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Handledare: Ambjörn Hugardt

Matti Mietola

Practicing is listening
Practicing viola with the help of self-recording

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Abstract

In this thesis I have examined the benefits of working with a help of self-recording. I wanted to experiment self-monitoring with different working methods to improve my practicing skills as well my performing skills as I prepared for my examination concert. This process consisted of a lot of recording, listening and practicing and repeating this cycle numerous times. I wanted to implement different practice methods and reflect on different aspects of playing the viola. This thesis is written from a violist point of view.

The main focus of this work is audio recording as a tool in self-monitoring practice. I have been using two main methods in reviewing the audio material gathered from practice sessions: 1) time between recording and reviewing the material and 2) recording, analyzing and practicing in line with the recordings within a practice session.

I wanted to take self-recording process into more regular use because I see it as an essential part of the self-teaching process. A music student has to go through a lot of practicing hours and most of these are spent alone in a practice room. Some of this time is wasted and misused in learning unwanted habits. I wanted to learn to practice in the most deliberate way and use my practice hours as effectively as possible by structuring my practice in self-teaching phases and putting the emphasis on self-monitoring.

Keywords:
Self-teaching, self-learning, viola, violin, practice, mental rehearsing.
1. Introduction

How I was introduced and became interested in the subject of self-recording and why I became determined to do this thesis on self-monitoring.

Thoughts on self-recording

Music sounds a bit different every time we hear it because of our different feelings and thoughts on different occasions. We tend to perceive things each time in a slightly different way and there is always a difference between being the performer and being the observer. As we perform something there is always the challenge of being objective in our perception of what has actually happened.

My former teacher used to say that as a performer you have to filter the music that you produce for the audience so that everything that comes out of your instrument moves through your perception: the sound, rhythm, pitch. Simon Fischer (2013, 93) views that style and expression cannot be separated from pitch-sound-rhythm as they are essentially the same thing and produced through these elements. By monitoring the sound, rhythm and pitch you can filter all aspects of the music for the listener.

Often people who are not used to hear their own voice freak out a bit when they first hear their voice recorded. "Do I really sound like that, no, it can’t be!" is the usual reaction from the average person. Though we hear our own voice frequently as we use it, it is not the same thing as hearing it as the people next to you receive it. Gerald Glickstein (2009, 17) writes about this dilemma and recommends especially vocalists to use self-recording to monitor themselves from the viewpoint of an audience member.

I can remember from my early childhood when I used make goofy recordings with my siblings on a cassette tape. It was great fun back then and it has brought a lot of joy listening to those tapes afterwards. I also had an experience in upper secondary school where I recorded some pieces with a band as a part of band course, and I can remember many school festivities where I did some kind of a performance on stage and it was filmed, usually by my mom.

One of the first powerful experiences of self-recording became when I was recording my very own band project with a 4-track Foster Recorder. I was so intrigued, so exhilarated to make an audio presentation of our music that I used hours and hours playing around with all kinds of ideas. In a way every track I made with that recording machine became very dear to me, like something that is not only made by you, but is also a living thing on its own. I was experiencing the joy of creativity.
In the earlier stages of my instrumental studies there was one occasion where my teacher recorded my performance so that we could analyze it later during my lesson. I think he wanted me to hear that my performance wasn’t bad at all and that there was no need to be so nervous and judgmental towards myself, which I had a tendency of, on the stage. It made me happy to hear that the music was coming through despite my stage-fright.

I started practicing with a recording machine when I was studying for the Bachelor’s degree in music. My teacher told me back then that it would be foolish not to use self-recording as a way to help you learn to listen; he had an idea of us, the musicians, becoming very stupid every time we grab our instruments because of the distorting effect it has on our perception. We need to be the musician and the audience at same time as we play.

My teacher gave me short instructions to play through a piece or a passage and then listen to it while looking at the musical notation and at the same time making notes to the paper of what didn’t work. After that it would be a matter of figuring out what do you have to change in order to make the music work and how to execute everything. I found these simple instructions very useful as I started to record pieces and passages.

I have to admit that even though I found this method of practicing very helpful, I didn’t use the audio recorder very often. When there was a concert coming up in a few weeks or days, I dug up my (at the time, it was borrowed from my teacher) recording devise and did self-recording couple of times, but I never used it regularly.

I think most musicians have done at least some self-recording and have found it useful. Recording and listening to yourself is one of the best ways to learn about yourself as a musician and maybe teach a thing or two to yourself. The question I have asked myself many times is: why don’t I do this on a regular basis? It became clear to me that self-recording could speed up my working progress in a drastic manner and make my work more precise as well.

After I got my bachelor’s degree in music, I spend two years working as El Sistema teacher in a children's orchestra in Finland. During this time I didn’t have a teacher to turn to so I read through a great deal of pedagogic violin literature to keep the learning process on. It felt great to get accepted to KMH after working for two years without a mentor and to once again be able to work with the aid of a teacher.

It is essential to have a good teacher to make rapid progress, but as we enter our own practice time we need to become the student and the teacher. We need a variety of different basic skills to connect with our musicianship through our instrument, of course, but the essential thing to learn is how to guide oneself to mould the music with the tools that we have.
I have found out from my own experiences regarding self-teaching that it is very often difficult to find the right approach to the problem when you’re not certain where exactly the problem lies. It is essential for a musician to learn how to first recognize and then tackle the challenges which arise in the daily practice.

I think one should self-record on a regular basis. It could be also used on many different things: scales, etudes, passages, pieces. I think self-recording can help one to learn about oneself. It is very important to acknowledge your strengths as an instrumentalist and a musician as well as what do you need to work on to evolve.

As I was striving to be effective in my practice sessions it became clear to me that self-recording, self-assessment and improving in self-teaching were something I really wanted to focus on. I feel that I need to consider these things as I approach my future as a musician, as a teacher and an artist.
2. Background

How to practice, how to choose what to practice and why should everyone keep an eye and an ear on themselves.

The essential benefits of self-recording

With this work I wanted to deepen my knowledge and understanding of how one could use self-recording to enhance the results of practicing. Using self-recording as a tool to improve practice sessions does not seem to be common: this was not used regularly in my previous studies and I hadn’t heard from too many of my colleagues that they were accustomed to use self-recording regularly. I can remember one colleague who told me she recorded every violin lesson she had so that she could listen to the lesson afterwards to recall things or to get a better perspective of things. This made me more curious about the benefits of recording and self-monitoring.

Gerald Klickstein (2009, 17) views and lists the benefits of self-recording in the following way:

1. Sharpens musicianship
   - you can take a step back and listen to the music as if someone else was playing it
   - after listening objectively it is possible for the musician to refine the execution in line with the insights
2. Prevents distorted perception
   - self-recording enables you to perceive how you really sound to your listeners, which is often distorted by the actions of producing the music
3. Heightens practice efficiency
   - self-recording helps you to be precise from the start
   - keeps you from wasting time with inaccurate practice
4. Enhances lessons
   - recording lessons gives you the opportunity to review your lessons again and again
   - you will be able to write down every detail of the often wide range of topics discussed during the lesson
5. Promotes objectivity
   - self-recording allows a group to appraise their work objectively and minimize conflict

(Klickstein, 2009, 17)

This list became the basis for my work as Klickstein’s book was one of the few pedagogic books I found strongly advising musicians to self-record themselves and the only one thoroughly rationalizing the benefits. It became a good starting point for my own investigations and experimentations.
around the subject of self-recording. These arguments were also in line with my own thoughts concerning the benefits of self-recording.

Practicing with a purpose

One of the first things that come to my mind when I think about learning and the process behind it is the learning curve. Learning curve, as it is usually presented, is never a straight line bolting upwards. Though it is eventually progressing upwards, the pace of learning is always changing. Learning is something that requirers time and patience and for me as a musician a lot of it is build on trial and error. It can be very difficult for a student to understand that developing skills is indeed a time-craving process where we have to correct our habitual actions again and again.

Malcolm Gladwell presents in his book *Outliers: The story of success* (2008) a ”10 000-Hour Rule” based on a study by Anders Ericsson. The ”10 000-hour Rule” claims that the the amount of practice that is needed to achieve world class expertise in any skill is 10 000 hours. Ericsson (2013, 534) tries to correct the popular misconceptions of his work brought by the ”10 000-hour Rule” on an article:

> More importantly, our research has never been about counting hours of any type of practice. In fact, it is now quite clear that the number of hours of merely engaging in activities, such as playing music, chess and soccer, or engaging in professional work activities has a much lower benefit for improving performance than deliberate practice. (Ericsson, 2013, 534)

As my studies have progressed I have become more conscious of the fact that my practice time should be more about quality than quantity. For me this became the most important factor within my studies because of the
need to be as effective as possible and make as much progress as possible in
the smallest amount of time. I feel that two years is a short time but with
highly efficient practice you can make in minutes an effect that could have
otherwise taken days or even years to appear.

The question is: what are the things that make practice time effective or in-
effective? I would say that firstly you have to have a clear goal of what you
want to accomplish. The clearer picture you have the better. When you have
set your goal the next thing is to estimate where are you currently standing
in relation to your goal. What is the distance between you and your goal?
After this you will have to work your way towards your goal and plan your
approach based on this distance between you and your goal.

Performance psychologist Noa Kageyama (2009) writes in his article How
Many Hours a Day Should You Practice that majority of music students
practice ”rather mindlessly”. This mindless method of practicing is descri-

ed in the following way:

You’ll notice that the majority of folks practice rather mindlessly, either en-
gaging in mere repetition (“practice this passage 10 times” or “practice this
piece for 30 minutes”) or practicing on autopilot (that’s when we play
through the piece until we hear something we don’t like, stop, repeat the pas-
sage again until it sounds better, and resume playing through the piece until
we hear the next thing we aren’t satisfied with, at which point we begin this
whole process over again). (Kageyama, 2009)

Kageyama presents three major problems with mindless practicing:

1. It is a waste of time
2. It makes you less confident
3. It is tedious and boring

Mindless practicing can enforce bad habits and tendencies. According to
Kageyama we need to be conscious as we practice also because of our ten-
dency to shift over into hyper-analytical left brain mode as we perform on
stage. If we have practiced unconsciously we won’t know what instructions
to give our brain when this shift to full-conscious mode suddenly happens.
Kageyama explains that ”it doesn’t really matter how much time we spend
practicing something — only that we know how to produce the results we
want, and can do so consistently, on demand.”

Instead of mindless practice Kageyama suggest that one should use method
of deliberate, mindful practice which he describes as systematic and highly
structured activity.

Instead of mindless trial and error, it is an active and thoughtful process of
experimentation with clear goals and hypotheses…

…Deliberate practice is often slow, and involves repetition of small and very
specific sections of your repertoire instead of just playing through (e.g. wor-
king on just the opening note of your solo to make sure that it ”speaks” exact-
ly the way you want, instead of playing the entire opening phrase). (Kageya-
ma, 2009)
Kageyama continues by clarifying the importance self-monitoring:

Deliberate practice involves monitoring one’s performance (in real-time, but also via recordings), continually looking for new ways to improve. This means really listening to what happens, so that you can tell yourself exactly what went wrong. For instance, was the first note note sharp? Flat? Too loud? Too soft? Too harsh? Too short? Too long? (Kageyama, 2009)

It is easy to dismiss this aspect of self-assessment or that the self-assessment one makes can also easily turn out to be inaccurate. This is where one usually relies on the teacher to correct misunderstandings and to lead your practicing process to the right track. Teacher’s primary job is to listen and observe the student as she or he works with a piece of music and then to try to make improvements in the way the student plays. Teacher is also a mentor who guides and encourages student along the way. No doubt our progress would be more swift if we could have this kind of mentoring and supervision also during our practice sessions.

Learning to know oneself

…there is nothing more fatal for our musical sense than to allow ourselves—by the hour—to hear musical sounds without really listening to them…

(Matthay, 1913, 5)

When you are a top level athlete most of your practice is supervised. There is someone constantly walking by your side and correcting your movement, giving you instructions, correcting flaws, scheduling your training and in general watching over you and keeping an eye on everything that can have an effect on your performance. A coach or maybe a team of coaches are there to make sure that the athlete peaks on the day of performance whereas a musician does most of his work alone with no other supervision than perception of oneself.

Only rarely does a musician studying for a professional career have another set of ears listening to him practicing. Typically a student practicing for a concert has to rely on advice of a teacher, who sadly enough isn’t usually there to oversee the quality of one’s practice. Some of the early stage students have their parents listening on them practicing and paying attention on different details. For example, within The Suzuki Method it is essential that the parents are educated to guide and supervise their children’s practice.

Since we spend so much time practicing without any outside supervision we need to become the teacher as well as the student. We need to assess our playing and make our decisions on how to carry on based on our assessment. First thing to do when something is not working is to stop for a moment, assess what just happened and then start to work with the problem. These steps are essential to keep your practicing constructive.

A musician is challenged to develop an awareness on everything that is happening inside as well as outside of oneself at the same time as making the
music. The musician has to produce the music and at the same time filter everything that is produced. It is essential for us to know what is really happening and how we really sound to the audience. This is a skill which we need to nurture throughout our career as musicians to be able to eliminate unintended actions within our musical activity.

**Self-teaching skills**

What are the skills we need in the practice room when we are figuring out what to do and how to do it? As mentioned earlier, there are many times when we often have to lead ourselves even if we don’t know how to reach our goal or even if we might not be able to visualize the goal yet. There are multiple steps we have to take alone and without mentoring guide by our side.

Ivan Galamian (1962, 93) suggests in his book ”Principles of Violin Playing and Teaching” that during the individual practice the students should act as the teacher’s deputies assigning themselves definite tasks and supervising their own work. In this idea of practicing the student becomes the teacher and practicing becomes self-teaching. Harald Jørgensen (Williamon, 2004, 85) divides self-teaching in three phases that are typically viewed as cyclical and interwoven:

1) planning and preparation of practice
2) execution of practice
3) observation and evaluation of practice

Jørgensen also presents a model of strategies based on self-teaching. This model below (Williamon, 2004, 86) connects the self-teaching phases with different strategies.

![Fig. 2. Model for self-teaching strategies (Williamon, 2004, 86)](image)

- Planning and preparation = e.g for activity selection and organization, setting goals and objectives, and time management
Executive strategies = e.g. for rehearsal, distribution of practice over time, and preparing for a public performance

Evaluation strategies = e.g. for process and product evaluation

Metastrategies = knowledge of strategies, and control and regulation of strategies

A metastrategy can be explained as an overarching strategy determining which other strategies to use in a given situation. For an advanced student there is a massive amount of variables that can affect your practice sessions. As a student you have to make the choices of how to react on each moment and what path to take as you lead yourself through these hours and hours of practice. We need different strategies which we can individually employ within our practice sessions according to our own judgement. Jørgensen insists:

> Every practitioner—from the student to the professional musician—must have thorough knowledge of his or her repertory of strategies and must be able to control, regulate, and exploit this repertory. (Williamon, 2004, 87)

I feel from my own experience that one needs to be as precise as possible when making decision on what one should work on.

A student should be aware of two things: what is the goal and what is he currently doing. A Teacher can help by giving advise and ideas and by doing this clarifies the goal, but it will help greatly if we can oversee that these changes are realized in our practice.

**Practical considerations**

In this segment I write about the recording gear I have used and differences between making an audio recording or video recording. I preferred recording to be a fast, easy and practical process for me as I worked with my thesis project.

For this project I have been using mainly my iPhone 5s. I found a good and simple application for my iPhone called MusiciansKit which I can use to record audio files and send then to my email. The sound quality could be better but it is decent enough to give me the information I need concerning my playing. The application also has a metronome and a tuner which have become essential tools in my practice.

I own a Zoom H2n recorder which has high sound quality and is great for any kind of recording but I found my iPhone sufficient enough and much more easy to carry around as I have it with me everywhere. I have been using both of these gears in producing material for this thesis.

A have also made video files with my iPhone. It has great video and audio quality and after I learned how to transfer the files to my computer everything worked out quite easily. I went and bought only one accessory as I
I needed a tripod to hold my iPhone. After that I was ready to make proper videos of myself playing and practicing.

My first idea was to focus this work on audio recordings because I thought that audio recording was much more simple to make — in video recording you need more time setting everything up. Technology has however changed greatly with time and nowadays you can make a great video just by using your mobile phone. It still takes a bit more effort to make a video than to just audio record yourself as you need to set everything up but it is quite easy and fast thing to do.

There is of course a big difference between audio and video recording. Audio recording focuses only on the music while video presents the whole process of producing the music. This gives us the possibility to observe everything in a detailed manner. One central question concerning the difference between audio and video recording is what are the benefits of doing one over another.

Video material gives both visual and auditory information. I have been wondering if too much focus on the visual aspect of a performance can be misleading and sometimes distract the listener from the music which actually coming from the instrument. One violinist can look very different from another but this doesn’t mean that you should base your evaluation on visual aspect. Musician makes music that is processed by our ears so the most important thing is what comes out of the instrument.

There is of course a relation between the physical action and the music that is made. Since music is produced by physical actions, any change in your physical action usually affects the music that is made. It is good to study how our physical habits (e.g. movement, posture) are linked with how we produce the music and specifically what are the necessary and unnecessary actions from the physical point of view. The distance between you and making music effortlessly is the distance between you and mastery. (Werner, 1996.)
3. Aim

I am interested in what elements make practice time effective or ineffective and how to find the right approach in practicing when one is not exactly certain where the problem lies. I will focus especially on how the tool of self-recording works in that respect. With this work I wanted to deepen my knowledge and understanding of how one could use self-recording as a tool to enhance the practice results.

The thesis is linked to the process of preparing for my examination concert at the end of spring semester 2016 and I wanted to investigate how the practice of self-recording could be helpful in preparing for the concert.
4. Methods

*Working methods and strategies.*

**Recording and listening**

I did self-recording at least once every week between September 2015—April 2016. I have had two main methods which I have been implementing throughout this project:

1) **Record a passage, passages or a whole piece. Come back to it and listen to it after one or two days for in-depth analysis.**

2) **Record a passage, passages or a whole piece and listen to it right away. Start to analyze and work with the piece immediately.**

The purpose of the first method (1) is to have some distance provide by time left between playing and listening to the audio files. The aim was to achieve the experience of a genuine listener which can be quite different from the role of an instrumentalist. Sometimes when you start listening to self-recording right after you have played it in, you are really attached to your emotions as a musician, which can lead to a distorted perception of what is really happening on the tape. You might just try to get confirmation for the thoughts and feelings you currently have when listening self-recording right after it is done. I have found it usually better to revisit these recordings with a more detached mind of a member of an audience.

The other method (2) that I have been using is in line with the approach of Miranda Wilson (2015) as she writes about making self-recording and self-evaluation a daily habit. This would mean that one would have to shift very fast from the performer to the observer as there would not be much time in between. Wilson suggests that one needs to record just tiny bits of the pieces since the most important thing is to become aware of where the performer is in relation to the desired result. Then she advices one to work from there and to make another recording at the end of this work to become aware of the progress that has been made.
5. The process

Description of the material I have been working with, why I have chosen these pieces and the process of working with the tool of self-recording.

The material

This past year (2015–2016) I have been mainly working with two important pieces for viola: Stamitz viola concerto and Bartok viola concerto. These two pieces from different eras of music are standard repertoire required when you are qualifying for a violist vacancy in an orchestra. I have been practicing the first movements of these two concertos as this is what I’m most likely to play in my future auditions.

Carl Stamitz was a German composer from the early classical era and his viola concerto is one of the two important viola concertos of that era: Carl Stamitz viola concerto and Franz Anton Hoffmeister viola concerto. In an audition for an orchestra Stamitz and Hoffmeister concertos present the same challenges for the violist that Mozart’s violin concertos present to the violinist. You have to be very exact but at the same time very free in your musical language to express all the different gestures and characters. Stamitz himself was a virtuoso violinist and undoubtedly performed this viola concerto when he was touring across Europe.

Bela Bartok’s viola concerto is one of the main pieces written for viola in the 20th century. It was ordered by a great viola virtuoso William Primrose who himself premiered the concerto 2nd of December in 1949 in Minneapolis. The concerto is technically very demanding as Primrose told the composer that he ”should not feel in any way proscribed by the apparent technical limitations of the instrument”. Bartok had worked as an ethnomusicologist and in this concerto you can find a lot of expression deriving from Hungarian folk music.

Like most musicians I try to practice scales on a regular basis. It is a great way to start your practice with and you can work on every and any aspect of playing and making music. For me it is a way to warm fingers, body and ears as you prepare to work with pieces. I usually concentrate on trying to produce as open and beautiful sound as possible and at the same time I try play as effortless as possible. Practicing scales is for me a way to establish good habits in the way you approach your instrument and music.

I usually play studies by Rodolphe Kreutzer who was a great violinist at his time. His forty-two studies offers a great variety of etudes focused on many different technical aspects. My former teacher used to say that if one can play every etude of Kreutzer forty-two studies one is capable of playing anything and everything on viola. Kreutzer’s studies are also great in a mu-
sical point of view which is great considering the amount of repetition in practice. It is important to have as musical approach as possible when you are practicing to be more technically precise.

I played Gabriel Faure piano quartet No. 1 as my chamber music project for school year 2015–2016. As we practiced this piece we repeatedly recorded passages and whole movements to understand what we needed to concentrate on.

The self-recording process

Monitoring artistic output

As I started to make self-recordings on a regular basis, the very first thing that I noted was that it had a big impact on how I perceived my playing and the intentions behind the action. For me it was quite common to start practicing different technical details without a clear picture of music and gestures that should be happening all the time. I started practicing but I was not involving myself as an artist, in an artistic way. Monitoring myself changed the relationship between me and producing the music and helped me to connect with my music in a more direct way.

Listening of these recordings made me more aware and focused on the the atmosphere of the music rather than the little details. I became more interested in how to make the atmosphere of the music more to my liking and to what I genuinely wanted to hear. As I formed a mental picture of the bigger musical frame it was easier to start working on the little details. I started to move the focus on thinking more about the final product that I would like to present to an audience.

There are of course different technical defaults in our playing which need daily work and attention. However, I have learned from this monitoring process that everything you practice should be done in a determined musical manner. This was something I had been missing as I had stretched my practicing hours. You do not want to practice something that you do not want to become as a habit. This is why it is so important to be deliberate when practicing music.

Example from the practice room

With this thought of being more deliberate on communicating different emotions, I started to work on phrasing music and specifically making detailed choreographies for the bow. Articulation, dynamics and the use of time are the main components when building the musical landscape. Each of these components are created in tone production and with a stringed instrument (with a bow) the main elements of tone production can be very easily described in the following manner:
Every tone is produced by using a specific
1) *bow speed* and
2) *bow pressure* and
3) playing on a specific *sounding point* (Fig. 3.) where the bow hair contacts the string. (Galamian, 1962, 55)

![Fig. 3. String divided in five sounding points between the bridge and the fingerboard](image)

For example,
- More bow speed — louder tone
- More bow pressure — louder tone
- Bowing closer to the bridge - louder tone
- And vice versa

To find the sonority in the sound the combination of proportions has to be precise: on a certain sounding point and a certain bow pressure there is a certain bow speed which makes the string vibrate to the widest.

By varying these different elements it is possible to acquire use of a vast range of colors in our music. It is possible to make a very detailed choreography for the bow to bring out the phrasing of the music in a desired manner by concentrating on tone production and the use of the bow. A strategy for the use of the bow is essential when linking one note to another and building a hierarchy inside a phrase. I wanted to make “the hills and the valleys” in the music more obvious for the listener, so to speak.
As I started to practice the opening theme of the first movement of Stamitz Viola Concerto (Fig. 4.) I found out by self-recording that I wanted to create a more legato line and more direction in my phrasing. Although the piece begins in with two bars in *p*, then two bars in *mf* and finally rest of phrases goes in *forte*, it was very important to notice that one shouldn’t be shy in the beginning. As the melody rises higher the volume goes naturally up too. I noticed that if I tried to play the first two bars in *p*, it would sound very uncertain or scared.

I also noticed that if I wanted to make the first motive sound legato, I would have to spare my bow in first chord to make gap between the retake as small as possible. Continuous vibrato is also very important in keeping the legato line. In order to make the passage smooth I had to find a correct way for dividing the bow. I kept everything in the lower half of the bow to keep the phrase flowing and to reach the passage climax in the first note of the second bar (Fig. 5.). In the next two bars (Fig. 6.) the division of the bow was similar.
For me the dynamic climax of the whole phrase is on the first note of the sextole in the seventh bar. (Fig. 7.)

To keep up the musical tension and arrive on the climax note in f I wanted to spare bow, keep the bow close to the bridge and then let the bow speed increase note-by-note as you arrive to the climax of the phrase. I also noticed that it is important to keep the f until the harmonic release in the last bar.

It is to be noted that my plan evolved as I kept listening the recordings. I knew most of these things before I did the recording but I needed the recording to come up with a solid strategy and implement the design with all the right proportions. To play a phrase in a specific manner I had to find the right set of proportions, e.g. the right amount of bow speed and pressure, the right speed and depth of vibrato etc.. (Fischer, 2013, 266)

Use of the different methods

1. Record a passage, passages or a whole piece. Come back to it and listen to it after one or two days for in-depth analysis.

This method was the first strategy that I implemented in my work as I started to gather information via self-recording. It was an easier way to work with because of all the emotions wrapped around recording and listening to yourself. Having a distance between the recording and the listening of the music helped me to really stop, listen and have a clearer view of the things happening on the recordings.

Separating the analyzing from the act of playing gave me the possibility of working with the music without having the viola in my hands all the time. I could for example lie on my bed while listening the work done couple of days ago or sit in a cafe making notes with a score in my hands. It had been quite rare for me to work with the music without my instrument, even if the benefits of this kind of work has been pointed out to me by many teachers.

I did some of the listening without too much thinking and analyzing in order to experience the music as one would when listening to his favorite artist. I wanted to see how the music communicates different emotions and atmospheres. Other times I would be more focused on the multiple little details and work with the score in my hands, making notes and planning different strategies on how to work with a piece. With both of these approaches I
found it very useful not to have the instrument in my hands while making strategies for a future practice session since this gave me more space to make more detailed and refined plans.

If we take a look at the three phases of self-teaching (Williamon, 2004, 85) described earlier —

1) planning and preparation of practice

2) execution of practice

3) and observation and evaluation of practice

— I think it is fair to say that I (and I believe many other music students) have been consumed by execution of practice. The other two phases — planning and preparation of practice and observation and evaluation of the practice — have not got enough time and focus. This cycle of phases is involved in any kind of learning we do. In order to be deliberate in our work as we self-teach ourselves we have to take a pause between these actions and monitor that all these phases take place.

It is also good to notice that this cycle of phases takes place both within a single session and over longer periods of time as we teach ourselves. When I was working using the first method mentioned I often went back to listen not just the previous but earlier recordings that I had made. This made it easier to make remarks of the progress made and find out if the changes made were for the better or the worse. The learning process is an ongoing cycle and there are always smaller cycles inside the bigger cycles.

2. Record a passage, passages or a whole piece and listen to it right away. Start to analyze and work with the piece immediately.

This was a method I used very frequently in February 2016. I had two pieces in particular, Bartok viola concerto and Stravinsky’s Elegie, which I recorded, listened and analyzed all in one practice session to find out what elements or details should I work with. Sometimes I recorded a passage, worked with the passage and recorded it again to find out what kind of effect did my practice have on the passage.

In this form of practice the cycle of a learning process can present itself repeatedly in a small amount of time as you play, evaluate, practice and then play and evaluate your performance again. Most of the time I recorded a piece (or a passage of a piece) in the very beginning of a practice session to get a clear idea of what to focus on. The first performance and evaluation of the performance was in these cases the planning and preparation phase of self-teaching. It felt very beneficial for my practice to first get the big picture of how everything is working and then to start working effectively from the very beginning with the focus on the right things.
This method often felt like “cleaning up” the piece passage by passage. After first recording a passage I listened through the recording, practiced accordingly to make the needed adjustments and recorded the passage again. I then repeated this process with the same passage or went on to work with the next passage. In a similar fashion I worked through the first movement of the Bartok concerto. By doing this, I wanted to go through the piece systematically in a small amount of time.

With Stravinsky’s Elegie I worked more often by recording the whole piece instead of just a page or passage of the piece. This was mostly due to the shorter length of piece. As a result of this approach the development of the whole piece felt more organic than when working with smaller bits. When practicing playing through a piece, I got a good understanding of how it will feel to perform the music and how every detail is linked together.

From practice recordings to a performance

Real on-stage confidence comes from (a) being able to nail it 10 out of 10 tries, (b) knowing that this isn’t a coincidence but that you can do it the correct way on demand, because most importantly (c) you know precisely why you nail it or miss it — i.e. you know exactly what you need to do from a technique standpoint in order to play the passage perfectly every time. (Kageyama, 2009)

The goal for practicing any skill is to be able to perform the skill when needed. I wanted my practice to be as functional as possible to help me prepare for my examination concert. As I worked with the help of self-recording, found out which details to concentrate on and made working strategies, there was also the aspect of simulating the on-stage-performance.

The performer has to try to bring all the ingredients in the practice room which he wants to present on stage at the concert day. If one learns to play with low energy, mild expression and without the joy of making music, that output is likely to repeat itself as one performs. Since practice creates habits, I focused on creating good habits instead of bad ones by emphasizing making every detail in the performance to really serve the music. I wanted every passage, frame and note to be meaningful and best quality that I could imagine. Buswell (2006, 144) points out that “peak performance involves peak practice”.
Buswell uses the figure above to put a performance — a small part of a long process — in a wider context and to emphasize the importance of considerate approach to practice.

To be effective, practice needs to be as well considered as performance. (Buswell, 2006, 143)

There is also to be considered the difference between rehearsing alone and performing on stage. I knew from my experience that recording yourself can make you feel some of the jitters you would normally have when performing in front of an audience. Being aware that I would have to listen and critique my own performance after making the recording made my body and mind function as if someone was listening to me playing. Self-recording process helped me to be aware of how I sounded and at the same time I got a glimpse of how it feels like to perform a passage or a whole piece under small amount of stress.

There is no better way to prepare for a concert than making sure one goes through as many lower-profile performances as possible, but you can also simulate a concert just by mentally picturing yourself on stage playing in front of an audience. (Fischer, 2004) I used this approach many times as the day of the concert got closer added with sometimes recording or video recording in order to analyze my performance afterwards. Using visualization to build as detailed mental picture as I could of how I wanted everything to be was essential in my preparation. It was easier to build the right mental image by recording and listening to myself through the recordings.
Ivan Galamian (1962) divides practice time between three major parts:

1) building time (devoted to overcoming technical problems),

2) interpreting time (devoted to making the playing of a musical work conform to one’s own interpretive ideas) and

3) performing time (devoted to play-throughs preferably with accompaniment and imaginary listeners present)

My practice time was naturally divided in these three stages in chronological order. However, using self-recording helped me to stay goal-oriented even if I was working with just one note. My ideal practice session connected all the different elements of these practice stages as I tried to work my way from the inside out with as clear aural image as possible and not the other way. It is very easy and common to learn and strengthen mistakes because of the lack of inner musical guidance.
6. Findings

The main findings of this thesis.

Important benefits

The feedback that I got from my teachers and colleagues concerning my progress was very positive during spring 2016. I performed different pieces in most of the viola group lessons that we had almost every week so that our three viola teachers and my student colleagues got to hear me throughout the spring. I really felt that things started to move in the right direction during the last spring term and that my work begun to bear fruit.

I had some earlier experience in using self-recording as a part of my practice, but as a part of my thesis it became more regular and organized. I did a couple of more intense periods of self-recording during autumn 2015 and spring 2016 with a more methodical approach than what I had done before. Listening myself made it more easy to measure different variables in my playing and take remedial steps accordingly.

Problem solving

The most basic benefit that self-recording has is the reliable information that you gain by listening to your recordings. The act of producing music can have a distorting effect on our perception. Listening through the recordings detached from the act of playing an instrument helped tremendously with breaking down every detail as well as with observing the piece as a whole.

It was also possible to listen through a recording multiple times or come back to a recording with more or less time between. Being able to listen recordings from different time periods helped me to assess the work done on smaller and larger time frames. Sometimes I thought I had corrected the mistakes made after first recording and found out after second or third recording that there were similar flaws on each recordings or that there was something still missing from the interpretation that I wanted to express. Listening to the recordings helped me to pinpoint problems and to assess the functionality of my different practice methods.
Strengthening mental rehearsing

I feel that this process of self-monitoring helped me to understand how important it is to visualize and to have an idea what you would like to hear before you actually try to produce anything out of your instrument. Daniel Coyle (2009, 92) presents in his book “The Talent Code” the following model for problem solving:

1. Pick a target.
2. Reach for it.
3. Evaluate the gap between the target and the reach.
4. Return to step one

As it happens to be, Simon Fischer (2004, 291) has very similar thoughts concerning the process of mental rehearsing:

1. Picture the ideal result
2. Make it happen
3. If there is any problem with Step 2, repeat Step 1.

What has changed for me during this project is making sure that every one of these steps occur when I practice. I also need to be as clear and articulate as possible with my goal setting and post-performance analysis. It all comes down to asking a lot of question during a practice session: What is my goal? Did I reach my goal? Am I satisfied with my performance? If not, why? The process of recording, listening and analyzing encouraged me to ask myself these questions and made me more active and effective with my practice.

Ordinary view of mental rehearsing would be that this is done as an alternative form of practicing. I would however consider visualization a big part of every action in playing an instrument. It doesn’t matter what particular aspect we focus on, — aural, visual, tactile or intellectual—, there is no action without an order from the mind. Therefore I have come to approach practicing with a thought of keeping the elements concerning mental preparation active as I play. The preparatory stage in the act of playing is connected with visualizing and memorizing the desired result as we mold, sculpt, refine and polish the perfect performance repeatedly during our practicing hours.

Memorizing a piece

Fischer (2004, 292) summarizes memorizing in the following way:

Playing from memory is all to do with knowing the piece well. If there are any problems playing a passage from memory there is usually no need to look further than simply getting to know it better.

I experienced that practicing in a very deliberate way with the help of self-recording process made it easier for me to mold a clear picture of how every detail in the piece and the actions in playing the music were connected.

When you dissect a musical piece in to smaller segments and work with the-
se different segments using different practice methods, you get to know the piece you are working with very well. The recording process made me go through the pieces I was working with in an extremely detailed manner.

As I went through with my self-recording process I found out that deliberate practice helped me in cultivating and reinforcing a particular mental image. In memorization it is essential to create "pegs" and "hooks" in which you can hang things you want to remember. (Fischer, 2004, 292.) After I had an idea of exactly how I wanted to play a piece or a passage it felt a lot easier to criss-cross associations and make connections between different aspects of playing.

For example, in the opening phrase of Stamitz Viola Concerto the musician has to ask himself how does he want to play the first chord. How is the length of the beat divided between the three notes of the chord? What is the dynamic? How should it sound? After having a clear image of the goal the next question is how to produce it. How to divide the bow when pivoting and crossing the strings? How much bow should be used and in what manner? Where is the contact point between the string and bow hair? Does it change as one is pivoting from string to another?

In the process of molding the right mental image, it is difficult not to learn the passage or piece in question by heart. As I practiced Stravinsky’s Elegie I did a lot of visualization in aural, visual, tactile and intellectual way and I found out that it became easy to remember and connect different parts of the piece in a quite short period of time.

**Listening and awareness**

The most important benefit of doing self-recording is to become more objective towards of what is happening as one is playing. It has been very important for me to be able to specify my strengths and weaknesses and to generally get to know myself better instead of relying too much on feelings or mere opinions. When a musician finds out how he sounds he has the opportunity of choosing and alternating his sound.

After listening through several self-recordings of a particular piece it got easier for me to perceive different habits I had in playing the piece. Some of
the flaws seemed to vanish by themselves just by listening to and becoming aware of them. Other flaws were more settled in my playing and changing these habits needed more commitment and time as well as being very deliberate and aware in my practice. The recording process sharpened my listening and help me to be more present when practicing.

Another important part of listening and observing is connecting a certain sound with a certain physical feeling.

Experimenting during practice is literally a matter of asking "What does this sound feel like?" and “What does this feeling sound like?”. (Fischer, 2004, 293)

As my work progressed it begun to feel easier to link a particular physical feeling to particular sound and to predetermine what kind of physical action and preparation is needed to attain the desired result. Mistakes or undesired results were also very important for learning the right way to perform the actions of playing.
7. Conclusion

Looking back at this project I feel that my practice has advanced in many ways. I discovered some practice methods which work very well with me at the moment and, most important of all, I am very confident in my capability of implementing different methods in my practice in a deliberate and effective way. I have had many tools before but now I feel that I have gained knowledge of how to use these tools to enhance the results.

As mentioned before, Gerald Klickstein (2009, 17) listed the benefits of self-recording in the following way:

1. Sharpens musicianship
2. Prevents distorted perception
3. Heightens practice efficiency
4. Enhances lessons
5. Promotes objectivity

During the process of self-recording on I found that these benefits indeed came to fruition. It became easier to take a step back, listen and have a clearer perspective and be more objective as of what was happening as I played my instrument. Of course, there is no such things as an objective listener but I felt that I became more objective in my perception of different details. The self-recording process made me more aware of my strengths and weaknesses, which helped me to guide myself towards the desired results thus making practicing more effective.

Deliberate practice in self-teaching

In search of deliberate practice I tried to be as structured and systematic as possible to find ways to be more effective. One of the key things was to keep the practice sessions short enough. I would also try to have as clear plan as possible on what to work on and how to work on a practice session. I feel that self-reflection done during this project really helped me to get my practice sessions organized, since it pawed the way for a phase of thorough planning and forethought.

Self-teaching is for me asking a lot of questions. Did it sound the way I wanted? What were the things I liked? What were the things I want to change? How do I make the changes I want? I then answer these questions and choose a strategy based on my experience of what has happened. From the perspective that I gained from working with self-recordings, I think self-teaching becomes more effective when you can base your decisions and choice of strategies on hard evidence. Monitoring yourself in the form of audio or video recordings can save a lot of your practice time and mental effort by giving you confidence in your decision-making.
Kageyama (2009) described in his article two types of practice: mindless practice and deliberate practice. One of the points Kageyama makes in his text is that in mindless practicing you repeat mistakes more than the desired results. This way you end up learning mistakes instead of making the progress you would like to. In deliberate practice you make an effort to correct errors permanently as you want to be consistent in the way you perform. This is in my opinion one of the main things that determine your success in a performance. Self-recording helps being precise from the start and in being consistent in quality, thus helping in building good habits.

I think many musicians do not regularly monitor themselves because of the difficulty of facing the mistakes that a self-recording might reveal. As I listened through my recordings, it was a common thing for me to hear both things that I liked and things I was not fond of. Since a learning process is build on trial and error, I would consider mistakes very important if not the most important part of learning. The mistakes lead us to functional solutions and the more we have the courage to observe our practice, the deeper our level of learning and understanding becomes. One could say that mistakes are essential in finding good habits and building confidence in performance.

It is to be acknowledged though, that self-critique can become overwhelming thing if it is done in an exhausting manner. In the beginning of this project it was very important for me to have some time between recording and listening in order to have a clearer perspective without too much emotional entanglement. After awhile I started to implement the method of working and analyzing self-recordings inside a practice session. As both of these monitoring methods have their own value, I feel it is essential to learn not to be too emotionally involved when implementing them in your practice.

One of the findings in my process was that since self-monitoring forced me to go through the self-teaching phases (Williamon, 2004, 85) and helped me to mold the ideal mental image, self-recording process became actually a significant tool also in the creative process. Going through the cycle of forethought, performance and self-reflection repeatedly helped me to build my interpretation of the music. As I am influenced by my idols, teachers and fellow musicians among other things, I was surprised to find that I was similarly influenced by my own self-recording process.

Gary McPherson and Alf Gabrielsson (Parncutt & McPherson, 2002, 103) write about the thoughts of James Mainwaring, a fellow of the British psychological Society and prominent music educator:

…concept of musicianship is the capacity of being able to “think in sound,” which occurs when a musician is able to produce the mentally imagined sound, whether by playing by ear, improvising, or reading from musical notation.

As a result of the work done with the help of my teacher combined with this thesis project, I have begun to think and approach music from this idea of
"thinking in sound". A lot of practice time can be used in a more efficient way by making sure that there is always a clear goal you are working towards. I have been focused on minimizing aimless practice by giving myself constant instruction on "what to do" and "how to do" and — most importantly — "what do I want to hear".

There are indeed different levels of practice: different levels of efficiency, accuracy, concentration and every other aspect you can think of. I have become a firm believer in practicing in a deliberate way and refining what deliberate practice means case-by-case. The way you practice determines the way you perform.

Practice doesn’t make perfect, practice makes permanent. -Larry Gelwix

The concert

I had my examination concert on 3rd of June 2016, where I performed the following pieces:

C. Stamitz: Concerto in D Major, Allegro

I. Stravinsky: Elegie

R. Schumann: Märchenbilder

I. Nicht Schnell

II. Lebhaft

III. Rasch

IV. Langsam, mit melancholischen Ausdrück

B. Bartok: Concerto for Viola and Orchester,

I. Moderato
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