



ACADEMY OF MUSIC AND DRAMA



# Applying Epstein's "Power Practicing" to violin orchestral excerpts

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## **ABSTRACT**

Key words: violin, orchestra, orchestral excerpts, power practice, Eli Epstein, active research

This thesis purpose was to find good strategies that would benefit the construction and preparation of orchestral excerpts.

In practical terms, how to make an excerpt sound/work without spending hours studying those six or seven lines. This means not to have it ready in one or two sessions, but to create a good structure and foundation to build the excerpt through goals such as intonation, rhythm, sound, character, pulse but also in terms of what these excerpts represent themselves in the pieces they are inserted in (melody, accompaniment, relation with other instruments, among others). To support my research, I tested the material written by Eli Epstein in his article "Power Practising", where the author points out various strategies for the practice of his instrument, the French horn. Since I believed a greater part of them could be used in the violin, I recorded my practice sessions, analysed and compared them and finally played them in real auditions, aiming to achieve a better knowledge about which ones work better for me. My investigation is based in action research, in which I studied myself through experiments and tested Epstein's material and William Preucil's violin principles.

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## Introduction

During the Master, the time factor is very precious since the dynamic at which we work is something similar to what happens once we get a job. It is for this reason and precisely due to lack of time to reconcile studies; work and my personal goals that I wanted to address this topic: how to be as efficient as possible in my daily practice.

What I intended with this research was to try to find a way to be efficient in a short period of time, in order to cover these needs that, although mine, eventually apply to any young musician. It is an interesting topic, in my opinion, since it affects a substantial part of a musician's life and it's a daily concern how to be effective when there is no time anymore to practise many hours a day. The reasons behind this reality are varied and distinct such as finishing studies, working while trying to combine personal goals or perhaps all the situations mentioned above at the same time. Nonetheless, at the end of the day it all comes down to a lack of time.

The goal is not to make music free of mistakes. The goal is to be complete in learning, and to grow well.<sup>1</sup>

During this research, I searched, tested and analysed different approaches to help me develop excerpts by solving obstacles when I performed them. My intentions were to evaluate if the techniques I chose to experiment on these excerpts were efficient in helping me to overcome my fragilities, especially in moments of tension and stress such as orchestra auditions.

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<sup>1</sup> William Allaudin Mathieu, *The Listening Book* (Boston and London: Shambala Publications, 1991), 92.

## Personal Background

The reason for choosing this topic came along with my interest in a CD recorded by the violinist and concertmaster of the Cleveland Orchestra William Preucil, entitled “Orchestral Excerpts for Violin”. In this album, the violinist exemplifies some of the most requested excerpts in orchestral auditions and explains the main concerns that a musician must have when preparing excerpts for these events. He also mentions, in the form of a final comment, a large part of the aspects that must be taken into account, such as sound, rhythm, articulation, intonation, “polished playing”, always emphasizing that the artistic side must always be present, even if in a subtle way. Quoting William Preucil “Orchestra Audition with good sound, good rhythm, good articulation, good intonation, very polished playing: Yes. But be an artist too.”<sup>2</sup>

I got to know about this excellent album during my bachelor degree. During my first year of orchestral excerpt classes, I had the opportunity to work with a former student of Preucil’s, for the period of one semester. During this time I had the opportunity to observe and study closely some of Preucil’s knowledge about these excerpts (bowings, fingerings, tips such as starting always with the bow from the string, releasing notes, waiting to the last minute to do a crescendo/diminuendo in order to be better heard and emphasized, to always keep a strong inner pulse or tempo’s subdivision) that I kept with me until today and that I always looked forward to study in depth. Since we didn’t have many of these classes, I absorbed and collected as much information as possible.

My choice of excerpts was guided by the fact that they are among the most requested in auditions to orchestras positions and, often, decisive when the jury chooses a candidate for the next round. These excerpts have a different variety of characteristics that makes them appealing for the excerpt’s list in auditions and were tested in three actual auditions (June 2021). They test the violinist’s skills at all levels, not only technically but also regarding a deeper understanding of the piece, the choices of bowings and fingerings, subtle inflexions on the musical phrasing and other aspects that appeal to the musician’s creativity and personality.

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<sup>2</sup> William Preucil, *Orchestral Excerpts for Violin*. Summit Records. Recorded 1998, booklet notes.

The final goal was to improve the chosen excerpts and help me become more comfortable while performing and to achieve clarity (in terms of the content of the excerpt and my own personality in it). As William Preucil said, “What separates you from the other thousand violinists with a high technical standard is showing some understanding of the music.”<sup>3</sup>

My research was focused mainly on the preparation of these excerpts and how I could achieve a higher level of performance using Epstein’s article about power practicing. The goal was to deepen my understanding of the excerpts and to find effective strategies for solving obstacles that interfere with their proper execution in a stressful situation.

### Purpose and research questions

My interest was to investigate how to start an excerpt with good foundations and to find the strategies that could increase my level performing them in a short period of time. Also, to understand which could be good mindsets to have during practice and to test them both in my daily practice and in a performance’s moment. For all this I designed my research to address the following questions:

- What strategies and ways of improving a performative obstacle lead to good results in a short period of time?
- How important it is to know what the final product should sound like and in what ways does it help while practising an excerpt?
- In what ways does practicing with a strong musical idea help to get the mindset needed for a certain excerpt or passage?
- How to cope with stress or exposure in practice sessions and how to prepare for it before a performance/audition?

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<sup>3</sup> Preucil, *Orchestral Excerpts*.

# Method

## Power Practicing by Eli Epstein

Eli Epstein was a member of the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra from 1987 until 2005 and currently teaches french horn at the New England Conservatory and the Boston Conservatory at Berklee. He also conducts youth orchestras and is an author. In his writings, he discovers new systems and methods to support the teaching and development of the French Horn.

Before reading this article, I had already familiarity with a major part of these tools. Some of them came intuitively and others were presented to me during my journey with the violin by teachers, colleagues, through videos or masterclasses. I already possessed the habit of recording myself, especially during examinations, rehearsals and run-throughs but during the practice sessions not so often. Using rhythmic patterns, playing slowly, playing loud passages quietly and using a metronome are familiar resources to me, however they are to keep and to explore even further. There was one advice that really continued in the back of my mind and that was the way we face our own mistakes. It seems obvious that mistakes are always there, but we don't often think about the way they influence our practice and our mindset and this is something I am really curious about and want to start implementing in my daily practice mindset.

The advices given address various kinds of situations and obstacles encountered when playing pieces, excerpts, warming-up sessions and also in the preparation for the instrument practice. The book contains concepts about our independence as musicians, for example "we become our own teachers"<sup>4</sup>, the importance of creating a healthy mindset based in work habits, attitudes, meditation and awareness that gave me motivation to experiment. I became curious to go deeper in this article and to experiment with it in the practice sessions, since a lot of what is said in this article can be brought to so many other components of one's reality. A major part of our work as musicians comes from inside, from pure understanding along with the will to challenge our limits every day, independently of the instrument one is playing.

The interest in experimenting came also from the objectivity of each aspect addressed and the multiple ways we can work and combine each one of them. I consider this

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<sup>4</sup> Eli Epstein, *Power Practicing*, (The Horn Call, 2009), 1.



article a powerful tool for effective practice and a faster way to achieve our daily goals without exhausting ourselves. It provides new, interesting, creative and innovative ways to practice that will improve as well as our perspective over difficult passages and our approach to the practice itself. I have made a selection of Epstein's techniques among those I was able to test and present results in the form of continuous video recording/ daily journal.

The three different techniques I tested were changing rhythmic patterns, stopping on the note that feels insecure and practicing with eyes open and then eyes closed. I did not carry out experiments for all aspects as many of them did not fulfil the necessary requirements for action research, as I had no way to test them or read objective results. I chose those that could possibly allow me to work and improve my way of playing the violin and that could help me become a better musician in the first place.

The video recordings contain material in form of violin playing and also brief verbal comments about the playing. Each one of the experiments cycles had four different phases: planning, action, observing and reflecting. The first step consisted in outlining a plan that specified the structure of the action part. After that I would execute the plan as thorough as possible and finally I would think about my previous performance of the exercise and analyse it out loud for the camera. The end of this process consisted in gathering all the material and transform it into text.

### Summary of Epstein's Ideas

All concepts come from a subjective place and an unconventional approach, which makes us believe that this could have been taken from a personal diary. A detail that really caught my attention was the way Epstein used not only different types and sizes of letter, but also the bold and italic, almost as if he wanted to highlight certain words in different ways. It surely gives much more dynamic and variety when reading and helps to memorize the most important sections of the article. One of them being the idea that we should keep our brain stimulated during practice and constantly finding new mechanisms for doing so. As a short reading's conclusion, I find the particularities of the article to be part of its charm and what makes it more appealing to read and remember its ideas.

Epstein writes the article for horn players in the first place therefore some of the advices sound too specific. However, most of them are great techniques that fit any other instrument, since the main source for our development is repetition and creation of habits in our brain. For a better understanding of this article, I decided to divide Epstein's advices in categories named by myself, according to the themes I believe they better fit in:

## 1- Awareness and Mental Health

### **a. Becoming our own teachers**

Epstein starts the article by affirming that, most of the time, we are our own teachers, since a major part of it we are alone in a practice room. He questions us about the kind of teachers we want to be for ourselves, as it's this inner teacher that will condition our progress, therefore we should adapt our way of thinking to our needs. A large portion of the practice we do must be about being aware of how we see ourselves and our work, finding ways to improve it by getting to know our habits. In order to achieve this, we need to know what kind of teacher we need for ourselves. In my case, it is quite the challenge due to the exigence I put on myself, since we musicians are always looking for perfectionism and quality in everything we do. Quoting Epstein "Each of us needs to become the kind of teacher we would most like to have: positive, helpful, challenging, but gentle (not overly critical, dull and repetitive.)".

### **b. Creating work habits and good attitudes**

Musicians who started playing at a young age give little thought to their work habits and are unaware of how they practice and why they do it in a certain way. However, Epstein defends that "Yet our work habits are what shape us as musicians.". Every time we are playing, we send a message to our brain. We are creating a habit of how we want to do something and sometimes we are not completely aware of what we are doing in that moment. So, when we make a mistake while practicing, we should immediately correct it in an effective way so that we are training our brain in the right way.

### **c. Developing muscular memory**

We should be aware that when we practice, we are improving our muscular memory and this ability allows to release our concerns during a performance and to let the body do what he as been trained to do.

### **d. Innovating during practice**

Our brain needs challenges, innovation and new ways to practice each time otherwise he becomes bored and unfocused. When to much repetition happens, we start to make mistakes. We should always try to find a new angle to look to a demanding passage and to make our brain pay attention to what is happening. “So, the more we can mix things up while practicing, the more focused our mind is and the more effective and efficient our practicing becomes.” says Epstein.

### **e. Taking time to clean and unwind before practice sessions**

Epstein gives us a simple and quick relaxation technique in order to achieve calmness before starting a practice session. It consists in sitting on a chair comfortably with our eyes closed and feet grounded and flat on the floor. The next step is to breathe in through the nose during three seconds and breathe out through the mouth in four long counts. It’s important to focus on the breath’s sound going in and out and to notice their differences. This process is to be repeated numerous times. When concluded we should open our eyes and begin our practice with a fresh mind. It’s also important to emphasize that this should come as an experience and we all should find our own way to reach this pre-practice relaxation.

### **f. Analysing what happened**

When we make mistakes during the practice sessions we have to go to the place where it happened and solve the problem. It’s of most importance to find out what didn’t work and to question ourselves about what is the source of that particular mistake.

### **g. Encouraging and being positive with ourselves**

When a conductor or a teacher makes an appreciation about what we just played to them it can be hard to cope with it, especially if it comes from a place of comparison and negativity. However, if the same people start a comment with saying that what we did is very good and that we just need to check some points, then our mindset is completely different. In this way, we start from a positive reinforcement that allows us to correct aspects of our playing that will be permanent. Often, we are very negative and auto-destructive and we need to start to be kinder and to inspire ourselves to be better. In Epstein's words "This is what empowers us as players."<sup>5</sup>

### **h. Building a foundation brick by brick**

Every time we have a effective and efficient practice session we build one more solid structure in our foundation and the brain retains this good work. Over some years doing this kind of work we develop a powerful, consistent, focused and artistic tool that will help us to express whatever we want in our music playing and to be confident about it as well.

### **i. Dealing with mistakes**

Quite regularly mistakes can have a destructive and negative impact on us because we put them in the wrong perspective. According to Mathieu our "mistakes are your best friends."<sup>6</sup> They carry a message and help clearing the way for us to achieve a better comprehension of what we are playing at the moment. Epstein also uses this metaphor when he likens mistakes with a rare stone. One must analyse a mistake deeply in all its forms and shapes and, once we have fully learned everything from it, we must throw it away and not expect to see it ever again. However, if it appears again, we must be tolerant and find a new way of look at it: "A mistake knows when it isn't needed, and eventually will leave for good."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Epstein, *Power Practicing*, 6.

<sup>6</sup> Mathieu, *The Listening Book*, 92.

<sup>7</sup> Mathieu, *The Listening Book*, 92.

## 2- Preparation

### **a. Warming up and cooling down**

Epstein believes that cooling down is as important as warming up. It's also true that he speaks from a perspective of a horn player, although I consider we can extend this habit to all the instruments as well. Epstein's reasons are simple in this matter. He says the warm-up is a daily reminder of the basics for our bodies and it is also the best tactic a musician as to stay away from injuries. This combined with a consistent practise routine keeps the body ready for the day and also for the next one since it has been prepared for the action of practice as well as for the rest afterwards.

### **b. Seeking a comfortable room to play in**

We should always try to find a room where the acoustic is appropriate for what we need to practice and one that gives us honest feedback, meaning "not too resonant but not too dry" as Epstein describes in his article. This advice couldn't be simpler and more straightforward. A room that keeps us away from distractions or interruptions keeps us focused in our tasks.

### **c. Keeping a notebook**

Having a notebook with details from our lessons and practice sessions is a reminder of what needs to be checked, what needs work and in what way. It is important to check it regularly even if we believe we have a good memory for details.

### **d. Aiming for consistency of practice**

Having a regular practice will always be better than to practice many hours whenever we feel like doing it. According to Eli "Daily practice is the path to strength, consistency and enjoyment.". He also says that the kind of work suggested in this article will

help to keep the basics and fundamentals in place, specially during tours and vacations. As a last advice he suggests for a light day a simple warm-up, for those days of tiredness and fatigue.

**e. Practicing when physically and mentally rested**

This advice makes us aware that when we do the kind of practice described in this article or one that is effective, we spend a great amount of energy, both physically and mentally. So that we can take the most advantage of each session we should always try to be in a good and healthy shape to make the most of our time and work.

**f. Stop practicing before the body gets overtired**

In this advice I made a small change to what Epstein originally wrote. He writes “Stop practicing before your face gets overtired” so, to reflect a violin player’s situation, I replaced the face with the entire body. I strongly believe this advice to be relevant for any kind of physical or musical activity, since we are all limited to what our bodies can do. While a French horn player might experience tiredness associated with the embouchure, so in the mouth and jaw region, violinists feel it more in the neck, shoulders and arms. Epstein shares one advice from one of his teachers: “Always do 99% of your physical capacity, never 101%”<sup>8</sup> with the intention of reinforcing the idea that many times negative habits are created when we practice tired.

**g. Involving the artistic side of the brain**

We often tend to be very critical about technical issues and due to this fact also frequently we neglect the core of our daily work, being artists. Instead of trying to solve a technical problem for the sake of it we can try to involve the musical aspects of the piece to overcome them, for example to sing the phrase out loud. Quoting Epstein “When our brain knows what the musical goal is, it finds a way to reach that goal.”

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<sup>8</sup> Epstein, *Power Practicing*, 5.

#### **h. Emulating great singers and string players / wind players**

This advice reminds us to look for inspiration in other instruments and other ways to conceive sound, phrasing or character. Epstein recommends to hear a lot of different recordings and to attend live concerts often. In case we are currently working on an Mozart Concerto, a good way to get better insight into the composer and his writing is to listen to arias from his operas and the way they are being sung. The main goal here is to understand in a deeper level what the composer wanted his works to sound like and to observe how artists in general other than string players (in my case) carry the message and the atmosphere in their instruments and in these great works.

#### **i. Developing an ultimate vision of how one wants to sound**

Again, this advice comes from a place of finding inspiration in others and creating our own version of what we are playing, in other words, creating our own interpretation of a piece. In order to achieve this, we should always question every aspect of our playing such as how would be our dream sound or try to find words to describe it. Also, to wonder about the style if it is classic, romantic or contemporary; what is the register in which we are playing; what is the kind of articulation we want to use in a specific part. Here is where our creativity takes place and where we can really create our voice through other's work.

#### **j. Performing the impossible**

According to Epstein, the way players improve is by stretching themselves “beyond what may seem possible”<sup>9</sup> on their instrument. We must want as musicians to always reach the next level of our playing and always search new ways to challenge ourselves in that sense. To enter this journey of constant quest to improve our skills, musical and technical, even when it feels that we have achieved our best way to perform a phrase, a desired articulation or even sound or posture, everything is challengeable.

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<sup>9</sup> Epstein, *Power Practicing*, 5.

### 3- Strategies and Exercises

#### **a. Playing passages in slow motion the first time through**

According to Epstein, starting with this mindset from scratch when approaching a new piece or excerpt can be the best way to introduce something new to our brain and body. Usually, the first times we play anything are the ones that last longer in our memory. Therefore, the greatest way to start playing something is by using a metronome with a slow/comfortable tempo, providing ourselves the required foundations to properly learn new material. This has been an habit of mine for quite some years now and I must say I find it very important in the sense of developing a piece with focus and calmness. It gives the necessary time to pay attention to more details written in the score and allows the first time reading to be more thorough.

#### **b. Singing out loud**

Epstein talks about singing “passages with vowel syllables.” Even if this advice is specific to a horn player’s embouchure, I believe string players can benefit a lot from singing a phrase out loud too, such as to get a more secure notion on intonation. The awareness about the direction of our phrase is improved and becomes clearer and more organic. Epstein also underlines that this small exercise is a wonderful tool to use to set our mind and focus quickly.

#### **c. Using a metronome**

This is a simple instruction and yet an excellent reminder about our old friend metronome. A lot of times during our practice sessions we are responsible enough to turn on the metronome to check the tempo marks written in the scores or to work on some passage keeping us away from the terrible habit of tapping our feet on the floor. The essence of this advice is to create a habit of really listening to the beat in the metronome, almost in a mindfulness state. If we really find this realm where we become one with the metronome we will be creating an unshakable inner pulse.



#### **d. Changing rhythmic patterns**

Epstein highlights this exercise as a brain stimulant and “one of the most effective techniques for getting the brain to pay attention”. There are countless rhythms that can be done within a passage depending on its metric. The subdivision of the passages where we want to introduce the rhythms helps us figuring out which ones will be most beneficial. For example, if we have a passage always with the same rhythmic structure, lets say sixteenth notes, the best rhythmic patterns we can apply to it are the ones with two, four, eight, twelve, sixteen notes. This exercise is to be done using a metronome at the same time.

#### **e. Stopping on the note that feels insecure**

This exercise is also very simple to do, although it requires a lot of focus and self-control. When applied to the violin, the mind becomes more aware and more confident, for instance in a difficult register jump or in an unnatural passage to the body. It compels us to face the fragile spots and improves the preparation for such uncomfortable passages, consequently making them develop to an easier moment in the performance.

#### **f. Playing loud passages quietly**

Playing *piano* or *pianissimo* can be an excellent way to practice demanding passages without all the energy the body needs to play in the actual moment of a performance. This doesn't mean to simply play it quietly but to take advantage of the fact that we don't need to spend much attention on that energy and can instead focus on the other thousand aspects on which we sometimes don't consciously focus. In my actual case, this could include how the tips of my left fingers are placed on the fingerboard, if my shoulders are relaxed, if my right hand and arm are not tensioned when attacking a note, if the way I want to lead the phrase is actually happening in the right way. We really can get aware of so many things and through this exercise detect mannerisms we didn't know we were doing.

#### **g. Practicing with eyes open and then with eyes closed**

Epstein believes that this process can be a really good exercise to do in order to better understand which passages are secure and which are not. When we close our eyes and

play, all the other senses become active in a way and it can make it clearer for us what we need to work on the most. The exercise is as follows: first we should practice and prepare the passage/excerpt mindfully and in a very slow tempo. Secondly, we close our eyes and again we play. After analysing it we can repeat the process how often we like until we feel the passage is deeply learned.

#### **h. Working backwards**

We all have a natural tendency to always start to practice our pieces from the beginning. Here Epstein suggests we go the other way around. Start from the end of a piece, the end of an excerpt or a simple exercise. Again, this is a mental technique that will help us to keep ourselves focused and interested during the practice session and also that assures we learn in depth. Working this way is also beneficial since we are more attentive when we start practicing ensuring that all the passages get the same attention and concentration.

#### **i. Using a tuner regularly**

Using this tool allows us to keep control of what happens with our personal intonation, for example, if we have the propensity of being more on the flat or sharp side. To have this type of habit will help us gaining more objective awareness, not only about if our pitch goes up or down, but also when it happens: in a crescendo, a diminuendo or even when we play *forte* or *piano*. Checking with a tuner regularly for intonation is the same thing as checking our metronome for steady tempo or rhythm, it's a way to "recalibrate our inner hearing"<sup>10</sup> says Epstein.

#### **j. Recording Oneself**

The act of recording ourselves often gives us awareness towards what we are doing but it is also a trusty source for feedback. It allows us to go back and carefully observe and hear what we have actually sounded like, despite our opinion. Epstein calls it " a second set of ears". He also compares the act of recording our instrument playing with our voice, since many times when we listen ourselves speaking or singing it doesn't sound the same as in our

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<sup>10</sup> Epstein, *Power Practicing*, 4.

head. This can also be applied to our instruments since we have them near our body and often near our head which can influence our perception. Usually, we don't like what we hear in recordings but as everything it is a learning process that requires acceptance, time and good feedback. A good recorder is also an important component to consider if we want to get objectivity from this experience. It will provide help in a lot of aspects and details of our playing that we miss while practicing, however use it wisely and in a moderate way.

### **k. Practicing the opposites**

A lot of times we don't choose the repertoire we are playing in a specific moment, especially if we are working in an orchestra or if we are studying. This advice tells us to find the balance between the repertoire we are playing during a certain period. For example, if we are playing a lot of Romantic Period in our job or school, we should find shelter at home in some Mozart or Bach – Classic or Baroque Period; if we are constantly playing in a high register or our instrument, we should try to maintain equilibrium and find our ground again with the opposite kind of repertoire in the first positions.

### **l. Exercising Physically**

Being tuned-in with our body makes us stronger when we play our instruments. Epstein speaks of course about the best kind of exercise to do if you are a French horn player, however the same goes for any instrumentalist. Violinists often get injuries, pain or soreness on their neck, shoulders and arms due to the grip and playing position. In my experience any kind of exercise that involves movement, rotation and strength of the back and upper part of the body helps to prevent serious problems and increases comfort while playing, practicing or performing. Epstein underlines the importance of this physical activity by saying “If you have three hours to practice, it would be more effective to practice for 2 and ½ hours and use the remaining time for exercise”<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Epstein, *Power Practicing*, 4.

## Experiments using Action Research as a Model

The whole process of outlining the purpose of this project through questions, identifying obstacles, establishing strategies and analysing the process had to fit within a method that allowed me to observe the results in an objective and systematic way. Therefore, it became clear that the method that best suited my process would be through action research, in which I would be both the investigator and the core of my investigation. This method is mainly used for education purposes, more specifically teachers and practitioners.

Action research is a process in which participants examine their own educational practice systematically and carefully, using the techniques of research. (...) Although there are many types of research that may be undertaken, action research specifically refers to a disciplined inquiry done by a teacher with the intent that the research will inform and change his or her practices in the future<sup>12</sup>.

In other words, the barrier between the participant and the researcher doesn't exist anymore, allowing me to become my own teacher.

The phase one, consisted in planning my research, where I defined my research questions that needed to comply to certain parameters as they had to be testable. Here was also the time to deepen my knowledge of how I wanted to conduct my investigation and outline my working method.

The active part took place in phase two, where I conducted several experiments based on some of Epstein's advice (the ones that allowed to be clearly tested). This phase also included recordings, the daily journal (both digital and paper) and the observations that constituted the main part of this investigation. They represent the collection of data of varied

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<sup>12</sup> Eileen Ferrance, "Action Research," Brown University, 2000, accessed November 5, 2020, [https://www.brown.edu/academics/education-alliance/sites/brown.edu/academics/education-alliance/files/publications/act\\_research.pdf](https://www.brown.edu/academics/education-alliance/sites/brown.edu/academics/education-alliance/files/publications/act_research.pdf).

typology, either quantitative or qualitative, and where multiple cycles of experiments were carried out.

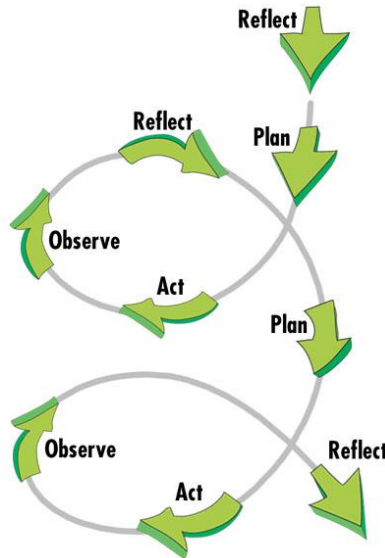


Figure 1. Nicholas S. Noakes, “Action Research.,The Overview of Action Research,” accessed November 5, 2020, <http://ceidev.ust.hk/teaching-resources/action-research>.

The third phase consisted of analysing the data acquired from phase two. It was the time to observe, organize and discuss information. In this investigation, the reality consisted of an alternation between listening to recordings several times, creating a brainstorming scheme about everything that was experienced (physically and mentally) during the process and choosing which were the highlights of each one.

Finally, the fourth phase consisted of the reflection of the entire practice process. It was also the time to transform all the analyses, to look from another broader and more distant perspective and draw my conclusions about my research questions and finally see where I stood after this long way.

## Recordings and Daily Journal Analysis

The idea of documenting and cataloging my data from this study through spoken and continuous recordings and, after that, entering them in a daily journal had, as main objective, to make the process more organic and quicker to reaction. It enabled me to remember more vividly the details that happened during the study sessions and then work and reflect deeper on them. As I practiced and tested, I would describe aloud what I sensed and transmitted feedback to the camera, so that later I could truly analyze the course of each experience. The emphasized aspects were comments explaining why something happened, what I could make better next time, which strategies I could test facing that specific situation and, lastly, how efficient it was for solving the obstacle. I believe it's pertinent to share fragments of these moments for a better understanding<sup>13</sup>. It was honestly one of the moments in this investigation that gave me the most pleasure to carry out and that I will certainly continue to develop in my daily practice, as I feel that I gained a lot from it, both at the performative level and at the level of self-awareness development.



Figure 2. Photo taken from a practice session, March 4, 2021, HSM – University of Gothenburg.

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<sup>13</sup> See Videos 1 and 2

## Experiments

All the experiments done in this chapter contained four different phases within a cycle: planning, action, observing and reflecting. They were recorded during my practice sessions where I played excerpts applying the strategies I thought fit and tested their efficiency.

### Experience One - Changing Rhythmic Patterns

This technique Epstein schematizes in his article is not revolutionary and also not something completely new to me. I have been applying rhythmic exercises in my practice for some years now and because I know they are a great tool I wish to gain more knowledge and deep control of this technique.

Weber — Der Freischütz Overture  
Violine I

142 **D**  
*mf*

147 *cresc.*  
*f*

152 *f*

157 **E**  
*ff*

Example 1. Excerpt of *Der Freischütz* Overture by Carl Maria von Weber, Violin I, letter D (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, ca.1900).

### Planning

*Der Freischütz* was one of the pieces we played in the orchestra project of the University. The concert was held on the 5<sup>th</sup> March of 2021 in which I was concertmaster. It's

important to know that when the following recordings were made I had played this piece for two weeks and they were done the day before the concert. This excerpt was one of the most difficult parts in the repertoire for this concert because it was very exposed and a fragile spot so everybody needed to be in control of it.

I scheduled my planning to start with a quick playing through of the excerpt (Example 1), to remember the main aspects of this excerpt using the metronome. I intended to play again the excerpt in its original shape in a faster tempo at the end of these experiments to see if the rhythmic patterns had indeed help me gaining better control of the passage.

### Action

The moment of playing was done in a slow tempo (half-note = 60) using the excerpt on Example 1. I recommend to watch Video 3 at this point.

### Observing








The first time I played I was very focused on having the right notes and intonation and it lacked the crescendo and direction. The bow stroke was fine but not precise. I repeated this process one more time, now more focused on exaggerating the dynamics. This time it was possible to hear a crescendo but, in my opinion, still not enough.

### Reflecting

The first time playing slowly really helped remembering the passage and to put in perspective all the aspects I wanted to work on during this practice session. By playing I realized I needed to improve the phrasing and mainly the bow stroke (VV). This excerpt is very demanding in terms of fast changing registers (in the violin it means the hand is never in the same position and it has to shift around various positions up and down in order to get a better organization and hand patterns for the left hand), the key in which it is (EbM) and the constant accidentals makes it less natural for the left hand. The last goal I decided to work as well was the *crescendo* from *mf* to *f* and phrase direction that comes naturally with the dynamics.



## R4 FOUR-NOTE RHYTHM PATTERNS

a)  $\frac{3}{8}$  1)  2)  3)  4)  5)  6)  7) 

Example 2. Ivan Galamian and Frederick Neumann, *Contemporary Violin Technique*, vol. 1 part 2, (Boston: ECS Publishing, 1966), 24. The circle indicates my choice for Experiment 1.

### Planning

For the first rhythm (Example 2) I decided to start in a comfortable tempo (eighth note = 135) and to keep the original bowing of the excerpt since this was one of the challenges to overcome with this exercise. It is important to say I started this exercise already with the amount of bow I was supposed to play with in the final tempo to gain the habit and searching the comfort of the movement for the performance.

### Action

This time I played the excerpt combined with the rhythmic pattern at example 2 using the metronome (eighth note = 135). Please see Video 4.

### Observing

I could notice an improvement from the first to the second time, the beginning was fine although my concentration disappeared and the quality of my bow-stroke articulation got worse. After the third attempt the bow-stroke was clear and my goal achieved so I moved on to the next rhythm.

### Reflecting

When I began to play the first time with this rhythm I realized almost immediately that I had to exaggerate the attack of the two up-bows strike and my focus wasn't anymore in my intonation. Before I repeated for the second time I set the goal to aim for a good start from the string for the bow-stroke to obtain a more clear and precise articulation. The two notes with

the up-bow were also different and the second one needed a stronger start from the string. I repeated one third time aiming for the same goal and it improved quite fast.

## Experiment Two

### R4 FOUR-NOTE RHYTHM PATTERNS

a)  $\frac{3}{8}$

The image shows seven rhythmic patterns, each consisting of four eighth notes. Pattern 1: quarter, eighth, eighth, quarter. Pattern 2: eighth, eighth, quarter, quarter. Pattern 3: eighth, quarter, eighth, quarter (circled in orange). Pattern 4: quarter, quarter, eighth, eighth. Pattern 5: quarter, eighth, eighth, quarter. Pattern 6: eighth, eighth, quarter, quarter. Pattern 7: eighth, quarter, eighth, quarter. Each pattern is separated by a double bar line.

Example 3. Galamian and Neumann, *Contemporary Violin Technique*, vol. 1 part 2, 24. The circle indicates my choice for Experiment 2.

### Planning

The second experiment was done on a different rhythmic pattern (Example 3). Since I wanted to have the same structure for all the experiments I decided to keep the same tempo and also to do the same number of repetitions to have a better way to compare each rhythm and the line of progress.

### Action

I played the excerpt combined with the rhythmic pattern at example 3 using the metronome (eighth note = 135). It can be seen on Video 5.

### Observing

While keeping the same tempo (eighth note = 135) I played the second rhythm for the first time and it sounded easier than the first rhythm. The second time served its purpose as a reinforcement for the first time, so I didn't notice a considerable difference however both times sounded natural to play. The third attempt I started playing in a more comfortable dynamic and less *f* so I had the space to build my way up from the *mf* to the *f*. By the end of the

experiment I felt that I was playing the passage in a more organic way and I looked less busy with the technical issues.

### Reflecting

After playing for the first time the second rhythm, I felt the structure of my left hand was starting to become more natural, meaning, the scheme of the passage was getting clearer in my head. Similarly, the bow stroke was starting to come more easily and with less effort from my right hand. I became aware that I was not doing the dynamics, so I decided to define it as the purpose for the third time. By the third time I was already feeling much more confident and a sense of letting go about the excerpt.

### Experiment Three - Stopping on the note that feels insecure

As I already mentioned before in the method chapter (a. Stopping on the note that feels insecure), this technique is very simple in theory, although in practical terms it can be rather challenging to execute. It requires a lot of concentration and self-control. There is another issue to consider that I would like to point out which is the why we are doing it. What is the reason that takes us to use this tool? For me this is the crucial point. It can be used for example for intonation purposes, for preparation to play a note (due to shifting to uncomfortable position on the left hand), for articulation/attack on the bow side, for mental preparation, for body tension, the list is big. This makes this tool a very rich and useful for numerous kinds of situations I might find in the practice room.

Richard Strauss  
Don Juan, Op.20

VIOLINO I

Example 4. Excerpt from *Don Juan* Op. 20 by Richard Strauss, Violin I, bars 1 – 36 (Munich: Joseph Aibl Verlag, ca.1890)

### Planning

Firstly, to start this practice session I planned to play through Example 4 from *Don Juan*. The goal I had in mind was to look at the big picture and to check how the excerpt was developing during that specific week. I had an audition coming up and I needed to start hearing it in the outsider perspective. My idea was to examine where my strong points were and where the fragilities were showing the most and work with that outcome.

### Action

At this point I played a small section of example 4, starting on bar 27 and finishing on bar 31. It can be seen on Video 6.

## Observing

After playing through the first time, I detected an exposed spot (bar 27), where there are a couple of double stops, among those a fragile fifth on the third bar (seven bars after letter A, second half of the bar). I decided to take that spot a few times. Primarily, I isolated the fifth and worked on the intonation and after that I included that same fifth in the context of the passage of the excerpt. I started a couple of bars before and then finished in the high D in *fff*.

## Reflecting

In order to build my way through the passage from bar 27 to the bar 31 I had to first face the intonation difficulty related to the double stops (bars 27 – 29), to create a bigger stability and confidence in its preparation and execution. The fifth interval was my main focus since it was the place that stood out the most. The four strings of the violin are tuned in perfect fifths and to be able to find the same result in other notes rather than open strings we must use the same finger in two consecutive strings to execute it (in this case second finger), which requires a lot of precision. Firstly, I started by finding the right and comfortable position for my left hand and finger in question in both strings. Secondly, I repeated that process, having the goal to hit the interval always in the same way with my finger, based on the feeling I got the first time I did it correctly. When it started to get more consistent I inserted the isolated fifth into the passage of the excerpt, gradually increasing the speed and consequently the preparation and execution of those bars.

## Experiment Four - Practicing with eyes open and then with eyes closed

The act of playing with my eyes closed is not something new for me but using it as a tool for my daily practice is a completely different reality. Being aware of this and doing it because is a part of my techniques to improve a certain passage or excerpt is very different from doing so involuntarily or as a mannerism. For me gaining conscience about what my eyes do while I play is one more step toward mastering one more part of myself as a violinist. For the next experiment I used the same excerpt as in the previous one, Example 5. I decided to do

an experiment in the same excerpt, since Don Juan is one of the most famous in the violin repertoire, if not the most requested in auditions.

### Planning

I decided to start this experiment with a slower tempo to focus entirely on the main goal: the sensation felt with eyes opened and then closed. Subsequently, the goal was to increase the speed and see if anything changed compared to the first attempt.

### Action

The first test was done on bar 34 of Example 4, starting on the second note, with a slow tempo. Please see Video 7.

The second time I used the same part of the excerpt (bars 34 to 36), in a comfortable and yet faster tempo. It can be observed in Video 8.

### Observing

Along with the first attempt, I felt some difficulty in focusing on the main function of the experience, as there were other factors that I wasn't able to put aside at first, specifically some intonation issues - possible to hear in video five. With eyes open, there is greater attention to what is happening physically and bigger tension in the facial area. In the second part of video five, with eyes closed, it is possible to observe a relaxation of facial expressions and a significant improvement in the left hand movements. The whole movement became more organic and the intonation, as a result, also improved in the higher positions.

In video six, the excerpt speed is higher, allowing a better observation of these elements, from a general point of view. Regarding facial movements, it is more accentuated in both scenarios, but in opposite directions: with open eyes, the mouth gestures and the tension are more pronounced while with closed eyes, it is more relaxed. As for the technical level, greater security is also visible in the execution of the passage, especially on the subject of intonation, changes in position and phrasing.

## Reflecting

This experiment gave me a lot of insight in how my eyes behave while I play and awareness about it was well. I became aware of that when my eyes are open while playing there is a natural tendency to look at my left-hand fingers and the performed movements with the bow, especially in difficult passages. I am very connected to the sensation of the bow hair on the string and to visualizing what I am doing. It helps me to see what's around me and to observe in real time what is happening in the violin and with the physical movements I am doing while practising or playing.

When my eyes are closed during the same action, however I can feel more in depth how I want to hear what I am about to play. This means that the sense of visualization of how I want to play is stronger, in terms of sound search, sound production, phrasing or anything I am focusing on that moment. Playing with my eyes closed provides me a clearer path for my final product and how I perceive the music. It allows me to be focused in more musical aspects and not so technical and physical sensations. This is a very effective way to prepare for orchestra auditions when associated with visualization for me.

## Final Thoughts

Along the process of getting to know in depth Epstein's article and of experimenting with his advices, I came across numerous situations that have led me to different perspectives on how to face an excerpt and how to accomplish my goals in each one of them. In a minor part of them, I believe I needed more time to see results, lacking the maturity that comes from working in a certain way for a longer period such as becoming my own teacher, creating work habits and good attitudes, encouraging and being positive with myself and, finally, dealing with mistakes. I consider these four points of view to be a longer process, one that I already started some years ago and that will continue for some more as they come from a place of great self-knowledge and introspection.

I could tell almost immediately that the major part of the techniques worked, since a lot of them were familiar to me. However, they were not completely mastered. In these ones, I had everything I needed to test them fully and so I focused my attention mainly on these ones. Now with the process nearing its end, I have a stronger notion of which tools work the best for me in the practice room. Which ones make me achieve quicker and lead to better results in a short time and they are the following:

- Stop playing before the body gets overtired
- Involving the artistic side of our brain
- Playing passages in slow motion the first time through
- Singing out loud
- Changing rhythmic patterns
- Playing loud passages quietly
- Practising with eyes open and then eyes closed
- Working backwards

It is important to highlight also that the list above only concerns the experiments done during this process and not all the successful techniques used. The second phase of my investigation, meaning the period in which I conducted my experiments through recordings, was itself an improvement over time. In the beginning every situation I was facing for the first



time was very uncomfortable. Although some of the exercises tested were familiar, the entire process caused me a bit of discomfort at first. Every time I made these practice sessions, I became more confident. Suddenly, being in front of a camera practicing and talking turn out to be a regular thing. That was the moment where I started noticing an improvement. The process itself was a test to my focus, discipline and self-awareness.

From all the experiments I carried out, the one that was most significant for me personally was working with opened and closed eyes. It had a huge impact on my way to perceive what I was doing musically. It made me realize how much the sense of sight changes my perception of the performance while playing. How my focus switches attention in both situations. Lastly, stopping on the note that feels insecure was the most uncomfortable to execute. I took benefits from it, but it didn't become a habit after my research. More time will be needed until this exercise becomes a tool in my practice routine.

There are many other techniques that I used and that had a positive impact on this investigation but that ended up secondary for the results. By this I mean that it was not possible for me to quantify their total influence, but I am perfectly aware that they helped and greatly facilitated the perception and conclusion drawn from the experiences.

The act of recording myself became something more ordinary in my daily base actions and rather comfortable. Gradually, this helped me facing these recorded moments with naturality, sometimes even forgetting the camera was on. I considered this a great personal achievement since I always struggle with practice/playing with a camera on, because previously, I could not focus completely on this type of situations. The fact that I used the recording sessions to journal through the process of experiments, saying out loud what I was thinking, how and what I felt, analysing what happened helped me to face the camera in a friendlier way. During the process of developing my toolbox for practice sessions and experimenting on them I came across various kinds of ways to approach excerpts. It made me understand more in depth myself through recording sessions and to know better what was happening to my playing in those moments.

Regarding the second and third questions I asked at the beginning of this project that led me to develop this theme – “How important it is to know what the final product should

sound like and in what ways does it help while practising an excerpt?” and also “In what ways does practicing with a strong musical idea help to get the mindset needed for a certain excerpt or passage?” - I can answer that I discovered some relevant facts. I have been searching and developing more my musical sense in order to build a stronger vision of music through the repertoire I play in each moment. I have been working on being more critical yet constructive and more creative during practice, in order to seek my own identity as a musician. Being able to question every aspect of my playing helped me to develop much further one of the exercises made in my experiences: playing with my eyes open and then closed. During the execution of this experiment, I already had a preconceived idea of how I wanted to play the excerpt, as it was an assignment I did before starting the recordings. After performing several takes I realized that the whole process was much faster than the ones that had another content or purpose. This led me to conclude that by knowing what I wanted, it helped me to develop other parts that I had to work on and made all the path until there much easier and more fluid. Looking at the whole, it not only contributed to consciously improving the excerpt - personal goals included in the planning - but also unconsciously in other dimensions - phrasing, movements and focus on music other than technical terms.

Regarding the last question I aimed to answer, “How to cope with stress or exposure in practice sessions and how to prepare for it before a performance/audition?” I did several mental exercises and committed to expose myself, through auditions. The goal was to understand how I was unconsciously coping with stress and anxiety and in what ways I could manage it better. The first immediate method I tried was visualization in the practice room, since it was suggested in Epstein’s article and something I attempted a few times before. I managed to make myself feel nervous. During this process, I closed my eyes and introduced thoughts such as standing alone on stage of a big hall, having a jury in front of me or even assuming that it was the first time I was playing those excerpts in this situation. A lot of times, after this small ritual, I felt discomfort and that was the moment to do a run-through of the excerpts. Another way to prepare for performance anxiety is to give good information to the brain from the start. By having good habits and self-control in the practice room I can “teach” my brain and my muscles how I want to play a passage that later translates as self-confidence. It allows me to let go in the actual performance and to trust the work I did previously. The

habits I consider having the greatest influence on this matter are repetition (always with the purpose of positively and objectively “educate” the brain); run-through of one or more excerpts in the beginning and end of a practice session (even if it is slow); visualization (from an early stage) and exposure through recordings or playing for colleagues. One component that equally helped me was to ask my violin teacher to listen to the auditions repertoire in the individual lessons and, in the end, to ask for feedback about it. This way, I faced a challenging moment for which I had to prepare, expose myself and, at the same time, to simulate an audition. In the final phase of this research, I made three auditions within a month where I could test all the skills I used to prepare for them. Regarding this topic, I concluded I was nervous in all the scenarios, but I didn’t experience the same during the performance. The three events varied a lot due to external and inner factors. Those who had more weight and determined the result were:

- The audition’s order
- Organization of the audition
- How isolated I was from other candidates
- The time I spent at the audition location
- My proximity and relationship with the other candidates
- Travel Day
- Difference in motivation and fatigue between the first and third auditions

The following table shows the variations from audition to audition that most determined my performances:

| Location  | Preparation | Travel Day                 | Proximity with other candidates | Familiarity with the Institution | Audition’s Organization | Audition’s Order | Waiting time |
|-----------|-------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------|--------------|
| Luxemburg | 2 months    | 2 days before the audition | None                            | None                             | Excellent               | Number 1         | 30 minutes   |

|        |          |                           |             |             |                |                 |         |
|--------|----------|---------------------------|-------------|-------------|----------------|-----------------|---------|
| Lisbon | 2 months | Audition's day            | None        | Significant | Excellent      | Predefined time | None    |
| Lisbon | 2 months | 1 day before the audition | Significant | None        | Unsatisfactory | Number 38       | 8 hours |

After all, the audition held in Luxemburg was the one where I felt bigger stability, both mentally/emotionally and physically. I believe the timings for travelling, waiting and playing were more organic to me and facilitated the performance.

Through this process, I found out in which kind of environments I am stronger, how much time I need to prepare for an audition (practice and mental preparation) and when I am at my best shape. I learned more about my fragilities during the audition's process as they became clearer each time I exposed myself to it. All the aspects referred above can be traduced into a development of my self-knowledge which I strongly believe to be the most important part of this long journey of auditioning.

# Recordings

## Video 1

<https://youtu.be/VX4Ga8MQzgQ>

## Video 2

<https://youtu.be/nqtiDC6sOL4>

## Video 3

<https://youtu.be/mve7LhQSfQg>

## Video 4

<https://youtu.be/nFDIEpWu0Vc>

## Video 5

<https://youtu.be/9p1RVbqKGAM>

## Video 6

[https://youtu.be/\\_FokR1-vYEQ](https://youtu.be/_FokR1-vYEQ)

## Video 7

<https://youtu.be/Itrnb0g3Ig4>

## Video 8

<https://youtu.be/GsRVO5X4dUI>

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