

NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTION: BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU MEASURE

The start of a new year is a common time to set new musical goals. For many of us, the desire to become a better violinist is the quest for the holy grail, ever elusive by design. The more our ears grow, the worse we seem, although the better we have already become. I have noticed a trend among my students that I recognize from my own past – setting goals that are related to how hard we work. In other words, they set new goals for the number of hours they lock themselves in the practice room. After many years of chasing the holy grail myself, I have to advise: be careful what you measure.



The number of hours we spend practicing is not what will make us great players. Some hours are required, to be sure. And counting hours is psychologically appealing – it's easy and it's so definite. It makes us feel as if we are doing our best. It allows us to assuage our practice guilt (you all know what I'm talking about), and gives us a measure of control in an otherwise rather vague and competitive endeavor. But it does not necessarily make us a better player.

If you are studying violin and have heard the same consistent issues surface in lessons, you know that what I'm saying is true. Instead of number of hours, worthy goals need to center on HOW we approach our work. Why? Measuring success by number of hours alone can keep us hovering at our status quo and ingrain errors at best. At worst, it can lead to pain and then injury...if not soon, then sooner or later.

There is another source of pain that comes from measuring ourselves by the number of hours: a deep sense of shame about our innate ability, i.e. feeling untalented and unworthy. I used to think "If I'm practicing this many hours, why am I not a better player? I'm not talented, or else I would be." So, to keep both physically and mentally healthy, we need to change our frame of reference from working hard to working efficiently. Efficient practice is defined by the greatest amount change in our playing produced by the least number of practice hours.

How do we make our practice efficient? Through concentrating on the process, not the hours – by striving for discovery, variety, and sources of inspiration. We need something fresh in our work all the time: a shift in perspective, a development of a new habit, or truly hearing something for the first time that we have never noticed before. Theoretically, practice is how we cement that which we have discovered.

Here are some examples of the types of New Year's Resolutions that speak to discovery, efficiency, and transformation, i.e. goals that have to do with the process of learning, not the amount of time we devote to it.

- Video record yourself at least once every single practice session
- Play for a peer or friend for feedback once a week

- Analyze a professional player's bow movements by slowing down a YouTube video of their performance of my piece
- Regularly sit in on a friend's lesson and take notes for them – with your teacher, or another teacher, or even another instrument category
- Perform for someone you have not performed for once a month
- Make every practice session interesting, intriguing, and stimulating so it will maintain your curiosity. If you lose that sensation, it's time for a break.
- Session focus: Write on paper one process goal before each session (concentrating on sound, or bow distribution, or shifting speed, or patience, or intonation, or musical commitment, just as examples)
- Change one fundamental technical flaw every three months by any means necessary
- Ask questions of mentors and coaches in every single lesson/interaction
- Concentrate on one aspect of playing at a time and break things into smaller and smaller components
- Watch one YouTube tutorial per week in the hopes of discovering something new. If there is nothing new to you, self-praise yourself that you already know it!
- When things are not working, do one thing at a time, don't try to do everything at once.
- Do something every week for your growth as a musician of which you are deeply afraid (for example play for an idol, contact a potential teacher, plant yourself in the first instead of second violin chair, post a practice video, play in public etc.)
- Every other day, spend half of your practice time not playing – singing, score study, listening, counting.
- Strategic self-encouragement: write down one thing you are particularly proud of at the end of each practice session.

- Perform regularly in a place where your music will deeply touch the audience – a nursing home, a prison, a hospital bedside.

Overuse is one of the greatest contributors to the epidemic injury rate of musicians, which among professional string players is above 80% during their lifetime. Put simply, we have to curb the hours, redefine what practicing is, and make more progress when we do practice. Efficiency makes us better players, and allows more time for other endeavors – like sleep – which is yet another way to keep injuries at bay by the way. Making our work fresh and assigning value our process, not our number of hours, makes us happier too. I think this holds true for all musicians - amateur, professional, students, and teachers.

The search for efficient and engaged practice is one of the reasons I started [Violin Practice Blitz](#) Youtube Channel for my students, itself a process oriented and slow endeavor for me. I wanted to give students many different approaches to the same old, same old problems. The channel is not meant as a teaching tool, but rather as an intelligent practice resource. Great practicing is like great performing – inspiration has to be at the core of it. Let our New Year's goals reflect the spirit of music and the miracle of the never-ending quest itself. Happy New Year, and Happy Practicing!

SUSANNA KLEIN – JANUARY 2019