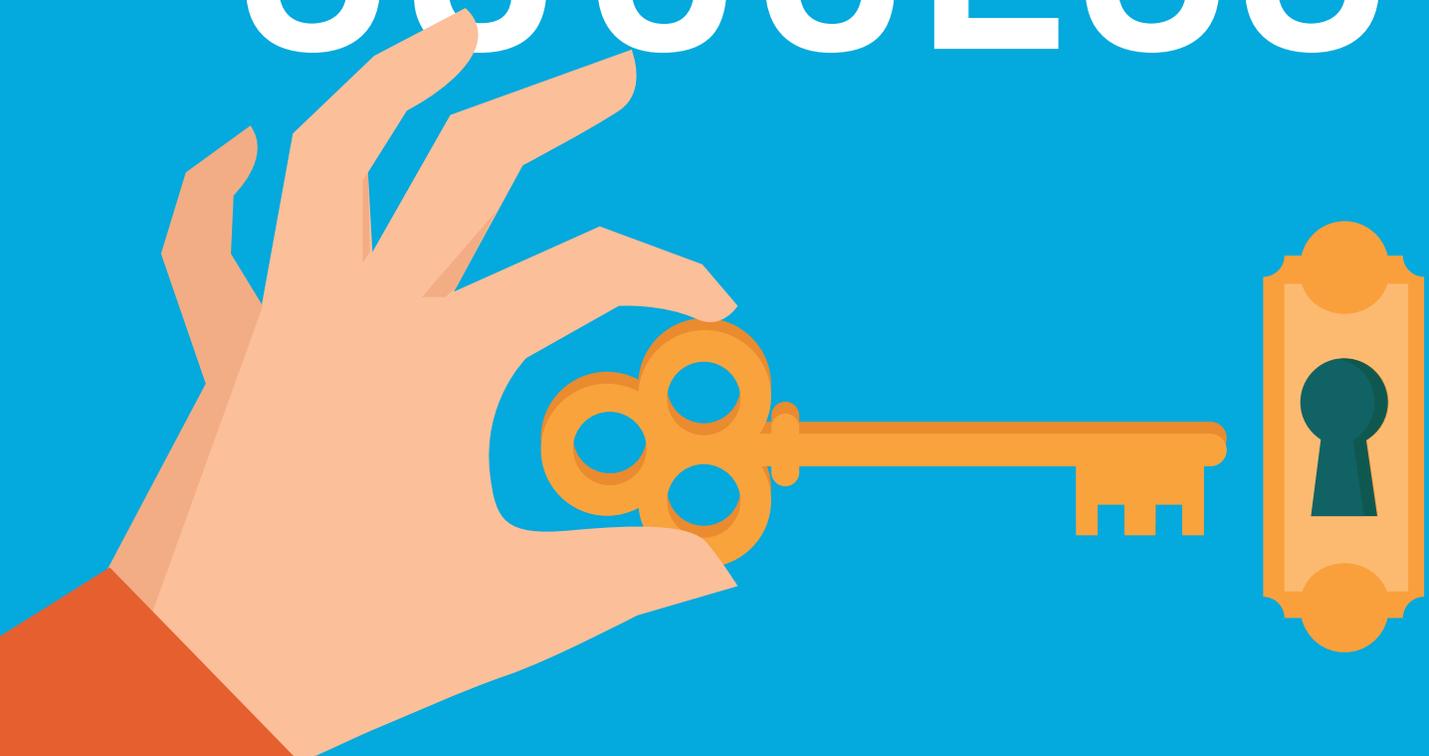
Eunice Kim

**KEYS TO  
SUCCESS**

Rachel Barton Pine

SUMMER 2014

# KEYS TO SUCCESS



*Rachel Barton Pine*

I am a professional practitioner. It doesn't sound as glamorous as "concert violinist."

If I've done my job, all anyone will ever think about is the time I'm on stage performing. No one will even be aware of the 35 hours or more of practice logged before I ever arrived in town to rehearse and perform that 35 minute concerto. The reality is: if you want to be a professional performer, you have to train to be a professional practitioner. I love to perform and share my art with others, so that's what I am – a professional practitioner.

Performing is about being prepared. Preparation has a cumulative effect. It's not something that can be "crammed" or rushed. Proper preparation inspires self-confidence in performance. Over the years, as a student, performer, and teacher, I've developed an approach to practicing that has been very effective for me. I believe it's one of the major reasons that I don't get nervous when I perform.

## Concentration and Consistency

I'm a big believer in the legendary American violinist Maud Powell's advice regarding practicing: concentration and consistency. Concentration is essential. You can accomplish a surprising amount of progress in short periods of time if you spend it fully focused. Practice time without concentration is often detrimental, reinforcing bad habits that will become harder to correct over time. Consistency is also critical. One hour a day of focused practice is far more valuable than three hours a day every few days, with empty days in between. Routine and regular reinforcement greatly increases retention.

These were fundamental principles of my childhood practice sessions. I carefully planned and organized each one and practiced nearly every day. In fact, between the ages of three and 13, I never missed a single day of practice. Now, as a professional who travels the world and has many demands on my schedule, I have far less time available in which I can schedule my practicing. I'm more dependent than ever on concentrated and consistent practice to insure that I'm prepared for every performance.

## Making a Plan

Structuring and planning your practice sessions before you begin playing is critical to maximizing the benefit of your practice time. If you just jump in thinking "I'm going to start with the first thing I'm inspired to

play," you run the risk of under-utilizing your limited time.

Start by listing the repertoire you need to prepare and the deadlines by which you need to have it prepared. Include everything that's on your plate: youth orchestra music, chamber music, a concerto for a competition, scales, etudes, or a sonata your teacher wants you to learn. Assign priorities and deadlines to each commitment. Then, work backwards and consider priorities, deadlines, and preparation time based on each work's challenges. Map out a plan for each day, one week at a time.

It's a jigsaw puzzle for any musician, but I have learned that when you already know what you will be practicing on any given day, you avoid panic and cramming.

These days, the majority of my concerts consist of standard repertoire, perhaps a Tchaikovsky concerto for one concert, a recital with Romantic sonatas, a Classical period sonata and virtuoso piece for another, and then I might play the Mendelssohn concerto and following that perform another Tchaikovsky. It's the repertoire you might expect, with less-usual pieces peppered in occasionally.

When I'm preparing works I've played before, like the big concertos, there are three main factors that go into deciding how far in advance to start preparing. One is the inherent difficulty of the piece; some pieces are simply longer and more physically challenging than others. Another is how recently I last played the piece, and the last is how many total lifetime hours I've practiced it. I also take into consideration how much other repertoire I'm performing shortly before I have to play that work. I calculate all of these factors and work backwards to figure out when I have to start.

For example, the Brahms Concerto is "harder" than the Khachaturian, but I haven't played Khachaturian in a while and haven't played it nearly as often over the years, so I would actually start re-visiting Khachaturian much sooner than I would Brahms. I'll realize that this week, I have to start practicing one piece for three weeks from now and another piece for six weeks from now, but actually, I don't have to start the piece I'm performing two weeks from now until next week because I've done a lot of work on it recently as I just played it last month.

I have to be extremely organized, especially if I am playing concerts with any of my other

instruments. In addition to the 1742 Guarneri del Gesù "ex-Bazzini, ex-Soldat" on which I usually perform, I also might be playing my viola d'amore (12 or 14 stringed cousin of the violin), baroque violin, or even my medieval rebec. It's not always feasible to be lugging around multiple instruments on airplanes, because you don't want to go through the trouble of arguing with flight attendants any more than absolutely necessary. Therefore, I need to calculate how many days I'm actually home to do some kinds of practicing.

## From the Macro to the Micro

After determining your schedule, make the most effective possible use of your time by taking your plan to the next level.

After warming up, it's up to you whether to do repertoire or etudes first. There are no right answers; it depends on your individual personality and how your focus tends to flow. It is very useful to keep a written practice log that you can look at. At first, a lot of your plan will be hypothetical as you get to know yourself as a practitioner. Having a plan frees you from having to figure out what to do next as you go along, though it's not necessary to follow it blindly. One part of your plan might take more time, and another less, so don't practice something for 10 minutes just because you wrote down 10 minutes. Write down in one column what you intend to do, and in the next column what you actually did, so that you can adjust future sessions accordingly.

Each practice session should be organized with specific goals and time increments to be certain that you don't run out of time or skip important elements of your preparation. For example, 10 minutes on Schradieck, 20 minutes on scales, etc. After determining that you will spend 30 minutes on the first page of your sonata, break it down even further: 15 minutes on intonation followed by 10 minutes concentrating on bow distribution, weight, and cleanliness followed by five minutes on vibrato.

Trying to listen for everything at once guarantees that no element of your technique will get your full attention, so be sure to limit your goals to one thing at a time. For example, if you're focusing on bow distribution, you shouldn't worry about out of tune notes. Maintaining that focus keeps your mind from becoming overwhelmed and distracted, giving you a heightened awareness of what you are trying to correct. As the different elements become more secure, you can start



to put all the separate parts together and let your focus shift among many things at the same time. Training your technique in a very conscious and detailed way will make your reflexes become automatic. Relying on technical habits you can trust allows you to give your full attention to the emotions of the music during your performances.

So much of practicing is physical, whether it's making sure your fingers are falling in the exact right spots, or trying to make the phrasing effective by using bow speed and contact point. We spend much of our practice time being athletes, so while planning your tasks and the time that you want to spend on each, be careful to consider the physical demands so you don't injure yourself. If you want to accomplish 20 minutes of fingered octaves, schedule two separate ten minute sessions with an hour of less intensive left hand work in between.

As you get more experienced, month after month, your plans will become ever more refined. What you plan to do and what you actually do will get closer and closer together. After perhaps a year of doing this, you'll be able to do it in your head.

### *Getting Ready to Perform*

Another vital component of the process is to practice performing, which is almost the opposite of the slow and careful practicing discussed above.

Whereas in slow and careful practicing you're supposed to stop every

time you hear something less than ideal, performing practice is about playing the piece from beginning to end without stopping. Performance practice and slow practice have different purposes, and you need to have a different attitude for each. Performing is about being positive and engaging the audience, almost the opposite mentality to the highly critical slow practice approach. You have to embrace the way your playing sounds now, even if you know in the back of your mind that you want to get better. Enjoy what you're doing in the moment so you can share it with the audience. Being an excellent slow practicer can make for bad performances if you are transmitting self-criticism through your playing. You need to be an expert in both kinds of practicing: the perfectionistic, detailed kind, and joyful and exciting performing.

On a basic level, when you practice performing, don't let yourself stop for anything. If you completely miss a shift, keep going. If you have a memory slip, barrel on through! Get used to that feeling of playing from beginning to end no matter what. Ignore the notes that have already happened because they are in the past. You should only think about what you're doing at the moment and what's coming up - the present and future.

The practice performance has to be done with utmost emotion and flair, making sure you're putting on a good show and expressing the music as much as you can. As you're doing a play-through, don't fill your head with memos to yourself about what you want to correct and improve. Instead, record yourself and listen back to catalogue everything you want to work on. Don't forget to also catalogue what you did well, to boost your confidence, and so that you can figure out how to repeat your successes.

Figure out what backstage routine works for you. Twenty minutes before the actual concert is too late to decide whether you prefer slow scales, doing the hard spots one last time, or jamming on a favorite piece that's not on today's concert. You can use your home to help the visualization. When I was younger, I used to start in my bedroom as the "dressing room" and experiment with different warm-up routines. Then I would walk out into my living room and have a couple of stuffed animals on the couch as the audience. If you can grab a few friends or family members to replace the stuffed animals, even better. I would bow, shake the invisible hand of the pretend pianist or conductor, tune, play my piece, smile, bow, and walk back off "stage." Practicing this whole sequence might seem odd, but it makes it feel familiar and comfortable when you do it for real. (Unless you're a beginner, when was the last time you practiced bowing?) If you really want to be hardcore, get dressed in your concert clothes so you can get used to the shoes, sleeves, etc.

One trick to get your energy up without wearing yourself out right before you perform is to do what athletes often do: listen to a favorite song. I usually choose something loud by AC/DC!

## Study Time

A lot of preparation happens before you even pick up your instrument to practice and rehearse. Looking only at your part would be like an actor knowing only their own lines without seeing everyone else's. Be sure to study the score! Figure out the formal structure of the composition, and make sure you know when you do or don't have the main voice.

An important aspect of interpretative choices is an understanding of the history and context of the repertoire you are preparing. No piece of music was written in a vacuum. Each composer has their own musical language, influenced by many factors including the time and place of composition and the intended performer.

Learning about a composer's dedicatees continues to be a very big part of my musical journey. Unless the composer was a violinist and was writing music for personal use, he or she was writing for a violinist. Learning about that performer's musical personality, taste and way of playing is very important to being able to understand what the composer's intentions might have been.

For example, Bruch was a German romantic composer, but his dedicatee for the Scottish Fantasy was Pablo de Sarasate, the great Spanish violinist. Sarasate spent a lot of time touring in Britain, including Scotland, and was very familiar with Scottish fiddling. In fact, he wrote his own medley of Scottish fiddle tunes with orchestral accompaniment. Through this knowledge of Sarasate as well as Bruch, I concluded that the Scottish Fantasy should stylistically lean more Scottish and less German. This had a direct impact on my choices of tone colors, timing, fingerings, etc.

Folk music roots of art music compositions are always interesting. For the Scottish Fantasy, I sought out a traditional Scottish fiddler to show me how to play the tunes in their original version, and then I incorporated those inflections into the violin concerto.

Today, there are many ways in which technology makes preparing and researching a piece so much easier than when I was a kid. The availability of sites like YouTube is so incredible. You can find great living performers in concert, and you can listen to recordings of all the deceased performers - it's an amazing resource. On the other hand, a student studying a concerto might go to iTunes and buy only the movement they're working on. They may not even listen to the other movements to hear what the rest of the concerto sounds like, to put their movement in context. Buying music through iTunes also means not getting program notes like you would with a CD booklet. These essays give you information about the composer, and the history and background of the piece. Luckily, there are lots of resources out there on the internet, from Wikipedia to Grove. If you're not buying CDs, you need to take the initiative to find information about your repertoire. I believe reading program notes about each track you purchase is extremely important.

It's also critical to know what sheet music you're buying. Everyone can go to IMSLP and get the free PDF of out-of-print material (which is great), but you might be playing from an edition with 100-year-old misprints. The risk of free sheet music is that you end up with something terribly incorrect or inaccurate. The worst offender is the digitized editions of music where appoggiaturas are written out into note values, bowings are changed, and dynamics are added, but with no editor credited. This takes away your ability to make your own decisions. I find this offense to be absolutely criminal! When you know the name of the editor, you still have to figure out how much is him or her and how much is the composer, but at least you have a reasonable starting point.

Invest in buying "urtext" editions which use careful scholarship to ensure you have the right notes and other markings. It's the only sensible way to ensure you are able to deliver an accurate and thought-

ful performance. It's a good investment too, because nicely printed and bound sheet music lasts a lifetime. Edited editions can be used as a supplement to your urtext to give you ideas, just as you listen to recordings to hear what bowings, fingerings, and dynamics other violinists choose.

Finally, when it comes to modern scholarship and research, remember that although most of the great novels and literature have been digitized for eBooks and Kindle, a great deal of musicological resources are only available in libraries (or for purchase as physical books). Just as we still use physical sheet music, we need to still read physical books about music. The good news is that most theses and dissertations can be found online. When I was learning the Szymanowski concerto, I searched the internet and found that there was a doctoral paper with the exact information I wanted. I searched for the author on Facebook, messaged her, and within hours I had a PDF of her document on my computer. Don't sell yourself short and give up on your research if you can't find what you need on Google - it could be waiting for you in a University library or major public library, and easily within reach.

## *The Importance of Orchestra*

Symphonic works are some of the greatest achievements of the classical music literature. A true musician appreciates and understands this repertoire and relates it to whatever else he or she is playing.

Studying orchestral music gives you the chance to better understand a composer's style and apply that information to your solo and chamber music repertoire. Historically, violinists from past generations weren't living in a bubble and playing nothing but concertos. Joseph Joachim, Brahms's collaborator, conducted one day and played string quartets the next, performed concertos the following day, and would sit in as concertmaster from time to time. That's not the way our profession works anymore, but the reason he was one of the greatest soloists of his day is because he was such a well-rounded musician.

Since the age of five, my primary aspiration was to be a soloist, but I am so glad that as I teenager, I also followed my interest in playing in an orchestra. From age 12 to 17, I belonged to the Civic Orchestra of Chicago, the Chicago Symphony's training orchestra for undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate students who are aiming for an orchestral career.

Intensive training in the orchestral repertoire directly impacted my understanding of the languages of national styles, time periods, and specific composers. Studying and rehearsing Brahms's symphonies improved my interpretation of his Violin Concerto far more than had I spent those same hours just working on my solo part. Learning how the instruments of the orchestra interact with each other, and gaining a section player's perspective on a soloist's interpretation, was absolutely invaluable.

And there are others reasons why this experience was so important for my solo and chamber music playing. In Civic, we had the amazing opportunity to play with many great conductors who were coming to the Chicago Symphony, such as Solti, Barenboim, Boulez, Mehta, and Slatkin. Sometimes they would just lead us in one rehearsal, but more often, they would rehearse with us for a couple weeks and then perform with us. They would work with us on every measure of the piece, breaking it down and putting it back together.

Today, when conductors tell me they find me easy to follow, I credit

how much I learned about working with a conductor as an orchestra player. I've sat in the orchestra when soloists have done rubatos that were impossible to play with. Playing inside the orchestra teaches you what works and what doesn't.

Training orchestras like the Civic or New World Symphony, college and conservatory orchestras, and youth orchestras provide a tremendous opportunity for those who take it seriously.

Even pick-up orchestras can be beneficial if you have the right attitude. Like many young musicians, I did a variety of freelance gigs during my student years. Even on occasions where the quality of my colleagues and/or the conductor was less inspiring, I made the most of my time by focusing on the construction of the composition, or paying attention to technical fundamentals like my bow-arm mechanics.

## *Styles and Colors*

Thus far, I have discussed some of the ways to prepare the material you're learning or are scheduled to perform. However, I have also found that it is important to use my practice time to maintain a variety of core styles within my playing, like high Baroque, Classical period, and late Romantic, both lyrical and pyrotechnical.

Sometimes I find that I'm spending a month playing big romantic concertos, and during that period I'm not doing any Mozart. The very careful cleanliness and refinement and sparkle that you need for a good Classical period sound requires a slightly different physical use of your left and right hands.

Or maybe it's the opposite. Perhaps I'm playing a few dates of Mozart concertos, a Shostakovich or some Bach and I'm not really doing anything Romantic. I don't want to lose my control over the timing of expressive slides or let my fingered octaves get weak when I'm playing music that don't require any.

Therefore, I try to always remember the different kinds of playing that I want to maintain, and to play some of each kind of music, even if it's on my concert schedule. You can use repertoire you've already learned as a supplemental sort of etude. For instance, if I'm not performing any Bach for a while then I'll add some Bach to the diet. If you want to make sure you're keeping your expressive slides varied and controlled, you might select something from Kreisler or the Meditation from Thais. Many violinists are more likely to maintain their left hand pizzicato or up-bow staccato, forgetting about also maintaining their Classical sound or their Impressionistic sound. As one of my favorite Scottish fiddlers Alasdair Fraser says, we need to be "multilingual" instrumentalists. Playing in different styles is like speaking in different dialects, making sure that all of those languages are in equally good condition.

I find scales to be really useful in this regard. Often when we play a scale, we end up playing everything sort of medium. Medium dynamic, medium tempo, medium vibrato. Of course, there are plenty of other things to think about: intonation, fluid string crossings, invisible bow changes, equal bow distribution, clean shifts, good left hand articulation. Why not add tone color to that equation? It will make your scale more interesting, and it will get you in the right mood to play your repertoire.

Which scale are you going to do today? It might be a scale that relates to one of the important colors in the palate of the piece you're working on. You're actually warming yourself up for the proper Mozart sound



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by doing a very narrow vibrato with a ringing tone. Alternatively, you might decide to work on a Debussy scale because you haven't played any impressionistic music in a while, so you go for a veiled color, flautando and sul tasto. Brahms or Schumann need a very thick sound, with your bow really sinking into the string and a warm and concentrated vibrato, and I warm up for Sibelius with a fortissimo scale with a really wide juicy vibrato. Choose what you're going to do with your scales based on filling in the gaps or enhancing what it is that you're working on.

Your bow can create so many different colors. A condensed, slow and heavy bow as opposed to a fast sweeping bow can both end up being the same number of decibels, but they're going to be different flavors of fortes. You have the freedom to manipulate contact point, bow weight, and bow speed with every note! Just think of the variety you can achieve with vibrato alone. What width of vibrato? What speed of vibrato? If you think of all those different variables and combine them in all kinds of different ways, you have infinite colors to paint with.

### *Letting Loose*

During our student years, we often spend the majority of our time learning and preparing music that we don't yet know well, spending whole days playing nothing but pieces we aren't familiar with. This isn't healthy! Find a favorite piece, something you can already play well, and maintain it. With limited time available for practice, you can't spend very much time on old things, but be sure to play something polished every day. Even if it's just a page of last year's easier concerto, play it so that you can experience something on your violin that sounds and feels good. If you're still struggling with the Tchaikovsky, play a page of the Mendelssohn. Playing nothing but scales, etudes, and not-quite-ready repertoire all day can be demotivating and doesn't give you a chance to let loose.

I also find that you can be so much more creative and interesting as an artist if you free your imagination. When I was three years old, my mom motivated me to practice carefully by saying that 30 minutes of good practicing earned me five minutes of "yuckies." Yuckies meant I could do anything I wanted on the violin. I could hold it wrong, I could scratch the bow, I could bow behind the bridge, or I could play fast and sloppy. At first it was a chance to be sort of rebellious. Of course, that experimentation got old pretty quickly and the "yuckies" evolved into improvisation time. I started to write my own melodies or play variations on a piece I was learning.

Whether or not you ever choose to improvise publicly or perform your own compositions, spending time writing music helps you become a more effective interpreter. Your imagination finds the creative space beyond the markings on the page, and you can figure out how to be faithful to the composer while adding in your own individuality.

I think it's extremely important for young people, even those who intend to be strictly classical players, to have comfort and familiarity with a variety of genres. If you can find 10 minutes a day, play along to your favorite song on the radio, learn a fiddle tune, or write your own piece (even if you're too embarrassed to ever play it for anyone). Ignore your intonation, forget about whether or not your bow is perfectly straight, and play any notes you want. In other words, jam!

Jamming is just as important to your daily practice session as all that Sevcik and trying to master the Tchaikovsky. These days, our profession is much more accepting of serious classical players who also love to fiddle or have a band on the side. Far from potentially harming your classical playing, learning other styles can definitely be beneficial. The best classical performances combine the best of both worlds: the deep understanding and athletic precision of a great artist, and the passion and fearlessness of a rock star! ■

