How to Learn the Dvořák Cello Concerto in B Minor:
Building Personalized Practice Techniques for Virtuosic Performance

D.M.A. Document

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Musical Arts in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

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2015

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Abstract

While there is a wealth of academic research examining the history and formal analysis of the Dvořák Cello Concerto, there is a lack of literature in the field regarding how to learn the concerto. The universal reputation, as well as the high levels of technical and artistic virtuosity of the Dvořák concerto set challenging issues for artists studying the concerto. To help young artists navigate the process of learning a virtuosic concerto, topics related to practicing the concerto are discussed, including prerequisite techniques for virtuosic concerto study; developing a practice method; the ethics which govern virtuosic practice; problem solving exercises for passagework; and interpretive issues that affect practice. Specific examples pertaining to the Dvořák Cello Concerto include exercises developed for practicing passagework, as well as listening lists and imagination exercises.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my committee members, Dr. Danielle Fosler-Lussier and Dr. Paul Robinson, for their service, support, and advice in preparing this document; Norah Zuniga-Shaw, for helping me explore creative methodology; my past teachers for their thoughtful pedagogy, which led me to this point; my writing partner Emma, for her commiseration throughout this process; my family, for their enduring love, care, and encouragement; and lastly, thank you to my biggest advocate — my artistic and procrastination mentor — Mark Rudoff.
Vita

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2012 ........................................ M.M. Cello Performance, Pennsylvania State University
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Fields of Study

Major Field: Music
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CHAPTER 1: Introduction: Purpose and Summary

“In the case of skill, I can show you how to do something by telling you what to do or by demonstrating it, but in the end, you must discover for yourself what precise signals to send to your muscles to get the job done. This is why musicians must learn to be great at teaching themselves.” — Benjamin Whitcomb

I have a long history of failure with the Dvořák Cello Concerto in B minor. That might seem harsh, but it is an accurate description of the years of frustration I have experienced in my efforts to learn this particular concerto. At the time of writing this document, my relationship with the Dvořák concerto spans 11 years. When the concerto was first introduced to me in high school, I excitedly listened to all of the recordings I could find and hacked my way through the first page. Within a month I was frustrated, physically unable to play through two pages at a time — unaware that my technique was unable to support such a large work at that stage in my development. The concerto reappeared in my repertoire throughout the years, though it was not until my doctoral studies that I began to analyze the process I was using to practice and interpret the music. I intended to perform the entire concerto on a memorized recital in fulfillment of my degree, as well as use the first movement for upcoming orchestral auditions. I further investigated my creative method through an independent study course, during which I
tracked my process concurrent to my study with the concerto. While circumstance intervened the week of the recital and I was unable to perform, I obtained invaluable information in the process of relearning the concerto.

Purpose

Having approached this concerto at many stages of my musical and emotional development, I feel uniquely qualified to speak on the various idiosyncratic issues involved in the learning process. The purpose of this document is to explain those issues in an effort to help others navigate through them. Mistakes are an integral part of the learning process, which cannot — and as should not — be avoided entirely. Some musical passages, or virtuosic techniques, do not “click” mentally until the entire issue is analyzed from every perspective, demonstrating the various ways the technique will and will not work. By discussing these issues and possible solutions in detail, this document can serve as a guide through those difficult learning moments, illuminating the entire picture of the problem so solutions may arise.

This document focuses on practice; it is the result of years of instrumental practice, personal reflection, and scholarly research on the art of practicing. Each of the topics covered — technique, method, ethics, and interpretation — are examined through the lens of practice. Just as historical, narrative, technical, and pedagogical information is traditionally passed through private instruction, this document draws on my personal experiences with the concerto as well as academic research.

The intent of this document is to fill an information gap left by previous studies of the concerto, regarding the process of learning. There is a veritable armory of research on Antonin Dvořák’s life, compositional style, and concerti. This is also not the first DMA

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1 The course was under the supervision of Norah Zuniga-Shaw at the ACCAD (Advanced Computer Center for the Arts and Design) at The Ohio State University. The objective of the course was to explore creative process and documenting any progress through a digital blog. The course culminated in a lecture-demonstration.
something lacking in all of this research, which remained unfilled after all of these years: how do you learn the concerto? Preexisting research on the Dvořák Cello Concerto focuses on either the history of the work, possible interpretations of extramusical meaning in the score and form, or relays data pertaining to historical performances. All of these are important topics that inform aspects of interpretation. However, understanding the technical execution of a chord by five historical cellists does not help an artist decide, for themselves, what or how to practice. As an artist I am not interested in preaching how to play a passage; I am infinitely more intrigued by how to learn a passage. And as a teacher, I am interested in providing my students with the tools they need to do so.

Summary

Syllabi are used to impart a wealth of information to students: expectations, course objectives, course content, due dates, policies, and prerequisites. The beauty of this form is that all of the necessary information needed to successfully begin study in a new course is included in a good syllabus. The student understands the extent of the course they are tackling and can plan their time, approach, and energy accordingly.

There are two DMA documents which feature the Dvořák concerto:


Ching-Shin Ko, “Cellists and the Dvořák Cello Concerto: the Labyrinth of Interpretation,” DMA diss., University of Washington, 2000. Like You, Ko also provides biographical and historical information. However, the other half of the document is a comparison of historical performances of the Dvořák concerto, mathematically dissecting previous interpretations. The focus is on reporting the interpretation of others, rather than developing new interpretation or recounting effective practice methods.
While using an actual syllabus for concerto study proved to be too simple for the scope of this document, the design and intent of quality syllabi guided the form and content. Well-crafted syllabi inspired Chapter 2: Prerequisites to Virtuosic Concerto Practice. This chapter identifies the skills necessary to study the Dvořák concerto without undue frustration. The demands unique to music of this technically and artistically challenging style are addressed, as well as the effect these demands have on practice.

Chapter 3: The Process of Practicing: Practice Method and Ethics specifies the different forms of practice and builds a framework for managing practice. The advantages of developing a method of practice to suit the individual, including ways to track and plan practice, are also taken into consideration. This chapter also surveys the ethics that govern practice, explaining the different forms of ego impeding practice. Chapter 4: Problem-Solving Practice Strategies delivers strategies to use in practice. The strategies are described and then presented in action through 10 example passages from the Dvořák concerto. Not intended to be an answer manual for the concerto, this chapter is designed to encourage creative solutions by demonstrating the use of the strategies in detail.

Next, because practice should not be discussed without acknowledging its relationship to interpretation, Chapter 5: Practicing Interpretation addresses the influence of interpretation on practice, and the ways practice influences interpretation. Activities for studying interpretation in practice are discussed: academic research, active listening, and imagination exercises. Chapter 6: Conclusions expounds upon the possible uses for this document, and how this format can be reworked for future pedagogical purposes.
CHAPTER 2: Prerequisites to Virtuosic Concerto Practice

There are a few things I wish I had known the first time I studied the Dvořák Cello Concerto, as a prelude to hours of practice I invested in learning the piece. Every piece of music requires a different palette of techniques, styles, or interpretive sensibilities, and prioritizing those techniques new to you can prepare you for the challenges to come. The Dvořák concerto is different from many others in its genre, due to the combination of virtuosity (highly technical demands) and artistry (highly emotional demands). If this is the first large virtuosic work attempted in a cellist’s repertoire, the required change in approach might come as a shock. In preparation of a “non-virtuosic” work such as a sonata,¹ one will come to expect passages of extra difficulty peppered amongst passages with lesser technical demands. However, in a virtuosic work the sections of lesser difficulty are often shorter and less frequent, and the technical passagework permeates the entire work. The Dvořák is also a highly visible piece of music, known by ear to most musicians, and certainly to cellists. As one of the most popular works of the cello repertoire, it is often required in auditions — orchestral or otherwise. It is hard to find a professional cellist without preconceived ideas of how the concerto should sound, whether they are playing or listening.

This chapter is a discussion of the physical and mental challenges specific to the Dvořák Cello Concerto. Headed by a definition of what is means to invest time in various

¹ This is not to say that there are no virtuosic sonatas, or that sonatas do not have passages of technical virtuosity in them; rather, the kind of virtuosity experienced in a Beethoven Sonata for Cello and Piano requires a different approach than a work such as the Dvořák Cello Concerto.
techniques, the skills I find most relevant to the Dvořák concerto are listed in detail. Special attention is brought to the topics of physical endurance, mental focus, and patience, as these are issues that often subconsciously disrupt the learning process.

**Mental and Physical Skills**

To attempt a masterful performance of a piece of music a range of skills is required, falling into the categories of physical or mental. *Physical* techniques refer to any of the skills at the instrument: shifting, control of bow speed and placement, spiccato and legato articulations, etc. I will categorize the remaining skills dealing with the translation of the score into music as *mental* techniques. This will also include what William Westney describes as the “integrative, intuitive connections to music,” such as imagination, communication, and individuality.²

As an artist approaches a new work, she brings with her a personal toolbox of skills (mental and physical). Some skills are developed early and used for years, while others are new techniques the artist is still trying to assimilate. Well-established techniques are the most effective tools for learning a new work, many of which are used subconsciously. Newer skills might prove to be unreliable and halt the process of learning the music in order to master the technique again.

For me, one of the most supremely frustrating aspects of virtuosic cello performance is that it utilizes physical skills I am not using in everyday repertoire. Each time I undertake the Dvořák concerto, I spend what seems like an equal number of hours relearning the most technically complex passages, since they did not fully assimilate into my technique the first (or second) time. My skills in this arena, such as double-stop chromatic octaves, are ones that I have always struggled to develop, and I only begin to feel comfortable with them towards the end of my performance goal. Unfortunately,

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² William Westney, *The Perfect Wrong Note*, 34.
physical skills do not stay in the hands unless they are being utilized, so each time I drop
the concerto and move onto other projects, the most difficult passages, yet again, require
approximately the same number of hours to regain mastery. I was very frustrated with
this phenomenon for many years, not understanding why I seemed unable to retain the
practice hours I’d spent; the following metaphor, inspired by the pedagogy of Mark
Rudoff, will help explain the reality of this process.3

Ownership of Technique

To better understand the reliability of technique, let us first recognize the
monetary value of practice hours. Every hour spent in a practice room toward learning a
skill costs time, and every technique requires a varying number of hours to master — the
cost. Cost might change from person to person (as some are naturally adept at certain
skills), and it relies greatly on the quality of practice hours spent.4 Say it takes 40 hours
to learn a new virtuosic technique, such as up-bow staccato. Due to the nature of this
currency, one cannot pay for the skill outright: one has to follow a payment plan, rent-to-
own if you will, spending 2 hours a week for 20 weeks until ownership (or mastery). Like
many valuable commodities, this new skill requires maintenance — and now the
musician is in for another 15 minutes a week to keep the hedges trimmed on their newly
mastered up-bow staccato.

Yet there is an alternative: instead of purchasing the mastery of up-bow staccato,
this technique could instead be leased for the duration of studying the piece which
requires it, paying a lower rental price of 25 minutes a week. The implication here is that

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4 Some hours in practice are highly valuable, accomplishing several tasks through acute focus and
profound reflection. Other, less valuable hours are waylaid by excessive social media breaks or the
pressure of outside concerns (Will I make rent this month? Did I remember to let the dog out this afternoon?)
and progress suffers as a result. Truthfully, practice will always encompass a spectrum of productivity
— though for the sake of this argument, we will assume the practice is moderately productive to
account for averages.
the 40 hours required for mastery will not be reached during the rental period, and so if
the skill again is needed again in a few months or years (during which it was not used),
then one will have to start once more with the initial leasing or payment options. There is
no ground gained by leasing technique over the long term; the investment is lost as soon
as the leasing agreement is null. However, should one decide to roll the leasing plan into
a rent-to-own plan until hitting the mark of mastery, then the investment will be
protected.

Regardless, all owned techniques require maintenance. Some skills demand little
maintenance once mastered, similar to a 30,000 mile check-up. Once mastered and
tested, basic skills such as an even legato string crossing or efficient shift will hardly
require any weekly maintenance outside of a normal scale practice routine (which is
effectively maintaining all of the basic skills). Bartel and Cameron maintain that, “Not
only must the performer spend much time and effort during the formative years, this
time must continually be spent if the ability is to be sustained.”5 Other, more advanced
techniques do not remain in muscle memory long and need a higher amount of weekly
maintenance. Benjamin Whitcomb also holds similar views on maintaining technique:
“Certain aspects of your technique need attention on a regular basis. Essentially, the
more advanced a technique is or the newer it is to you, the more important it is to work
on it regularly.”6 Therefore, the cost of weekly practice maintenance might be close to the
cost of simply leasing the skill, if there is no intent to use the skill continually. Just as a
financially savvy consumer will run the numbers on the cost of renting, leasing, or
buying their major purchases outright, a wise consumer of practice hours should weigh
the short- and long-term costs of the varying techniques required for the repertoire they
want to pursue. There are individuals who feel comfortable renting all of the items in

their house, down to their couches and flatware. If that is the only lifestyle that fits their current financial situation, then it is their best option. I cannot imagine a situation where I could recommend leasing all of your cello technique to a young artist, though there certainly are cellists unknowingly living this way, especially beginning and intermediate students.

This algorithm can also be applied when choosing repertoire. If a piece involves a long list of techniques not yet purchased, and one is short on time (essentially, short on cash), then the piece might be an unwise investment of time. By contrast, if one has come unto a windfall of practice hours, then it might be a prime opportunity to invest the practice hours in the new repertoire and possibly purchase the ownership of a few new techniques along the way. As always, when building a recital program the cheapest repertoire is the repertoire already owned. The Dvořák Cello Concerto is a costly work, but a worthwhile long-term investment.

*Physical Techniques to Own*

With this new understanding of what it takes for a technical skill to be “owned,” let us now discuss what physical cello techniques are needed to pursue concerto practice. This topic is subjective; as previously stated, each practice consumer should choose to spend their time differently according to their performance goals. However there are a few basic performance skills that, if mastered, will ease the concerto practice process.

*Clean Shifts* — Facile movement in short and long changes in position.

*Right and Left Hand Coordination* — Particularly for fast technical passages, there should be no disconnect between the bow articulations (right hand) and the speed of the notes (left hand).
Aural Anticipation — The ability to hear ahead, and aurally connect passages of chromaticism. This is particularly important for Romantic and contemporary concerti.

Sound Production — All solo writing requires a present, projecting tone. In addition, most cello concerti written after 1800 will present further problems with balance between the soloist and the accompanying ensemble. Larger instrumentation and thicker tonality means more sound for the soloist to overcome.

Lyrical Contour — The means of clearly communicating the line of a melodic passage through clear highs and lows of the phrase. A flat or boring phrase holds little to no musical interest.

Demands of Virtuosic Writing

In addition to the basic techniques required, each concerto will demand a unique set of virtuosic techniques. Following is a list of the most problematic physical techniques in the Dvořák Concerto. The Dvořák is not a “teaching” concerto; rather, it is a piece that one strives to achieve the ability to play, or is a goal in and of itself. Therefore it is my opinion that the majority of the following techniques need, at the very least, a reliable foundation of understanding. Without this the learner will be quite frustrated, and those specific passages may become barriers to performance. It is subjective to determine which of these techniques will be mastered beforehand, but they are all required for a masterful performance of the text. These techniques are ones students are

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7 By “present” tone, I mean the desirable quality of a focused and direct string tone. A diffuse sound may serve as a color in an artist’s sound palette, but it will not be able to compete with the full force of a Romantic style orchestral accompaniment.

8 Problem solving strategies for passages utilizing these techniques are discussed in Chapter 4.
most likely to lease during their study, and concertizing soloists will need to constantly maintain for the specialized repertoire of their career.

*Upper Register* — The majority of the passagework in this concerto is in the medium to upper registers, requiring command of this register.9

*Mobile Thumb Position* — It could be argued that thumb position is a basic concerto skill; however, many concerti are used as a pedagogical tool in teaching and reinforcing this skill. When studying the Dvořák concerto, this skill must be ingrained. The music demands a fluent use of thumb position across all registers and strings.

*Chromatic Octaves* — One of the peak musical moments of the first movement is a chromatic climb of successive octaves [m. 266]. There is no orchestral accompaniment for two thirds of the gesture, making mistakes (namely poor intonation) painfully obvious. This flashy skill is a hallmark of this concerto, and requires a disproportionate amount of practice to accomplish a 2-second segment of music.

3/6ths — While not found in every concerto, most virtuosic concerti use this skill of double-stop 3rd and 6th, often in a chromatic or diatonic scale. Having a strong understanding of the hand-shapes required for these intervallic relationships is necessary for these passages; if not already established, understanding of this technique will certainly build through study of the Dvořák concerto. Extended sections of melodic and chromatic 6ths occur in the first movement [mm. 261 - 264, mm. 338 - 340]. Passages built on a mixture of 3rd and 6th are found in the second [mm. 69 - 73 upper positions and mm. 146 - 148 lower positions] and third movements [mm. 49 - 56 uppermost register, and mm. 427 - 428 mid-range].

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9 The upper register is known for its difficulty due to the difference in techniques required. Use of the bow, vibrato, and the placement of the arms in relation to the body all change in this register.
*Thrown Sautillé* — This particular articulation is specific to the Dvořák concerto.\(^{10}\)

The passage requires a light articulation caused by a thrown, or ricochet, stroke across three strings. The constantly changing elevation of the bow makes the passage exceptionally difficult, as the left hand does theatrics of its own [mm. 157 - 165 and recapitulation in mm. 285 - 292].

*Multi-Stop Chords* — Triple-stop chords are generally unable to sound simultaneously on the cello, as they would on a piano — they are instead rolled with varying degrees of rubato to voice all of the pitches musically. In passages such as mm. 170 - 171, and mm. 186 - 189 of the first movement, the rhythmic integrity of the passage is often lost in an effort to roll the chords.\(^{11}\)

*Finger Independence (Left Hand)* — In many cases different fingers of the left hand will have opposing roles. For instance, in the quasi cadenza of the second movement, two fingers are required to hold double stops, as the others pluck lower open strings [mm. 105 - 117].

Three remaining skills deserve individual discussion: physical endurance, mental focus, and patience. These three mental skills, or conceptual understandings, affect the process of learning the Dvořák concerto in the same way a physical technique would. One can learn the concerto without developing these skills, but it will be supremely frustrating and slow.

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\(^{10}\) I have yet to find another passage of music that uses this exact technique. A few have used a thrown ricochet across two strings, or jump across strings in the lower positions of the instrument, but I know none that combine the contortionist acts of the left hand with the delicately balanced thrown sautille of the right.

\(^{11}\) In Ching-Shin Ko’s DMA document on interpretation and the Dvořák Cello Concerto, Ko presents an analysis of the various ways in which twelve performers on historical recordings execute this particular skill, describing the various approaches to mm. 93 – 94. (72–78)
Physical Endurance

Like similar works in the repertoire, the Dvořák concerto is physically and mentally taxing. As the technical and musical demands on the soloist increase, the physical and mental stamina required for performance increases as well. It often happens that when one makes the jump from thinking in purely technical terms to considering the message of the music in performance, trying to convey intensity and emotion, one may lose the necessary physical focus. Or possibly the techniques in use were not efficient and balanced to begin with, and the strain is starting to show. I consider this to be more of a mental skill, since physical endurance requires acute mental control in balancing where your energy is distributed in the moment of performance.

The manifestation of poor physical endurance is overplaying, particularly in the Dvořák concerto. The emotional intensity of the music can be overwhelming, driving cellists to throw energy (usually in the form of physical tension) inefficiently at the instrument in an effort to sound ‘intense’ or ‘emotional’. As well, study of this concerto comes with a lot of baggage for cellists: most young artists have heard multiple performances of the Dvořák before they have a chance to study and build their own ideas, coming to their study with preconceived ideas of how it should be and putting these recorded interpretations up on a pedestal too high to approach. This image of seeming perfection can clash greatly with the current of the cellist’s ability to play it, and as a reaction the cellist physically bears down even more trying to force the interpretation into their elevated image of the concerto chimera. This negative thought can lead young artists to believe they are unworthy of studying certain styles of literature. Leah Hagel relayed her own experience with this phenomenon: “[My teacher]
questioned why I was able to allow myself to enjoy the experience of learning one type of music but not another. He probed further until I admitted that I felt undeserving of the right to practice or perform works because I had technical flaws.”

How can one tell when overplaying is an issue? Symptoms of overplaying include tension in one or both arms, especially after running chunked sections of the concerto. A tendency to short shifts (arriving flat in ascending shifts, or sharp in descending shifts) can also be an indicator of extra tension in the body. When there is excessive tension in the arm, shifts are often cut short since the muscle is not as mobile as it is when released and ready for movement.

A perfect candidate for overplaying in the Dvořák concerto is the first page of the solo cello line, from the opening statement (m.87) through the second theme (m.159). While there are moments of rest for the soloist throughout the work, the relentless gauntlet Dvořák has thrown down in the first page is acutely taxing. This is also tied to the mind game created by the extended orchestral introduction: for five minutes the soloist is left to her thoughts, hands growing cold as music intensely rages behind her. The musical statements are expansive, covering all of the major melodic material of the first movement with an expectant energy. When the solo cello entrance finally arrives, it then appears to be the soloist’s job to retaliate, or top the grand music that preceded her. One cello can never match the volume of a full orchestra, though we often try. The extra energy spent in trying to match the orchestra does more harm than good towards supporting the musical line; the soloist attempts to carry the music, squeezing sound from the instrument, forcing the most intense sound she can muster. The musical reality

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14 Such as a grouped section of related melodic material (exposition, coda, etc.).
15 Trying to match the volume of the orchestra can result in forced tone, strained intonation, and possibly overuse syndromes manifesting in the abused muscles of the arm.
is that this first page, though packed with important musical statements that set the tone of the concerto, is only one of many. The most difficult passagework is yet to come.

There are a few ways to approach this section and others to prevent overplaying and build endurance. First, always conserve energy. This principle begins with always striving for the most physically efficient technique, especially in the most technically complex sections. In her DMA document describing the process of commissioning, practicing, and performing a new contemporary concerto, cellist Ashley Marie Garritson describes the benefits of this mentality: “Eventually, the more minimal and smooth the motion - achieved by keeping the bow close to the string, not using too much bow, keeping the left hand close to the string and transferring the weight from finger to finger in order to keep the hands as relaxed as possible - the easier it is to get through this section.” Continually identifying where physical technique inefficiencies can be eliminated from your technique is imperative at all stages of practice.

Another way to conserve energy is to identify opportunities for physical release. Orchestral tutti passages are obvious points of relaxation for the soloist, but there are also moments between and during passagework where moments of physical release can be found. There are many ways to accomplish release: letting the ends of phrases properly close before anticipating the next section; using quick eighth-note rests to settle back into the strings; breathing out (instead of holding a breath in) right before an entrance; or letting the left hand fall open and away from the instrument on open strings and short rests. Establish the points in the concerto that are likely to cause endurance issues. Within in those points, determine potential moments for release. Garritson

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16 Ashley Marie Garritson, “The Journal from Inception to Performance of a Twenty-First Century Cello Concerto,” 42.

17 It is important to make a distinction between relaxation and releasing; it is impossible to relax while playing an instrument, since relaxation implies the absence of physical work. However there are often opportunities to release extra tension in the muscles, finding the most efficient use of muscles in a particular passage or technique.
discussed this issue as well, remarking how the overall arc of the writing in the concerto affected her ability to perform the work: “... finally the soloist has an opportunity to physically recover from playing continuously up until this point in the concerto, which is crucial in allowing the muscles to recover before the technically dense sections.”

Relentless concerto writing provides an extra challenge for the soloist. Incorporating physical release into not just endurance-breaking run-throughs, but also everyday practice, promotes efficient use of physical energy in performance.

Additionally, the structure of practice sessions can help build physical endurance. For instance, starting practice sessions with excerpts of the major technical challenges (likely the weakest sections) can inform the rest of the practice session. It becomes clearer which sections need immediate attention, and it is mentally affirming to know that those looming passages are addressed before all others. Most importantly, one can treat the entire process as a marathon runner would. It would be unwise, and potentially damaging, to attempt a full marathon without running long distances beforehand — even for a seasoned athlete. The same principles apply for virtuosic concerto performance.

Even for experienced performers, there is a need for gradual training towards the full performance of such a long, demanding concerto. After the initial phase of practicing, as one approaches comprehensive performance of a movement, running sections daily is paramount to building the endurance necessary. The Dvořák Cello Concerto is not a sprint — it is a musical marathon.

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18 Garritson, 23.

19 Also similar to athletics, adding a stretching routine before, during, and/or after practice is highly recommended. While not exclusively beneficial for virtuosic performance, it is an especially good idea in this style of performance. The more physically grueling the task at hand, the more necessary stretching becomes.

20 Initial phase meaning the practice stage of learning notes, and pulling apart passages. The next phase would be starting to pull larger sections of the concerto together.
Mental Focus

A critical factor in managing physical endurance is mental focus. The ability to focus intently on the task at hand, leaving all of the buzzing annoyances of modern life at the door, can seem impossible in performance. Nonetheless, it only takes a moment of inattention to miss a shift, fall off the fingerboard, or accidentally play the primary statement of a theme instead of the recapitulation. Practicing with weak mental focus also creates bad habits in physical technique, which in turn affects how the music is executed. If the concerto is practiced in a way that allows the mind to lose focus, then it will be performed this way. We perform music in the way in which it was practiced. In the words of Whitcomb:

In truth, though, the effects of losing your concentration are actually more detrimental than simply being a waste of your time, for such situations get you into the habit of losing your concentration and they allow all sorts of other bad habits to get entrenched in your playing without your even knowing it.\footnote{Whitcomb, 10.}

Poor mental focus negatively affects all aspects of practice and performing; thankfully, it is a skill that can be built through practice, not a congenital personality trait.

What causes inadequate mental focus? Often the chaos of daily life or thoughts outside of practice can distract from the task of practicing: Did I play well in my last lesson? When should I buy new strings? Did I answer all of the questions correctly on the test last class? Some individuals are more inclined to lose focus and have to work harder at focusing. Alternatively, practicing in a non-specific way, without fully engaging in the process, allows the mind to wander during practice. Losing focus during run-throughs, especially when attempting to play memorized music, can be an indicator of a weak understanding of the music that needs reinforcement.
Inside the practice room, probe the music for as many details as possible.\(^{22}\) The more details provided to the mind, the fewer opportunities there are for inattention or drifting. As Whitcomb writes, “Train yourself to become someone who is very, very aware of and attentive to detail. ... In many cases, you may be able to enhance your concentration considerably by giving your conscious brain more to do while playing.”\(^{23}\)

Furthermore, as the understanding of the concerto begins to improve, it is important to start eliminating indecision in practice. In the initials stages of work with a complex piece of music, one might leave many options open to pursue. There is after all more than one way to play a passage. An artist searches for one choice existing in a multitude of combinations of: bowings, fingerings, articulations, timbre, intonation, and musical accentuation. It is useful to keep a few options simmering for the first phase of practice, but holding options open becomes increasingly problematic as work progresses.\(^{24}\) If this approach becomes the practiced norm, the mind will start intuitively choosing one or multiple options at once, wreaking havoc on the passage. Many of these choices require preparation, and if that choice has not been made in advance, the preparation will not happen.

While practicing, determine the cases of weak focus. This might be a measure where a shift is often missed, a rhythm is characteristically sloppy, or it is difficult to remember what comes next while practicing memorized music. Analyze what is happening in that section in detail: are you fully aware of all details in the passage? Or in the reverse, rather than looking for the symptoms of inattention, Benjamin Whitcomb

\(^{22}\) Musical details, and details of the physicality on playing the instrument. What exactly does the shift feel like when it is executed smoothly? What the the full sonic picture of the timbre of the note when it is absolutely in tune with the instrument? And so on.

\(^{23}\) Whitcomb, 9-10.

\(^{24}\) These are primarily technical decisions — there will still be opportunities to explore spontaneity in musical expression, though this generally only works if multiple clear ideas have been practiced separately. And there are some things that should not be left to chance, particularly in the most virtuosic and complex passages.
suggests to, “Monitor your level of concentration very carefully. As soon as you realize that your level of concentration has fallen, stop and try to find the point at which you lost your concentration. If you can find this exact location, it may give you some clues about the sorts of things that can trigger a loss of mental focus.”

Realizing focus has drifted, there is now an opportunity to find the point of distraction and fill the mental space with more precision.

Concentration can also be practiced without the instrument, though still in a musical context. Visualize a performance of the music in real-time, starting with shorter passages, building up to entire movements, and eventually the entire concerto. Similar to practicing with the instrument memorized, any point where the music becomes hard to imagine, or sections are sped up and even skipped over, is likely a place where musical understanding is weak and requires fortification.

Changing habits outside of the practice room can also improve mental focus. Just as poor focus in everyday activities can negatively affect the mental state in practicing, improving focus away from the instrument positively develops the skill for use inside the practice room as well. A modern lifestyle dictates multi-tasking whenever possible: one might eat dinner while watching the news, cruising social media, responding to e-mails, and pulling up directions for an upcoming rehearsal. Unfortunately these habits lead to a wandering mind, easily distracted by little tasks or thoughts that spontaneously crop up. Focusing intently on one task at a time can help train the brain to focus, building positive habits that will carry into the practice room. And on those days when outside worries and pressures continually invade the practice space, other methods may be required. The act of practicing is a commitment to the instrument and the music, and during that time there is nothing that can be done about all of the “other” driving life. So make a full commitment to practice: address the nagging stressors by journaling either away from

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25 Whitcomb, 10.
the practice space, or at the beginning of a session before diving into the practice mentality.\textsuperscript{26} Should extra concerns come up during a session, write them down as well, and then forget them. These are not concerns that will help practice in any way, so they do not belong in the mental practice space. Practice, and the music, deserve full attention.

\textit{Patience}

When a cellist approaches the Dvořák Concerto for the first time, it is likely one of the longest, if not \textit{the} longest, most difficult work she has attempted. Therefore, it is a new experience, and it cannot be expected that previous formulas will work. The amount of effort and time that produced a stellar performance of a short showpiece will not be sufficient for this concerto, or any other virtuosic concerto of this breadth. One must be prepared to change their approach, be flexible, and be patient with the development of this new process. The learning curve is considerably wider in this style of repertoire, and requires a lot of trust in the cellist’s self. Playing virtuosic music is like driving on the highway the first time: scary, death-defying, and everything is moving too fast to react smoothly. What would have been a reasonable adjustment at a slower speed now derails passages completely. Nevertheless, after a few attempts one learns to anticipate farther down the road, gains trust in one’s control, and one’s motions even out. The kind of self-analysis required, and produced, by musical study means that musicians are highly self-critical and perpetually review their actions and processes. In the words of Bartel and Cameron: “Critical ability must be developed to be artistically responsible but the inner critic can ruin confidence and the love of the art.”\textsuperscript{27} For those who have a difficult time

\textsuperscript{26} This is a free-form act: it can be anything between a random list of words and concerns, to a letter addressed to yourself. By putting it on the piece of paper, you are pledging to deal with it later, when the time is appropriate.

\textsuperscript{27} Bartel and Cameron, “Pedagogical Dilemmas in Dance and Music,” 3.
turning off the judgmental critic, this can mean a lifetime of not trusting oneself, constantly waiting for failure: *Okay, I thought that passage went well — but I’m sure it was a fluke, and will go horribly the next time.* This mindset is unhealthy and unproductive.

So why are we predisposed to be impatient with ourselves? We have the capability to be logical, though often we are not. Westney describes this phenomenon in depth, describing multiple areas of life where failure is readily accepted. “In many areas of endeavor, we seem to share a common-sense understanding that risk-taking is absolutely essential for success.”²⁸ For example, many successful CEOs are hailed as brilliant, former failures who managed to bear through difficulty and create illustrious triumphs. Movies depicting the lives of business moguls such as Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, and Mark Zuckerberg immortalize their failures, portraying them as models for success to the public. Not only is there an understanding that in these cases failure was integral to success, but also that with higher-stake risk comes a higher instance of failure. Yet when it comes to music, we lose that sense of empathy for our own learning process. I believe the reason for this lack of empathy is twofold: first, the on-demand, impatient nature of modern culture. If willing to pay, there are many things we no longer have to wait for. TV shows can be viewed at our convenience through online subscription services on phones, televisions, or other digital devices. Prepared food is never farther than a few minutes away with frozen, fast, or delivery options. The idea that some things in life simply take time and patience is becoming an increasingly foreign concept. Or, at least, the timeline on which many aspects of life occur is shrinking; while the timeline for learning a trade skill, such as instrumental performance, is not changing.²⁹

²⁸ Westney, 65.

²⁹ At least, the timeline is not changing at the same rate. There are more digital tools that have streamlined a few processes (copy machines, digital applications for tracking practice) but the physical act of practicing is not changing at the same rate.
The other side of this issue is that the most visible part of the process of developing a performance of any musical work is the finished product. Searching YouTube for “Dvořák Cello Concerto” produces hundreds of thousands of results, from historical performances to student recitals. YouTube is the primary way young artists consume music, and the way in which many will be introduced to the Dvořák concerto for the first time. This creates a misconception of the kind of work required for high-level virtuosic performance. No one would expect even Yo-Yo Ma to learn a concerto like the Dvořák in a week, but there is a disconnect between the months (sometimes years) of work and the resulting polished performance. To make matters worse, many of the recordings produced in the digital era are enhanced or augmented, creating an altered reality of consistent, perfect performances. Charles Rosen writes:

When recordings replaced concerts as the dominant mode of hearing music, our conception of the nature of performance and of music itself was altered. ... A performance was no longer a singular event that would evaporate as soon as it took place but an infinitely repeatable experience; the model execution was no longer one that would dazzle, surprise, or disturb our emotions for the minutes that it takes place, but an ideal rendition of a respected work that could support many rehearsals.

The nature of performance has changed in the digital era. As we prepare our own versions of the Dvořák concerto and they fail to match the dozens of “perfect” versions in our memory, it is hard not to become impatient and feel inadequate: Why is it not perfect yet? Why can’t I play it yet? In fact these thoughts are entirely unhelpful, and have no business invading the practice space. Remember: virtuosic techniques are likely

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30 A search on October 15, 2015 produced over 214,000 hits. A cursory study of the results found that while there were a few recordings of masterclasses or discussions of the concerto, there was an overwhelming number of performances compared to “informative” or academic material.

31 Charles Rosen, Piano Notes, 184.
the newest techniques learnt, with less accumulated practice time than basic skills. Each
time you step away from a skill, they are not being maintained, and a part of the time
payment will be lost. They will need reinforcement, possibly relearning, if they are not
maintained. The more complex physical techniques require more complex muscle
memory, and they are complicated to assimilate mentally as well. A patient, systematic
mentality is key in learning a virtuosic concerto, such as the Dvořák.

Unlike issues in endurance and focus, patience is not merely practiced.
Impatience is one thread of many woven into the fabric of modern culture, and it is
not likely to disappear entirely. Rather than attempt to erase the behavior, it is important
to recognize when irrational impatience is impeding progress by recognizing the
following facts. To start, acknowledge the fact that more complex skills take longer to
process. Some techniques, many of which are found in the Dvořák concerto, need more
time than others. A large part of practice is developing a rote physicality, and that
development takes time. Again in Rosen’s words:

A proof of how purely physical the process of learning music can be is the fact
that if one practices a passage steadily for quarter of an hour, an immediate
improvement does not always appear. The next day, however, it has suddenly and
magically improved as if the labor was validated only by a night’s sleep. It is
simply that technique works at its best when the involuntary part of the mind
takes over more completely. Then consciousness, no longer burdened with the
difficulty of hitting the right notes, can assess all the other aspects of
performance.\textsuperscript{32}

Since these skills take more time to digest, start them early and work them often. In my
own work I have identified, at least for myself, the spots that cause me the most grief and
require the most hours to reintegrate each time I undertake the concerto. These “top

\textsuperscript{32} Rosen, 40.
hits” are prioritized in each practice session, rotating though warm-ups and exercises created from the materials in these passages. Some of these virtuosic techniques are athletic in nature, and require training similar to that of an athlete. Rosen remarks that virtuosic octave passages in the piano literature “also require special and painful training similar to the hours of exercise to which athletes must submit. ... It is, however the brilliant loud octave passages that audiences wait for, just as they wait for the fouettés of the Black Swan in the second act of Swan Lake, another feat more athletic than artistic.” The athletic aspects of virtuosic writing deserve a kind of work that produces that kind of athleticism, which requires patience and time. In this category I include chromatic octaves, thirds, sixths, and perpetual motion passagework.

Lastly, give yourself permission to make mistakes. Although private practice is not on public display, every famous soloist has spent countless hours trying, failing, and trying again to master their instrument. What makes these individuals different is that they have used their apparent failures to their advantage. These experiences can be used to further the learning process, rather than as a road block built in defense of a weakened ego. Westney suggests that, “just as in mastering a stick-shift car, we must have permission to make our own mistakes (what I think of as each person’s sovereign mistakes); we must be permitted to do it badly before we can do it smoothly and well.” Give yourself permission to fail, or at least fall, embracing and learning from these honest mistakes.

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33 The process of building warm-ups and exercises from musical passages is explored in Chapter 3.
34 Rosen, 5.
35 Westney, 66.
CHAPTER 3: The Process of Practicing: Method and Ethics

“...if you give a man a fish he is hungry again in an hour; if you teach him to catch a fish
you do him a good turn.” — Du Parc in Mrs. Dymond [Anne Isabella Ritchie, 1880’s]

“If you teach a student to play a concerto, he will win the competition. If you teach a
student to learn a concerto, she will have an artistically fulfilling career.”

— Ancient Cellist Proverb

Aspects of Practice

What constitutes practice? Not all aspects of practicing clearly present
themselves as such, as some of the most useful activities — those that engage us more
fully with the music — can appear to have nothing to do with the traditional view of
“practice”. Years ago in a basement practice room, I was interrupted by a colleague
during my normal stretching routine. At that time I began each morning session with a
regimen of stretches recommended by a physical therapist, though the majority of them
required me to roll around on the floor and looked absurd. To make matters worse, I did
this with the lights off to narrow my mental focus inward; which meant that to a
passerby, it looked as if I were sleeping. Practice rooms were at a premium, so it was no
surprise when the door was opened by an irate music student ready to kick my sorry,
sleepy hide out of the space. As soon as I explained that I was engaged in a portion of my
practice process, prescribed by a medical professional, the now-embarrassed student
quickly apologized and left. Whether it looked like practice or not, I was committing myself to an activity that greatly improved my practice mentally and physically.

Practice encompasses all of the activities which form meaningful connections with either the instrument or music: mental to physical, academic to mundane. The more discernible category of practice is practice at the instrument. This includes activities at the instrument that warm-up or build instrumental technique, such as etudes, scales, and warm-ups. This chapter deals primarily with the remaining two activities in this category: learning the text (the notes and rhythms of the concerto) and practicing performance of a musical work.

The other category of practice is cerebral practice, or activities accomplished primarily without the instrument. This covers all of the organizational aspects of practice: tracking progress, setting long-term performance goals, and prioritizing objectives each practice session. This also includes the practice of visualization of performance, as discussed in the previous chapter, as well as mental exercises exploring imagination and interpretive skills for the concerto. Also in this category are academic pursuits which expand knowledge of the work such as historical research, active listening, and study of the form of the composition. This chapter will address methods for organizing practice in Organization: Tracking Progress, and the remaining activities are discussed in Chapter 5.

Developing a Personal Practice Method

Taking on each of these activities can contribute to the musical understanding of a piece such as the Dvořák Cello Concerto. This is not to say that there is a set formula that incorporates study of all practice activities and guarantees immaculate performance and complete understanding of the concerto. Thankfully, the opposite is true: it is not necessary to know everything about Dvořák, the concerto, and all of cello technique in
order to give an informed performance. Rather, the goal is to find a balance of work amongst the activities based on personal interest in and curiosity about the concerto. Although the decision is not made consciously, each young artist is developing a method of practice each time they take part in one of the above activities. This is not an issue until the artist finds herself unable to meet a competition deadline or unprepared the week of a recital — and ignorant of how her decisions guided her to that state.

To prevent aimless practice when approaching a new work such as the Dvořák Cello Concerto, an artist must form a general timeline for her study. The artist must consciously choose what activities to pursue in an effort to engage with the concerto, based on processes that have worked in the past. On a smaller scale, musicians who are adept at practicing are able to effectively solve problems by choosing appropriate methods for each situation. A study by Siw Nielsen found that, “For a skill to be mastered or performed optimally, learners need strategies that are appropriate for the task and the setting. Skillful self-regulators are more likely to continuously adjust their choice of strategy.” What works in one passage might not be successful for another. Each individual’s method will vary, but the overall procedure will remain the same:

1. **Identify the difficulties**, large and small. Whether it is a single shift or an extended passage, where are the possible obstacles?

2. **Determine possible reasons for the issue**. Is it a mental misconception, or a physical error?

3. **Contemplate possible solutions**. There are multiple solutions for each puzzle, and it is best to propose a few for trial.

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2 If there were a cure-all for practicing, the music community would certainly be using it already. The only practice technique which comes close, is to slow down a passage — most often a problem can be more easily managed by slowing down to capture as many details as possible. However, slowing down does not cure all musical maladies.
4. **Attempt a solution.** This also includes varying the approach in a constant attempt to solve the issue. Often more than one solution exists, but only some of them work well for each individual.

This process requires an extensive mental library of the issues one faces in the practice room, and of the problem-solving methods that dismiss them. The following chapter will provide an array of problem-solving strategies for the technical barriers of the Dvořák concerto, whereas this chapter explores the ethics governing the self in the practice room.

So why is it important to builds a personal method of practicing? Clarifying the practice process to oneself establishes a routine for concerto study. It is important to develop the ability to understand the scope of the tasks one is undertaking when launching into new projects: what are the kinds of mental and physical exercises needed for study of this particular piece? How much time will each of them take — will some be disproportionately longer? Will I need to drop other projects in order to pursue this one? Answers and processes deriving from these questions lend themselves to professional behavior.

For instance: say a young artist is offered the opportunity to perform the Dvořák Cello Concerto with a local community symphony. The artist will need to be able to accurately predict the demands on her time to complete that task at a high level of performance, while simultaneously managing her private studio, freelance schedule, and the mundane aspects of life. After all, most artists cannot afford to hire a maid, chef, and chauffeur to take care of them while they devote their entire selves to their artistic practices. Having a sound understanding of the demands one will face in practice can

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3 As I have approached the end of my structured musical studies, I have become increasingly aware of the fact that I will soon be making all of these decisions alone. I expect I will have a healthy support system of artistic and personal mentors, though in the end it will be myself pushing the process along. It is important for young artists to explore this process before leaving the nest of their schooling, as they are bound to have an adjustment as they transition to an independent process.
also help one make pragmatic decisions based on opportunity cost: the time and resources used in an effort to pursue an artistic or audition opportunity. For a musician, the opportunity cost of taking an audition might entail loss of private studio income, loss of income turning away performance work surrounding the date of the audition, and the hard costs of travel and lodging for the audition (airfare, meals, hotels). Knowing the amount of time and stress the practice process will impose on one’s schedule, the artist can realistically weigh the risks, costs, and potential rewards. Forming a dependable practice method is crucial to a young artist’s professional development — financially and artistically.

**Organization: Tracking Progress**

A key component in generating a methodical practice process is organization. This includes goal-setting (short and long-term) as well as recording practice to track progress. This section describes the benefits of setting practice goals, the different ways of recording practice, and the pros and cons of recording practice.

**Goal Setting**

Articulating to oneself daily, weekly, or even project-wide practice goals clarifies the purpose and work required to meet specific deadlines. Beginning study with the Dvořák concerto, an artist should ask herself: *Why am I studying this concerto?* For many the answer is an external motivator, such as a teacher’s or studio’s requirement. Given this concerto’s prominent standing in the cello repertoire, it may be “time” for the artist to add it to the arsenal. Others may study the concerto as they train for auditions.

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4 Leah Hagel describes the Dvořák concerto as a “benchmark of development” and a piece that cellists look forward to “learning and mastering” Hagel, 36.
since, as mentioned previously, this concerto is currently a popular choice for orchestral auditions. Ideally, an artist embarks on this concerto because she has an enthusiastic desire to examine the Dvořák concerto and an urge to add their voice to the musical work. Aimlessly studying the entire concerto all at once, with no clear objective, is a recipe for disaster. The Dvořák concerto is a giant work: at almost 40 minutes long, it can be overwhelming when not divided into manageable pieces. Whatever the reason for study is — competition, obligation, or curiosity — identifying that reason enables one to determine the shorter-term goals. If preparing for an upcoming audition, the scope of study will likely narrow to the first movement to manage performance under the required timeline. Then secondary goals (performance of the first movement exposition, for example) can be made within the window of available time. By setting these milestones, it will become obvious when preparation is falling off track, or if the end-goal is compromised.

Lastly, on the shortest term, set goals for each session of practice. Prioritize a list of musical sections to tackle daily, based on the current phase of practice. Later phases will favor run-throughs of larger chunks of music, if not entire movements, whereas early stages of practice will require a specific list of passagework to accomplish in the session.

Recording Practice

There are many ways to record your practice. First, establish a system for recording tasks executed in practice. Note all of the practice activities that actually occur in practice, as well as the efficiency or deficiency of the methods used. As well, if you are

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5 In each of the 4 orchestral auditions I have taken in the past year, I have been able to hear at least one other candidate warming up this concerto through the walls of my own warm-up room.

6 The Cambridge performer’s guide of the Dvořák Cello Concerto, by Jan Smaczny, describes an interesting phenomenon: the trend amongst different artists in the second half of the 20th-century was for the concerto to grow in length in performance. Originally clocking in at close to 35 minutes when recording technology first come into use, the concerto was closer to 40 minutes at the time of publication (1999).
currently taking lessons, record notes directly after each lesson. Weekly or even daily practice logs can illuminate issues of progress. If a passage of music has consistently monopolized practice sessions without progress, a daily log would reveal this problem and indicate that a new approach is needed. Compare the tasks accomplished with the goals set, to check progress. If one is not regularly tracking practice activities, this issue might not become apparent — or will take longer to realize. These notes do not have to be a tangible pen and paper journal; a digital log is just effective.

In a slightly different vein, writing in a journal format is a great way to explore more complex issues. By writing through the issue, one can pull away the layers of difficulty in intricate techniques, or theoretical topics pertaining to interpretation and artistry. Digital blogs (weblogs) also provide an interesting format for public discussion with colleagues, who are able to contribute their own perspective and experiential wisdom.

During my revamp of the Dvořák concerto in the winter of 2014, I attempted to keep a public digital blog of my experiences. I aimed to start a conversation digitally with my colleagues about our collective experiences in similar musical endeavors, as part of an interdisciplinary independent study project at The Ohio State University. While it was not successful in every respect, it was a constructive way to sort through larger questions I had about the concerto: issues of showmanship, artistry, recording practice, and musical truth. Normally issues such as those would have rattled around in my subconscious, occasionally coming to the forethought of my process for a brief moment.

My blog resulted in varying degrees of success; I managed to start a collegial discussion on one of the posts, but was unsuccessful with the others. Blogs can also be kept anonymous, or even private, if one desires the freedom to hold discourse without fear of personal criticism.

Published posts of the blog Dvořák Redux: Defining Creative Methodology are under Appendix A.

The process needed to be started earlier, ready to launch at the beginning of my practice. I had the idea to build the blog after I had already restarted practicing the concerto. I tried to make each post far too involved, so I got behind on posting. While many colleagues voiced their interests in the project, I was not persistent in gathering commentary to foster discussions. If the project were longer, it would have provided more opportunity for colleagues to respond.
— leaving before I had a chance to assimilate them, since I could never fully address them this way. The blog reduced some of the anxiety driven by avoiding these ideas, by forcing me to wrestle with these issues. Whether or not they provided clear answers is up for debate, though I believe many of these topics will never have simple answers. I absolutely intend to try this format again by keeping a blog for similar future projects.

In the year 2015, we have an advantage over previous generations of practicing musicians: access to cheap digital recording equipment. We have the ability to make a quick recording of a shift, or an entire concerto if we desire, with an array of devices: smart phones, compact video and audio recording devices, laptops, and tablets. Whitcomb argues that, “Many musicians do not like to listen to recordings of themselves, because it tells them information that they didn’t want to be true, but you stand to gain so much by doing so that you cannot afford not to do it.” It is true; in the modern world, you cannot afford to pass up the opportunity to gain valuable information about your performance. Mistakes are going to occur, invited or not, so it is better to acknowledge them fully in order to address the underlying issues. The process is a great equalizer, eliminating all possibilities for bias. Recording allows one to hear the whole effect of a passage or work, without being distracted by the physicality of playing. While playing, it is easy to justify a multitude of musical transgressions, since the performer’s perspective is bogged down by the why and the how of the actions taking place. The audience will only experience the what: the results of the performance. Recording performance and practice is an opportunity to hear oneself from the perspective of a listener, as an audience would in that moment. For learners studying the concerto without regular input from a private instructor or mentor, this tool is particularly helpful for manifesting the third person mindset required for objective evaluation.

10 Whitcomb, 55.
There is a different mental state, more closely related to the performance mindset than the experimental practicing mindset, that kicks in when the red light of the recorder is engaged. It is a fantastic way to practice performance, and practice performing in the “worst case” scenario:

Recordings create artificial performance situations. This can help us learn how to *keep going* convincingly, and straight-faced, when we do make mistakes, which is a critically important skill. Everyone makes mistakes—it’s how well one hides them and recovers from them that really matters.11

The experimental mindset is vital for earlier stages of practice, though as performance nears it becomes a hindrance to developing the do-or-die state necessary for performance. Recording is the ultimate test: will the hours of careful deliberation and delicate interpretive work hold up in performance?

Digital recording also provides another avenue for tracking progress throughout concerto study. Recordings can be kept for later analysis, such as work with the concerto at a later date, or reviewing procedure in preparation for a new project. Recordings are tangible accounts of the interpretive decisions made, ready for comparison with future ideas. Which of these ideas hold up over time? It also is easier to see when practice methods have particularly positive or negative results, since the results are available for repeat analysis.

Nonetheless, there are also dangers in recording; the same opportunity for repeat analysis recording provides can turn sour if used excessively. If recording is misused, one can become dependent on recorded feedback, effectively training oneself to stop listening while performing. I observed this phenomenon in a colleague of mine, who for a period of time recorded every practice session, lesson, and studio class performance during his preparation of a virtuosic concerto. Initially it seemed like an aggressively

11 Whitcomb, 18.
constructive method of practice, until I witnessed a practice session firsthand. Constantly poring over recorded sessions, my colleague was unable to discern mistakes in performance until reviewing the digital session. He could no longer hear his intonation, even when reviewing the records. No longer trusting his ears, he waited until reviewing the tape to look for mistakes in his playing, rather than gathering information in process.

Rosen spoke out against recording, remarking that:

Many pianists developed the habit of recording themselves on tape, in order to hear what they were doing. [That practice] encourages a growing reliance on a mechanical device, when, on the contrary, we need to increase our awareness of what is taking place at the moment of performance.12

In the context of this excerpt, Rosen states a belief that this issue (of not listening during performance) does not affect string or woodwind players, because of how they are trained. I have to disagree with this conclusion. Yes, it is imperative that string players learn how to use their ears, and it is of central concern in string pedagogy. However, from my own experience teaching others and myself, string players can easily lose focus and forget to use their ears to gain information while playing. In fact, I would argue that this issue is even more disastrous for young string players. While the effects are bad for both pianists and string players, when a string player ignores their aural sense they play with poor intonation — if off, intonation is often the first quality a listener hears, and will distract them from any of the positive qualities the artist might possess. Like many aspects of practice, recording is a tool that should be employed with caution, and in balance with other practice techniques. Used in moderation, and never as a replacement for intense aural focus, digitally recording practice yields valuable information for concerto study.

12 Rosen, 36.
Whether it is a digital notebook, a weekly recording habit, or jotting down notes after a private lesson, organizing the what goes into and results from practice is critical for efficient practice. These routines are practical for study of all styles of cello literature, and mandatory for virtuosic concerto practice. Having considered the ways to organize practice, next let us discuss the ethics which regulate the practice process.

*Ethics of Practice: Leggo My Ego!*

An informative syllabus will include a critical section outlining the policies, or ethics, which govern the course, and by extension, the student. This generally includes statements regarding plagiarism, late work, and attendance. By clearly delineating the boundaries of acceptable actions, the student is given the best possible chance for success in the course. These syllabus policies inspired me to ask: what are the implied ethics of practice — specifically, practice of a virtuosic concerto?

It all comes down to *ego*. The music will present many challenges, but solutions to most of those present themselves with time and practice. The truly insurmountable barrier is the self. There is no room in practicing for ego; the task of practicing is already complicated enough without pouring the entirety of one’s self-worth into the success of every practice session. Self-worth should not be dependent on how well the practice session progresses, and the quality of the practice session should not be affected by self-worth. Removing this extra emotional burden allows focus to lie solely on the music and the process of learning it. The following topics are all policies for removing the ego from the practice process: *Faith in Practice; Honesty in Practice; The Planner, Performer, and Critic;* and *Defamiliarization.*
**Faith in Practice**

As discussed in Chapter 2, an artist’s harshest critic is often her own inner commentary. When the pessimistic side of that internal critic rears its ugly head it can drive one to impatience, and the larger picture is lost. Parts of the Dvořák concerto are straightforward — such as the opening theme of the second movement — and require little effort to figure out. These passages are often lyrical, symmetrical melodies without high technical demand. There are still interpretive details to be considered, but these passages do not take hours of work to simply comprehend their shape and intention. However, virtuosic technical passagework requires a “long game”. These sections need to be pulled apart, analyzed, synthesized, and then pulled apart again (and again, if necessary). These are not the kinds of issues solved in one practice session, just as some aspects of cello technique which take months and years to assimilate into the body and mind: bow hold, vibrato, and ricochet articulations, to name a few. A distorted expectation of progress may be born from the tradition of weekly private lessons. Westney describes this phenomenon:

> Sometimes the very fact that there is a weekly lesson can be counterproductive. Why should it be assumed that the student’s efforts will be ready for aesthetic critique after only seven days? Why should accuracy and control be expected right at the start, rather than at the end of the process?²³

Progress can be glacial, and not always perceptible each week. The pressure to perform frequently encourages students to push past the earlier stages of practice too soon, forcing an artistic product before competency is achieved. Westney reports that students often feel a greater sense of accomplishment when left to their own devices on their

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²³ Westney, 51.
teacher’s leave without the “disruption of those premature attempts to perform every week.”

The effect of this mindset was demonstrated to me in a private lesson on the first movement of the concerto at a summer festival. I had studied the movement for months before to the festival, but I was still grappling with the iconic sextuplet passage [mm. 158 - 165]. After hacking my way through the page, completely out of tune, the instructor had me start back at square one, playing only the notes that lay under the thumb. It had been a long while since I had practiced this way, but I was baffled; I could not, reliably, play that simplified passage in tune. Why was I trying to put the passage together, when I couldn’t manage the simplest of tasks? Entirely focused on producing results, I was trying to prove my musical excellence to this new instructor. My ego had directed my practice.

One must remember that learning the Dvořák concerto is a process that will take much longer than one would like. The mindset needed for this kind of work — slow, gradual, and patient — is a form of faith. Suspend anxieties, put in the work, and have faith that there will be an eventual mastery of the passages.

**Honesty in Practice**

Mistakes have negative connotations: they appear as villains in our work, ruining our chances of success. In actuality, though, mistakes are an opportunity for growth and understanding. “Honest mistakes are not only natural, they are immensely useful. Truthful and pure, full of specific information, they show us with immediate, elegant clarity where we are right now, and what we need to do next.” Each mistake is an open

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14 Westney, 51.

15 This exercise is explained in detail, in Chapter 4.

16 Westney, 62.
window that leads towards the solution, but only if the mistake is recognized and processed. Determine the cause as soon as the mistake occurs; orphan mistakes are unhelpful, and they become habits if left alone.

In complex passages it is useful to understand the paths to successful solutions as well as the failed tracks. Using a process of elimination can illuminate the details which are working by excluding those which are not. As Westney states, “Sometimes we have to experience fully what’s wrong in order to understand and integrate what’s right, and honest mistakes are the only way to do that.”

The other side of honesty in practicing is, in each stage of practice, being honest with oneself on the quality of work and the current status of the project. Do not settle for half-learning: if the hole in the issue is visible, fix it while it is still perceivable. While some issues have a slow path of progress, do not leave work that is presenting itself for later. Being honest with oneself creates better results: Do you really know the passage well enough to play it memorized with people watching your every move? This is applicable when deciding a passage is “good enough” or ready for performance. It is acceptable for a section to be “in progress”, as long as one is clear that there still is more work to be done. That said, there is no time to disparage oneself while in the process of practicing — which is again putting the self ahead of the practice of the music. Focus on the factual information produced by the attempts, rather than how one feels about them.

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17 Westney, 62.

18 One way to ensure honesty in practicing, is to digitally record sections of practice. Listening with honest ears (or watching with honest eyes) away from the instrument is a reliable way to truly know the current status of your work.
The Planner, The Performer, and The Critic

Life for a musician in the modern world requires the ability to fulfill many roles, such as performer, private instructor, collaborative colleague, and personal manager. This skill is often developed when one begins to work in the professional field, as a result of the responsibilities necessary to build a financially sound career in music. However, in the practice room there are three separate mindsets required for efficient practice.

Westney, Whitcomb, and Nielson each described this theory from varying perspectives, with key similarities. Whitcomb describes playing an instrument as “three processes: we plan what we are going to do, we play, and then we judge the results.” Whitcomb comments on the rhythm of practice: “Relax—Imagine—Go for it—Assess the result.” And finally from a more clinical perspective, Nielson calls this approach a “cyclic self-regulatory system: strategy selection, monitoring and revision.” All three models have a similar flow, with the exception of Westney’s added ‘Relax’ step. Lining up the other statements presents a collection of descriptors for each mindset:

1. plan, imagine, strategy selection — The Planner
2. play, go for it, monitoring — The Performer
3. judge, assess the result, revision — The Critic

The roles of The Planner and The Critic are straightforward: choose a plan of attack, and then give an honest attempt, respectively. The Critic’s role is often the most misused or misunderstood. Though I am using the word “critic”, The Critic is not the stereotypical pessimistic persona attributed to critics. The Critic is emotionally removed from the act

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19 Nielson also noted previous research on this subject, as early as 1998 by B. J. Zimmerman:


20 Whitcomb, 17.

21 Westney, 90.

22 Nielson, 163.
of performing, and serves strictly as an assessor of the sounds, motions, and practice strategies used by the Performer — a reviewer of the raw data. That data is analyzed by The Critic in preparation for The Planner.

Any time two or more of these mental modes try to run concurrently, the process will break down. If The Critic is allowed to judge the value of The Performer (casting doubt), then the The Planner will not be given a chance to develop a new strategy. And without the information categorized by The Critic, The Planner has no new data to process into potential solutions. Lastly, without the sincere attempts of The Performer, there is nothing to analyze. Each mindset plays an important, yet separate, role in the practice process — none of which cast negative judgement on the self. There is no room to evaluate the self in this process: it is all about the music.

After all, the language one uses when coaching oneself is very powerful. Verbal self-talk can effectively narrow focus in a practice session. Living exclusively inside of the mental space while practicing is common, though it can lead to negative comments on the self. The majority of these negative sentiments live inside of the mental space, but those same negative thoughts — *I can’t play this passage* — *why still am I unable to do this?* — *I must be a bad cellist* — are much more difficult to say out loud. By directing the practice session with objective, factual statements out loud, the tone of the practice can steer clear from cynical assessments. Neilson determined that skillful learners were likely to use a verbal form of self-instruction, as a way to execute strategies:

> Self-instruction involves overtly or covertly describing how to proceed as one executes a task. Self-guiding instructions can play a variety of performance control functions such as concentrating one’s attention, following each step of a strategy, and praising oneself to sustain motivation.23

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23 Neilson, 160.
The first time I observed this behavior, I was shocked; it was incredibly efficient and there was no room for negative judgement.\textsuperscript{24} It was the consummate example of the three modes of practice: the planner would announce a verbal goal,\textsuperscript{25} the performer would enthusiastically try, and the critic would make a factual statement regarding the results of the attempt. What was most shocking, was how effective the session was. No energy or time was wasted, and certainly nothing was wasted on ego. This was a professional cellist, with years of experience performing the musical work being practiced; it was an impressive display of an efficient practice process.

When faced with a mistake, my students typically say something along the lines of Ugh, I messed up! or I sound bad! These statements, straight from the defeatist side of The Critic, are unhelpful evaluations of the effort just made by The Performer. I encourage my students instead to change their grumbling into a statement that describes the event, such as I overshot the shift. For my advanced students, they are also required to answer why: (I overshot the shift) because I moved my hand too fast.\textsuperscript{26} By tweaking the verbiage into a factual statement, the student has now identified the goal (to shift), the issue (moving too fast), and the desired result (to not overshoot the shift, and possibly move slower). The student is now prepared to attempt the shift again with a clear plan in place and a ruler for success that he can reuse in the following tries.

The three roles of Planner, Performer, and Critic are developed by every musician, whether or not it is a conscious decision. It is the duty of the artist to control

\textsuperscript{24} I observed a practice session of Dr. Wesley Baldwin, as part of the Tennessee Cello Workshop in February 2015. He was preparing for an impending recital performance of Alberto Ginastera’s Pampeana No. 2 for cello and piano later that day.

\textsuperscript{25} The goals were not always verbalized — commentary was verbalized the most often at the critical stages, which would feed into new planning goals.

\textsuperscript{26} For a student unsure of the solution, a teacher can be very helpful. A student that enters a lesson saying “I keep overshooting my shifts” or “I am missing my shifts” is much easier to help than one whining, “My shifts suck!”
the use of these mindsets, in a constant effort to suppress the urge to judge self-worth and achieve efficient practice.

Defamiliarization

Performing the Dvořák Cello Concerto is a perfect storm of technical challenges, artistry, and expectation. As a popular, oft-played work, there are expectations of how the piece will sound already hardwired into the audience and the soloist. It is difficult to separate an internal interpretation with the one developed in real time, even for the most rational of artists. And when the actual interpretation fails to compare to the perceived memory of the concerto, passages can become obstacles that seem insurmountable to the learner.

To counteract this, one must learn when to defamiliarize the passage: remove the issue from the context which is causing the mental anxiety, to view the passage in a new perspective. There are a few ways to accomplish defamiliarization, the first of which is to transform the complex technical barriers into a simpler, more manageable exercise. Choosing only one or two aspects of the passage to work on at a time, practicing the passage away from the musical context as a warm-up or daily exercise allows the technique to be practiced in isolation — away from the musical and emotional baggage of the concerto.

Another form of defamiliarization is to walk away from the problem for a short period of time. Let the passage percolate in the subconscious for a while, while the

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27 It should be noted that this is in no relation to the Russian ideal of defamiliarization, or ostranenie (остранение): “The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.” Viktor Shklovsky, *Art as Device*, pg.16.

28 Examples in the Dvořák concerto are found in Chapter 4.
conscious mind focuses on other parts of the concerto. Rewriting over old processes is complex, and frequently the brain needs to sort itself out without conscious interference. Chapter 2 explained the potential for losing technique after spending time away from the concerto; while physical technique often leaves after an extended break, some of the passagework mentally makes more sense and is less imposing.

Alternatively, if the timeline for practice allows, there is also value in shelving physical practice of concerto entirely for the span of a month or so. During time away from physical study, take on the other activities of concerto study such as score study, historical research, and especially active listening. If a particular passage is causing trouble, find and listen to at least five different interpretations of that narrow excerpt. Ask yourself: How clean are these passages in live recordings, really? What successful solutions do you hear others using in context — or are they also scrambling underneath the orchestra as well? I found this practice very useful when the chromatic octaves of the first movement became a barrier in my practice. Active listening taught me that not only was I coming into the passage too fast, but that the entrance of the orchestra covered any crimes of intonation in the final beat of the bar. I still attempted to clean the passage throughout my study, but there was less anxiety, or fear of failure, once I realized what the musical effect of the technique was in context.

While we cannot change the notoriety of the Dvořák Cello Concerto, we can change the effect it has on the learning process. Temporarily removing practice from the emotional baggage often attached to the concerto, there is an opportunity to approach technical challenges with frank objectivity. We must never underestimate the power of a small break: running full force at an issue is not always the solution.

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29 Principles of active listening are discussed in Chapter 5.
Ethics regulate human behavior in many ways, from the morality of taking a human life, to the principles of stealing an unmarked sandwich in an office break room. A code of virtues regulates behavior in the practice room, and can determine the productivity of the hours of sweat at the instrument. You have a choice when practicing: devote the entire act of practicing to the music, and leave any judgement of self behind. The music deserves your full attention.
CHAPTER 4: Problem-Solving Practice Techniques

Utilizing creative problem solving skills in the practice room is not a new suggestion, though it is difficult to find specific examples based on virtuosic repertoire in action. Most examples are abstract, compelling the student to apply these ideals to their current practicing repertoire. A study of the link between practice strategies and outcomes suggests that: “...teachers will want to show students not only what sort of strategies might be useful, but also in what contexts these strategies are most effective.”

Oddly enough, the contextualizing half of this equation rarely happens in detail. Cello methods and pedagogical texts might apply a strategy to a technical issue, though in the context of a passage of actual music the solutions become muddied by layers of problems. The examples are solutions addressing abstract technical problems, not music. What strategy is best when everything in the passage is difficult?

Whitcomb presents a rare illustration of multiple techniques in action using the first page of the Elgar Cello Concerto as an example. Multiple practice techniques are recommended for specific bars, though the exercises are not written out in musical notation. Eventually, a young artist must develop these miniature exercises on their own, but while still building this skill it can be hard to imagine what these passages will look like transformed through practice. The objective of this section is to illuminate this process through the use of visual and verbal representations — explicit versions of the miniature exercises one might develop during practice of the Dvořák concerto.

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1 Jennifer StGeorge, “Learning Patterns in Music Practice,” 259.
The Strategies

Let us describe each of the problem-solving practice strategies, beginning with the most popular: **slow practice**. The frequent response for many teachers, slow practice is the king of practice strategies. Can’t coordinate your hands? Slow it down. Can’t tell if the intonation is accurate? Slow it down. Can’t keep control of your bow? For goodness sakes, *slow it down!* Whitcomb suggests using exaggerated rhythms, as well as paying close attention to your body when slowing a passage down to maintain an awareness of any tension.² Motions should be continuous, or “circular” as advised by Whitcomb, preparing for the economy of motion that will be required at faster speeds. Jagged motions, which typically use extra muscle tension and produce extra stops in the physical gestures of playing, become more exaggerated when sped up. Be wary of becoming *too* circular and mushy; if the physical gestures have become too large and grand, they will be a mess when sped up. Aim for crisp, prepared motions, that can be sped up when needed. This strategy is generally useful, though is exceptional useful for passages too fast or complex for the ear to discern at tempo; complex coordination between the hands; excessive string crossings; and complex rhythms.

Many of the virtuosic passages of the Dvořák concerto require multiple voices, appearing impenetrable even when one is simply trying to visually identify the pitches. These are the kinds of passages which benefit most from **simplification**: “Leaving out one or more technical aspects of a passage in order to concentrate on solving one problem at a time.”³ Tending to one voice or one technical challenge at a time, the structure of the passage becomes clearer, and the problems more manageable. For

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² Whitcomb, 73.
³ Ibid., 72.
example, one might play only the downbeats of section to hear the outline of the chord spelled in the passage, or to align the timing of shifts in positions.

A closely related technique, **standard comparison** is the practice of playing a passage in “... an easier or more favorable way to make it sound better, and then replay the passage as written.” This is different from simplification, which does not involve the direct comparison of the altered form to the original passage — in simplification the altered passage becomes the focus of that segment of practice until the issue is resolved. The strategy of standard comparison is suggested for upper register passages (such as playing an octave lower for comparison), passages with asymmetrical bowings, or passages in awkward positions that can still be produced in easier positions.

The tonal center of the Dvořák concerto is B minor, with sections traveling to B major — not a favorable key for the cello. A suggested format for improving aural understanding in passagework is **transposition**: playing a passage in different keys, or on different strings. Some passages already occur in transposition, such as the problematic sextuplet passage in the first movement. The passage reappears in the recapitulation, and so where additional tonal exploration would be beneficial for the ear. Successfully transposing a passage by ear, without writing it down first, exercises the ears. Transposing can test the understanding of the aural relationships from note to note, as well as the comprehension of the tonal framework of the passage.

While arpeggios should be old hat for any cellist undertaking the Dvořák concerto, there is a technique for tuning similar passagework found in the concerto. **Harmonic practice** turns arpeggiated lines into double-stop passages, to allow the ear to correct any inaccuracies of the hand-shape. The use of an external drone (the root or

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4 Whitcomb, 72.

5 Ibid., 72.
fifth of the chord is recommended) may accomplish the same goal. This strategy requires the ability to identify the chords in the passage.

**Add-a-note** is practicing by adding notes sequentially, one by one, in tempo. This strategy can pinpoint a problem area, down to one note, in a constant stream of fast material. It confirms that all motions are running smoothly, without the stamina-testing burden of playing an entire passage. The ear has an easier time by zooming in on short chunks, and there is less information to sift through after each attempt. The Dvořák concerto has short bursts of material, two to four bars at a time, in the style of perpetual motion writing: these passages profit most from the add-a-note technique. Yet a lot of the material in the concerto also requires an “add-a-group” process — adding grouped notes or beats with each iteration, rather than just one note.

The final practice strategy is **conceptual practice**. Occasionally, a passage will still baffle despite careful practice. This might be an indicator of a lack of cerebral understanding of the passage, or a discrepancy between the text and physical gesture required to accomplish that feat. This is very instructive for shifting, where the actual distance shifted may differ from the melodic distance.

**The Exercises in Context**

These examples are meant to be a starting point for practice of the virtuosic elements of the concerto — again, the aim of this document is to inspire creative solutions when studying the Dvořák Cello Concerto, not to be a comprehensive answer guide. The following exercises are models of the kinds of solutions created in practice that uses the problem-solving strategies. Practicing only these exercises will not be

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6 Based on Whitcomb’s definition, 73.

7 This strategy is based on Whitcomb’s conceptual/theoretical practice: “improving your knowledge. Sometimes difficulty with a passage is due to a lack of understanding of the pitches or intervals involved.” pg. 73. However, I left out the suggestion to identify the issue out loud, repeatedly, and faster to drill the information.
enough. I address some of what I believe to be the thorniest passages to practice through verbal and visual description of exercises created by use of the practice strategies.

Ten musical selections are include, presented in the order in which they appear in the concerto. An excerpt of the solo score is presented first (Excerpt 1, 2, 3, etc.) in each example group, followed by its related exercises (Exercise 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, etc.). For the score excerpts, sections were taken from the 2001 Breitkopf & Härtel critical performance edition, edited by cellist Heinrich Schiff. Occasionally, I suggest a fingering which differs from the edited solo part is suggested, which is reflected (and mentioned) in the pertinent exercises. The verbal explanations follow each example group to facilitate visual reference to the exercises while reading about each example group.

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8 I choose this edition because of its quality: crisp printing, and well-spaced material. Many editions squish the first 135 measures onto one page — even the C. F. Peters critical performance edition. The 2001 Breitkopf & Härtel critical performance edition spreads the same amount of material onto two pages.
Movement I: mm. 122 - 124 and 126-127

Excerpt 1  mm. 121 - 30

Exercise 1.1  mm. 122 - 24 Shifting Outline and Timing

Exercise 1.2  mm. 126 - 127 Simplified with Ghost Shifts
The first musical excerpt for consideration, Excerpt 1, is from the mini-development within the first statement of solo cello. The passage climbs up and down the upper register, requiring a facile left hand and a sure understanding of the shifts required. The first challenge is the shifting in mm. 122 and 123: to better understand the issues at work in this passage, simplify the passage by removing all of the duplicated notes (or “noodles”) and the complicated rhythm, as seen in Exercise 1.1. The conceptual issue here is that while melodically there is a large jump from the G to the E, physically the hand does not travel that far. The position change is only up to a B, and then the remaining distance is covered by using the third finger — the thumb determines the change in position, not the third finger. The first line of Exercise 1.1 demonstrates the required shifting pattern for the left hand, and the second line demonstrates the desired timing for the shift. Most of the shifting exercises presented in the following examples use the notation used in the first line, though the second line precisely demonstrates the timing before the beat. Thankfully, the music provides the necessary time for shifting in this excerpt; there is a full sixteenth note rest for the shift. By simplifying this passage, the desired melodic outline is clearly defined for aural learning, and the shifting timing is clarified.

Here is a similar issue in m. 126. The edition in Excerpt 1 suggests a different fingering with more shifting, though in Exercise 1.2 I propose a slightly different fingering which utilizes the D-string longer. Again, the shifting pattern is illuminated in Exercise 1.2 to demonstrate the required timing, by clearly defining the start and end points of the shifts with grace notes. As practice of the exercise progresses, let the grace notes gradually become ghosted notes, to guide the hand into the proper pitches. Accentuate the off-beats in m. 126 to emphasize the connection between the old and new notes of each shift and equalize off-beats, as shown by tenuto markings in Exercise 1.2.

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9 This also promotes the necessity of shifting with the whole arm, rather than the fingers — the latter of which can cause the hand shape and angle to distort.
Movement I: mm. 158 - 65

Tempo I \( \text{♩} \text{= 116} \)

Excerpt 2  mm. 158 - 65

Exercise 2.1  mm. 158 - 65 Thumb Alone

Exercise 2.2  mm. 158 - 65 Second Finger Alone
Exercise 2.3  mm. 158 - 65 Third Finger Alone

Exercise 2.4  mm. 158 - 65 Thumb and Second Finger Together

Exercise 2.5  mm. 158 - 65 Second and Third Fingers Together

Exercise 2.6  m. 158 Rhythmic Shifting Variation 1

Exercise 2.7  m. 158 Rhythmic Shifting Variation 2

Exercise 2.8  m. 158 Accentuating Shifts with All Voices
Here it is, the wickedly difficult sextuplet passage (Excerpt 2). A few aspects make this passage complicated: first, the bowing. As a ricochet bowing, the very nature of the stroke is supposed to be uncontrolled, so a hint of tension in the bow arm kills the stroke. Unfortunately, tension on one side of the body often translates to tension in the other, so the great feat of strength and stretching required of the left hand often negatively affects the delicate work of the right. Which comes to the second difficulty: the left-hand work of this passage is physically taxing and difficult to comprehend. Lastly, the length of the passage: if the gesture were only two or four bars long it would be much easier. The passage is just long enough for one or both of the arms to give out, especially when practicing repetitively or with physical inefficiency.

Therefore, the first rule in practicing this passage is efficiency. This passage requires a vigorous thumb strength, which takes time to develop. Always search for the most efficient use of the body, and of time, when practicing this excerpt. Address this passage early in the practice session for a maximum of 10 minutes, and then again towards the end of the session when the thumb has had a chance to recover. This will help build endurance by applying multiple repetitions, without overly stressing the muscles and callus. If there is ever any pain, **stop immediately**, and move onto something less strenuous. This is the same process for the analogous recapitulatory passage at mm. 285 - 93.

To begin, simplify the passage. Exercises 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3 isolate each voice — thumb, second finger, and third finger, respectively. Use standard comparison by first using simple fingerings to play the notes easily and train the ear of the desired aural pattern. Then play the pattern with the shifts of the single digit required. Next, put two of the fingers together, simultaneously, as double-stops. Exercise 2.4 presents the thumb

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10 Despite my years of study and detailed understanding of the passage earned through hours of practice, I still found myself making multiple mistakes when trying to transcribe the exercises for this particular excerpt.
and second finger together, and Exercise 2.5 the second and third. Start these exercises by ghosting one of the voices (putting the fingers on the string, but only sounding one with the bow) to experiment with the feel of the shape, while only aurally concentrating on one voice. Then, sound both voices in unison; this is good practice for tuning, as the notes need to relate to one another and the fingers must arrive at the same time.

Once one is able to slowly play the double-stops, test the agility of the shifts. Exercises 2.6 and 2.7 are sample variations meant to test the shifts rhythmically. These exercises begin alternating between voices, and the same rhythmic patterns could be applied to Exercises 2.4 and 2.5 as well. It is harder to hear the intonation of the passage without the relative pitch of the concurrent notes, so the separate voicing is more difficult. Vary the speeds and rhythms until the hand shape is consistent, and mobile.

All of the preceding material forms the daily exercises I use when warming up this passage. The last exercise is devoted to coordinating the bowing. Again, I find the right hand technique impossible to accomplish without a solid, athletic understanding of the left hand in this passage, which is why the bowing has been ignored until this point. Start by playing the passage completely on the string, with separate bows, accenting the shifts as shown in Exercise 2.8. Next, practice the printed bowing with a stationary left hand; for example, playing only one beat of Exercise 2.8. Taking out the shifting element, but practicing the bowing on each of the chords (and using the different bow placements required for each of them), temporarily removes the remaining element of shifting difficulty. Afterwards, alternate between two chords at a time, going back and forth until secure. Then the passage is ready for longer chunks — say one chord progression at a time (mm. 158-159) — after which the entire passage is linked together. Rest occasionally to prevent the arm from over-tiring. The process of going through all of these exercises will not be accomplished in one day; the exercises are to be used progressively until the appropriate endurance is built, after which the whole series can be attempted.
Movement I: mm. 186 - 88

Excerpt 3  mm. 183 - 89

Exercise 3.1  m. 186 Reference Tuning

Exercise 3.2  m. 187 Reference Tuning

Exercise 3.3  m. 188 Reference Tuning
Excerpt 3 is included, not because of the difficulty, but to demonstrate the harmonic practice technique. An analogous passage occurs in the recapitulation, in mm. 313 - 15 — it is particularly helpful to compare the two passages in practice, to help define the differences for the ear and hand. The two statements are quite similar, and it is easy to accidentally play the wrong one in context since the orchestra plays the soloist in each time. There is no physical gesture leading into the passage to help mentally connect to the preceding material, so a conscious decision has to be made. Again, the same practice procedure works for both excerpts.

When leaping across the strings with as many shifts as this passage entails, the hand shape is often lost — causing intonation issues as the passage progresses. Turn the arpeggiated line into double-stops to check that the entire arpeggio is in tune with itself, as demonstrated in Exercises 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3. You can also use an external drone (such as a drone CD, or a digitally-produced drone on a metronome/tuning device) for the same process. In mm. 186 - 88, I used an A drone for all three runs, since they are all part of an A7 chord.
Movement I: mm. 261 - 263

Excerpt 4  mm. 260II - 65

Exercise 4.1  mm. 261-63 Bass Voice Alone

Exercise 4.2  mm. 261-63 Bass Voice with Ghost Shifts

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The challenge of Excerpt 4 lies in the coordination of the offset slurs. While the chords change on the beat, the bowing does not match this pattern. Additionally, the intonation of the chords is hard for the ear to grasp, especially in the higher positions of the cello where overtones are less present. I again deviate from the fingering shown in Excerpt 4, in the last beat of m.262 and first of m.263, which is reflected by the fingering in the example exercises.

Begin by simplifying the passage into singular voices, starting with the bass voice (Exercise 4.1). Start by using the easiest fingering to find the desired pitches and train the ear, then practice using the performance fingering in the exercise. Exercise 4.2 demonstrates the same voice with the ghost shifts required for the position changes. This includes placing the thumb down on the A-string in the third measure of Exercise 4.2, which will change the angle of the hand. Then the upper voice is practiced with the same procedure in Exercise 4.3 — first a simple fingering, then the performance version. In Exercise 4.4, both voices are included. First ghost the upper voice, silently fingering the A-string while sounding the D-string. Reverse the ghost and sounding roles of the voices, and then attempt both voices sounding together.
Take note of which voice holds the lowest finger for each chord. The lower voice primarily controls this passage, but it does switch when the thumb is used on the A-string on the downbeat of m. 262, and then on beats two and four of m. 263. Either lowest finger or the thumb will be in charge of timing the shifts, and so that finger is where the mental focus must go. To coordinate the bowing, I suggest playing the passage first as written rhythmically, but without the slurs. Then try the passage as printed, but very slowly, gradually working towards the desired tempo.
Movement I: m.266

Excerpt 5  mm. 266-69

Exercise 5.1  m. 266 Grouping and Bass Voice Alone

Exercise 5.2  m. 266 Alternating Voices

Exercise 5.3  m. 266 Chunk Grouping 1

Exercise 5.4  m. 266 Chunk Grouping 2
Though short, the impressively virtuosic gesture in Excerpt 5 requires a commitment of conscientious practice to master. Again, robust thumb strength is required, which takes time to build before there is any hope of accuracy. Chromatic octaves also require an astute understanding of the gradual change of the hand shape, as the hand moves from uncomfortably unhinged (in 1st position) to crammed together (at the top).

Begin by isolating the thumb voice, to simplify the passage. It is easy to lose track of the sequence of notes since every note is aurally the same distance away, so in the early stages devise a grouping for counting. Both of these devices are demonstrated in Exercise 5.1. Use the same for the upper voice, which is actually written alone as an ossia in Excerpt 5. Next play the lower voice again, ghosting the upper voice silently. Occasionally check in with the upper voice, to test if the hand shape relatively close. Then try reversing the roles by sounding the upper voice and ghosting the thumb. Exercise 5.2 begins to test the voices together, though not simultaneously. More strength and weight are required to depress both strings simultaneously, so this version is easier on the hand. Use slow to moderate tempos.

Once that version is consistent, chunk a few notes together at a time, as in Exercise 5.3 and 5.4. At this point, the work is still slow. Lastly, use a similar grouping approach, but at tempo, to build up to the full gesture. Use small bursts of high energy to test portions in context of the desired tempo. In the end this is a quick two second moment of music, though if poorly executed it is one most listeners will remember after the performance.

I recommend $6 + 6 + 4 + 3$ rather than ending $3 + 4$. Ending in a triplet facilitate a slight stretch in time, which helps in finding those last three high intervals. The alternative instead crams even more notes into a smaller amount of time, and it becomes harder to hear the change in pitch.
Movement I: mm. 332 - 33 and 334-35

Excerpt 6  mm. 329 - 335

Exercise 6.1  mm. 332 - 33 Shifting Outline

Exercise 6.2  mm. 332 - 33 Harmonic Tuning

Exercise 6.3  mm. 334 - 335 Voice Isolation
In the closing material of the first movement, the music changes every two to four measures, providing an array of virtuosic techniques to be accomplished in a short amount of time. It is like a villain throwing deadly obstacles at a heroine as she nears her victory, in increasing intensity, and the heroine is expected to prevail over each obstacle without breaking stride. In this segment of the first movement coda, we will address one excerpt (Excerpt 6) with two different challenges: mm. 332-33, and mm. 334-35.

The first challenge is a descending run with complicated shift timing and dissonant intervals. I suggest a fingering with fewer shifts, reflected in Exercises 6.1 and 6.2. Begin by isolating the melodic line and determining the shifting timing, as seen in Exercise 6.1. Once the shifts are in place, the passage can be transformed to
harmonically tune the fingered notes in relation to the pitches played by the thumb. An example of this process is demonstrated in Exercise 6.2. A logical next step would be using an add-a-note or add-a-group process improve coordination and agility.

The second challenge is a series of ascending double-stop sixths and tritones. Similar to previous examples already discussed, start by isolating the voices — first using a simple fingering, then the performance fingering notated in Exercise 6.3. Two rhythm variations are suggested in Exercises 6.4 and 6.5, which are meant to challenge the rapidity and timing of the shifts of the upper voice. Part of what makes this passage particularly hard is the fact that the upper voice alternates between creating sixths and tritones with the lower voice. Exercises 6.6 and 6.7 isolate those intervals, focusing on intonation of those intervals separate from one another. Next, play the passage with all of the voices, but in the rhythmic patterns seen in Exercises 6.4 and 6.5. Practice in a variety of rhythms and tempi to work the passage from all angles. Lastly, use add-a-note to bring the passage up to full speed.
Movement II: mm. 69 - 73

Excerpt 7    mm. 66 - 78

Exercise 7.1    mm. 69 - 73 Thumb Melodic Outline

Exercise 7.2    mm. 69 - 73 Double-Stops #1
While the majority of the second movement is straightforward — compared to the outer movements — Excerpt 7 requires a more complicated practice approach. It is hidden amongst all of the black on the page, but the melodic line of the passage is actually the same as the second theme presented earlier in the movement, mm. 42 - 49.\(^\text{12}\) To make this connection to the previous material obvious, it is important to bring out this melodic line. It also lessens the difficulty of the passage to play the notes with this hierarchy, allowing all of the secondary notes to become less forced and vibrant. That said, the passage is a finger-twisting puzzle, constantly changing position, hand shape, and string.

\(^{12}\) This melody has an extra-musical significance, which is discussed in Chapter 5.
Simplify the passage by locating the thumb melody, as illustrated by Exercise 7.1. First use a simplified fingering for comparison in first position, then use the performance fingering, checking all shifts for efficiency. There are two other voices hidden in the trilling motif of each beat. Exercise 7.2 demonstrates the thumb voice with the highest voice, or the notes which occur on the A-string, which are primarily sixths in relation to the thumb. Alternatively, Exercise 7.3 is the highest voice with the middle notes, forming fourths. Fourths are exceptionally difficult to tune on the cello, so this exercise is likely to be more difficult than Exercise 7.2. While none of notes will sound concurrently in context, the relationship will be heard by the listener — these two exercises, Exercises 7.2 and 7.3, ensure that the tonal relationship is solid.

Additionally, Exercise 7.4 is an example of an initial transposition of the passage from the A- and D-strings to the G- and C-strings. As the hand shape changes frequently, this is a way to test that the internal knowledge of those changes is committed to memory. The entire exercise is not written out entirely, since this should be a mental exercise accomplished without the music. It would be useful to review the exercises of Exercises 7.1 - 7.3, transposed over one string (to the G-string), in preparation for Exercise 7.4.
Movement III: mm. 49 - 56

Excerpt 8  mm. 40 - 59

Exercise 8.1  mm. 48 - 52 Thumb Voice Alone with Simplified Rhythm

Exercise 8.2  mm. 48 - 52 Thumb Voice with Ghost Shifts
Exercise 8.3  mm. 48 - 52 Double-Stops High and Low

Exercise 8.4  mm. 48 - 52 Double-Stops High and Mid

Exercise 8.5  mm. 48 - 52 Double Stops All Voices

Excerpt 8 was chosen for its complexity as well as the athletic use of the thumb in the upper register. Again, passages such as this require time to build the appropriate strength; until the left hand is resilient, it will be hard to achieve accuracy in the initial stages of practice. Thankfully, the passage is not long, and the bowing matches the pattern of the left hand.

First identify the role of each voice/finger. The role of the thumb is shown in Exercise 8.1, with a simplified rhythm for study. Exercise 8.2 shows that the thumb is once again in control of the position changes, determining the timing of each shift. The primary challenge of these shifts is that they do not take place on the beat — they are
right before the “and” of the second beat. While difficult to wrap the mind around, it is for the benefit of the notes on downbeats of the bars which follow. It is easier to shift in-between the repeated notes of the second beat, with the aural guide of a repeated note to indicate if the shift was successful. There is a nano-second of rest for the shift, whereas there is none at the end of the bar.

Exercises 8.3 and 8.4 demonstrate the process of pairing different voices for intonation purposes. Finally, Exercise 8.5 includes all of the voices in the passage, but maintains the simplified rhythm and ghosts of the off-set shifting pattern. Exercises 8.3 - 8.5 are the daily exercise I use for warming-up this passage, all the way through to performance.
Movement III: mm. 177 - 86

Excerpts 9 mm. 176 - 87

Exercise 9.1 mm. 177 - 83 Double-Stop Reference Tuning

Exercise 9.2 mm. 185 - 86 Melodic Outline
The first challenge of Excerpt 9 is clear: agility. Yet that agility is demanded in conjunction with whipping string crossings and pitches that belong in the same chord (and therefore must relate well to one another). It is very obvious to a listener when the intonation slips in this passage. As the passage climbs into the upper register, a series of shifts on the same finger is required. The passage continues past what is shown in Excerpt 9, though it is similar material, so the solutions presented for mm. 177 - 86 are applicable.
To start, Exercise 9.1 demonstrates the use of harmonic tuning using reference points on the instrument for mm. 177 - 84. A drone would also work in this section, choosing the tonic or fifth from the chord progression for every chordal group: Bm — DM — B♭M — FM — FM. For the next two bars, in the upper register, I suggest using the same process of outlining the shifts as used by previous examples — the melodic outline is shown in Exercise 9.2. To practice the successive shifts in these two bars, three rhythmic variations are presented in Exercise 9.3, 9.4, and 9.5. Finally, Exercise 9.6 is an example of the progressive grouping for use in the entire passage — though the example is specifically of m.185. Gradually adding the first note of a shift, then the accompanying notes on that beat, allows the ear to focus on each new addition. This process is a mixture of add-a-note and add-a-group which works well for passages of this nature. All of the agility exercises — Exercise 9.5 - 9.6 — can be practiced with separate or slurred bows, which will focus on different aspects.
Movement III: mm. 393 - 96 and mm. 401 - 404

Excerpt 10 mm. 376 - 424

Exercise 10.1 mm. 393 - 96 Melodic Outline with Shifting Rhythm
Similar to the coda of the first movement, Excerpt 10 runs the gauntlet of virtuosic techniques. I will focus on the solutions for two specific passages — mm. 393-96 and mm. 401-04 — though it bears mentioning that the entire passage shown in Figure 10.1 benefits from slow practice. It is an exhausting passage in context, and is followed by a section of high register melodies and softer colors, which require a great deal of control. At this point over 30 minutes of the concerto has passed — you will be tired when it comes time to play this page of diverse material. Therefore it is imperative to practice this entire passage slowly, watching for all opportunities for release and economy of motion.

In the first trouble spot, focus first the rhythm of the shifts, as seen in Exercise 10.1. A fingering which utilizes fewer shifts is recommended in the exercises. The bowing lines up with the strong beats of each measure; however, the pitch changes are off-set. Eliminating this issue through simplification, focusing on the melodic outline, allows the ear to focus on the shifts alone. Exercise 10.2 suggests an alternate rhythm for the passage that allows the patterns of the right and left hands to come together. The next
step (not shown) would be to play the passage with the printed rhythm, but without the printed slurs, and progressively raising the tempo. When adding the slurs back in, start again super slow, to feel the connection between the two hands. Alternate between slurring and separating the passage, comparing the clear note changes of the separate bowing with slurred version.

The final selection requires an asymmetrical pattern for the left hand, which does not match the bow. It is quite unpredictable; Exercise 10.2 highlights the alternate hand shape with the dotted arrows below the staff. Practice using accents on the notes to indicate the hand shape changes, which are also shown in Exercise 10.3. This procedure will plainly define each shape change in practice.
CHAPTER 5: Practicing Interpretation

“The musician who has surrendered his will to tradition has abandoned the possibility of keeping the tradition alive.” — Charles Rosen

“The artist must have a technique that includes invention and originality, not just command of materials.” — Joseph Bassin

The topic of interpretation is vast and polarizing. There are many ways to teach, enact, practice, and perceive it. To describe all of the interpretive issues of the Dvořák Cello Concerto would take up an entire document on its own; however, interpretation needs to be a part of and discussion of practicing and technique. One of the objectives of this research is to refrain from preaching a specific interpretation of the concerto. To remain within the scope of this document, this chapter will only address the ways in which interpretation affects practice, and is practiced in concerto study. This will include issues within interpretation that drive the practice process, such as the custom of teachers bequeathing concerto interpretation to students, and the multiple inhibiting pressures of “The Concerto”. This chapter will also explore the practice activities that actively encourage interpretive inspiration and creativity outside of practicing mastery of the text: academic research, active listening, and imagination exercises.
Issues in Interpretation

The first issue concerning virtuosic concerto interpretation, is the tradition of passing down conventional specific interpretations of concerti. Feeding students interpretations of the Dvořák concerto bar by bar might solve immediate issues and enable the student to perform in the lesson, but this practice is not teaching the student to make these decisions independently in the future. Melissa Silverman asserts that, “It seems fair to say that a preoccupation with what ‘should be’ can lead a teacher to neglect their students’ basic democratic freedoms. Living and working in a democratic context requires that people exercise their freedoms in relation to moral and ethical responsibilities.” The teacher in this situation may not be aware, but they are doing their student a disservice. Giving only the answers and never explaining the process does not prepare students for making their own decisions; and those decisions are what makes each artist unique.

Besides, in both of these situations, what is the student actually learning? Can the student duplicate the process being demonstrated to them, and use it as a model for their own practice? Will this information help the student make interpretive decisions in the future, when studying another concerto on his own? The format of bestowing interpretation without explanation skips the most important step: deciding what one wants to say, before deciding how to say it.

Many musicians can relate to the frustration of the following scenario: a lesson or masterclass where minute details are adjusted through numerous numbing repetitions, and the instructor exclaims: “THERE! That’s it! Isn’t that better?” Only the difference is not clear. Not given a chance to understand the chain of decisions behind the results, the student might not hear the differences anymore, let alone understand the process which carried him there. A highly trained artist-teacher already has the decision-making

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process written into her mental hard drive, and unless she are sharing that process with the student — a process that is obvious to the teacher — then how will the student invent his own process? Cutting straight to the interpretive results does not benefit the student in the long run.

There is an alternative: share the process with the student. Guide through the problem to the answers, rather than deliver solutions as soon as issue arise. When sharing interpretive solutions, frame them with conditioning information: what is the artistic or intellectual impulse that is creating these changes? Or — what is it about the phrase that needs help: execution, clarity of idea, or inflection? Artists must be trained to ask these questions of themselves as they develop their ideas, or they might later find themselves incapable of making decisions. Similar to the purpose of building a personal method of practice, young artists must prepare themselves to make interpretive decisions independently.

Another issue which one will face when studying and performing the Dvořák cello concerto is back-seat interpreting. Due to its long-standing popularity, most listeners have a preconceived idea of the concerto. In the same frustrating manner that passengers in the back seat of a car (the listeners) are often certain they know a better route to the intended destination then the driver (the soloist), listeners are often turned off by an interpretation that deviates from their memory of the work, simply because it is not what they know to be the “right way.” In this concerto, and many others, performers are punished for not delivering the expected, as explained by Leah Hagel:

When composers push these boundaries, musicians often resist playing their works due to either the increased difficulty or unfamiliarity. In the same way, performers can stretch the limits of convention with unusual playing styles. For
doing so, they are, at times, criticized for not delivering exactly what the audience is accustomed to hearing.²

However, attempting to perform in a way that would please this kind of audience is a lose-lose situation. It is impossible to please every interpretive perspective in the audience, and catering to one perspective will alienate the others. There will *always* be someone in the audience who thinks that you, the artist, are wrong. There are no footnotes or supertitles to justify decisions to listeners in performance; the performance must be able to speak for itself.

At this point, we have discussed two expectations artists might feel compelled to honor when making interpretive decisions: the audience, and the instructor. These unhelpful pressures are part of a larger inner demon that I refer to as “The Concerto.” I have felt the stress of The Concerto for many years, though it was not until recently that I realized it was not one beast of expectation but many smaller judgmental monsters. An artist cannot be faithful to all of these pressures: the audience; the instructor; the composer’s intent; the concerto chimera fed by general perfectionism; and the artist’s own interpretational ideas. The Concerto always felt like one overwhelming force of *should* and *should not* to me. Having parsed the beast into identified smaller monsters, I am able to dismiss or work through each pressure when it starts to negatively drive my practice.

Of all the monsters, I feel that two are valid pressures that can be constructive if attended to carefully: the artist’s own interpretational ideas, the composer’s intent. While not every idea will be brilliant, an artist’s original ideas create the unique statement she will make in performance. The composer’s intent can inspire artists to make their own decisions; knowing the passionate conviction Dvořák held for his own musical ideas (described in the following *academic research* section) encouraged me to

² Hagel, 27.
search for my own interpretation of the final coda. However, if adhered to too strictly, then paying fidelity to these forces can be limiting. Or in the worst case, these ideals can turn back into mental monsters of expectation.

Chapter 2 previously introduced the pressure an artist might feel from a *concerto chimera*. The idea of a “correct,” perfect concerto interpretation is a mythical rendition greater than reality: a perfect, ideal version of the concerto held on a pedestal high above human ability, where no mere mortal may alter or mar it. The idea lingers that if an artist pays proper respects to the concerto — if she is smart enough, good enough, and *deserving* enough — she might be worthy of reaching it. Bruce Adolphe cautions against this mindset:

> If you revere or worship a work as if it were a holy relic, you will not be able to get your hands on it or sink your teeth into it. A great work will survive your experiments. In fact, you will love it all the more when you can see it without the halo you have placed above it.³

If the objective in studying and performing was truly to immortalize the perfect account of the concerto, then why are we still trying? The feat of concerto study is difficult and long, so why bother when the the concerto already exists in our favorite recordings? Dozens of fantastic recordings running the gamut of interpretation are preserved in digital memory, and with modern technology can be revisited at a moment’s notice; many of which are digitally enhanced to remove human mistakes, contributing to the myth of the concerto chimera through unrealistic perfectionism.

Yet we are still trying, because the perfect versions of the concerto that live on in a listener’s unreliable memory and in enhanced recordings, are *not the point*. The act of an individual engaging with the concerto brings it to life. Silverman relates this phenomenon to the act of reading poetry: “A reader’s engagement and involvement with

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a text is what ‘makes’ poems. In other words, a poem is not something that exists on the printed page; it is something that happens at the intersection – at the joining – of a reader and a text." This connection is why cellists across the country begin work with the Dvořák and other warhorses of the standard repertoire every year: they are engaging in the music with the hope of putting their own voice to the work, in a way that only they can.

Rather than a fixed entity which exists in only one form, created the moment Dvořák put ink to paper and delivered to the world in 1895, consider the Dvořák Cello Concerto as a holistic work: an ever-changing work which exists in a timeline that has, and will continue to, survive long beyond our time. Each artist contributes to this timeline, presenting his or her version and statement on the concerto. Silverman suggest that:

To be able to connect with the essence of a work, the performer needs to understand himself, to explore his own emotions, and get in touch with his inner life and musical imagination. The artists uses her intelligence and imagination to understand the larger historical and aesthetic context of the work to be performed.\footnote{Silverman, 104.}

Part of embracing this outlook, is connecting with the timeline of the concerto through research. Soak up aspects of the concerto beyond the text of the score, following any genuine paths of inquiry that come up. Descriptions of these activities are in the following section.

\footnote{Adolphe, 7.}
Practice Informing Interpretation, Informing Practice

As mentioned earlier, it is unhelpful to mention practice without interpretation. This is because the way one practices will affect the interpretation — practicing with musical purpose changes the way one plays, and in turn the interpretation. It is a perpetual cycle: interpretive principles inform the practice process, and the practice process is how one enacts interpretive ideals. So what are some of the ways one can pursue interpretation in practice? We will investigate three areas of interpretation-enriching practice activities: academic research, active listening, and imagination exercises.

Academic Research

Due to its popularity, there is wealth of scholarly Dvořák Cello Concerto research for curious artists to discover. Faced with a mountain of informative research, it is important to ask: what kinds of information actually inform practice and interpretation? Two types of academic research have the most impact on concerto study: studying the formal relationships within the composition, and contextualizing the concerto with historical research. Benefits of each academic practice, as well as suggested sources to begin personal research, are described below.

Pursuing at least a general understanding of the form and structure of the Dvořák concerto certainly affects interpretation and practice. For instance, knowing that thematic material in the exposition of the first movement returns in a related key in the recapitulation influences how practice time is delegated to each passage. Realizing that the opening solo statement returns in many permutations and keys throughout the movement could inspire a reflection of the different moods of each statement — how will the music progress through these transformations? Or should each iteration adopt
traits of the first statement, to aurally connect them? The point of these lines of inquiry is not to find the “right” answer, but the inquiry itself.6

Closely related to the investigation of form, is general historical research. Putting the concerto in a historical context can illuminate aspects of compositional style, or purposeful extramusical meaning intentioned by the composer. Deciding which information has interpretive meaning is highly subjective, and is for each artist to decide.

Two revealing points of information affected my approach to the concerto. The first is Dvořák’s working relationship with cello virtuoso Hanuš Wihan. There were many revisions of the concerto, including suggestions by Wihan which resulted in some of the more virtuosic passages: the sextuplet passage, for example. Wihan also requested the addition of a cadenza, which Dvořák was firmly against. In a letter to his publisher, Simrock, Dvořák expressly requested that concerto was the remain exactly the way he was sending it (including some of Wihan’s edits, but not the cadenza). Dvořák even described the poignant mood he was trying to accomplish musically, defending his ideas to his own publisher. He firmly ended the statement by adding, “This was my idea, and I cannot abandon it.”7 Dvořák would not be swayed, and was resolved to preserve his musical intention for those sections. What this exchange tells me is that Dvořák was entirely in control of the concerto and that the result is a true representation of what he wanted it to be, musically. Additionally, the fact that so much of what I was struggling with in the concerto was not Dvořák’s original intent, was encouraging. Not to say that I

6 I suggest two sources for starting an investigation of the concerto’s form: first, the Cambridge Music Handbook: Dvořák Cello Concerto by Jan Smaczny (1999). It contains detailed analysis of the forms and melodies employed in the work, as well as a chapter of thoughtful interpretations of the score. I also recommend the DMA Document by Yali You, A Historical Overview and Analysis of the Cello Concerto in B minor, Op. 104 by Antonin Dvořák. Besides delivering what the title promises, You compares the concerto to other works in the genre: all concerti, string concerti, and the other Dvořák concerti.

7 This information is repeated in many sources, including the Preface of the C.F. Peters critical performance edition based on the composer’s manuscript. The letter can be found in Antonin Dvořák: Letters and Reminisences by Otakar Šourek, 184-85.
devoted less attention or value to these sections, but it made sense to know that these passages were the result of a virtuoso cellist conferring with the composer. If a professional race car driver is involved in the development of a sports car, the vehicle will be built differently; when a virtuoso cellist is involved in the compositional process a cello concerto is going to reach a different level of difficulty. This knowledge also helped me come to terms with the possibility of playing the alternative ossia passages instead, knowing they were suggestions by the composer, instead of an editor’s version crafted for a less-accomplished student cellist.

The other historical fact I found compelling was Dvořák’s use of one of his older compositions as a theme in the second movement. Dvořák included a variant of the song “Lasst mach allen” [“Leave me alone” - “Kéž duch můj sám”] as the second theme. It appears briefly again in the third movement as a concertmaster solo, and as motives throughout the achingly beautiful coda. The song was a favorite of Dvořák’s one-time piano pupil, sister-in-law Josefina Kounicová. Many sources state that the use of this theme was meant to be an homage to Josefina and was an indication of Dvořák’s heartbreak after her death. While we cannot know for certain, the important fact is that the song is quoted in the concerto. I hunted down a score and recording of the original song, and I was surprised to hear the familiar melodic shape of the second movement theme sung by a voice. It has a very different mood than the one I had imagined for the theme in the second movement, with a beautiful soaring lyricism.

8 Most critical performance editions, including the C. F. Peters and the Breitkopf & Härtel editions, include scholarly preface material; these prefaces are a good place to begin historical research. Again, the Cambridge Music Handbook: Dvořák Cello Concerto is a wonderful resource, which in this case provides historical perspectives on Dvořák and the cello, influences that led Dvořák to compose the concerto, and compositional style. Finally, the DMA dissertation Cellists and the Dvořák Cello Concerto: the Labyrinth of Interpretation by Ching-Shin Ko contains a concise chapter on the life and history of Dvořák and a chapter regarding the genesis and composition — including discussion of Wihan’s involvement and the use of Josefina’s song.

9 This story is told in almost all of the sources listed in the Dvořák section of the bibliography — though I was actively referring to the Preface of the Breitkopf & Härtel critical performance edition.
Active Listening

The next activity meant for enriching interpretation is *active listening*. Most of the time listening is a passive activity, with music serving as a background to another activity. Even in a concert, listeners often do not consciously listen *for* particular characteristics, but rather the broad impressions of the performance. However, when studying a musical work, it is helpful to *actively* listen for specific elements, to draw conclusions on style and execution. Cellist Brinton Smith remarks that, “Some generalizations can be made from the recordings as a whole, but for other factors it is necessary to compare very specific points, in order to be able to truly understand the details of each performance.”\(^{10}\) The listener’s ear can be very forgiving when listening to an entire performance, compassionately ignoring small slips in intonation or accuracy. This section will explain various aspects of the concerto that one can explore through active listening, as well as provide suggested listening for the Dvořák Cello Concerto.\(^{11}\)

One way to understand the style of a composer is to immerse the ear in the sound world of the composer, choosing works which typify the composer’s style, and works within the same period of composition as the concerto. For Dvořák, this means works of a similar scale written in the years leading up to and following the cello concerto. This includes the larger orchestral works of the 1890’s:

- Symphony No. 8 in G Major, op. 88 (1889–90)
- Suite in A Major for orchestra, op. 98 (1895)
- The Noon Witch, op. 108 (1896)
- The Golden Spinning Wheel, op. 109 (1896)
- The Wild Dove, op. 110 (1896)

\(^{10}\) Brinton Smith, “The Physical and Interpretive Technique of Emanuel Feuermann,” Online thesis.

\(^{11}\) Examples will be provided in process, and the complete listening list is available in Appendix B.
I would also include Slavonic Dances, op. 46 (1878) and 72 (1887) — as it is one of his more famous orchestral works, and a prime example of Czech style. To more intimately explore Dvořák’s writing for the cello, I would also add the following chamber works including the string quartets and double-viola string quintet written in the same year:

- **Piano Trio in E Minor, op. 90 “Dumky”** (1891)
- **Piano Quintet No. 2 in A Major, op. 81** (1887)
- **Piano Quartet No. 2 in E-flat Major, op. 87** (1889)
- **String Quartet No. 14 in A-flat Major, op. 105** (1895)
- **String Quartet No. 13 in G Major, op. 106** (1895)
- **String Quintet No. 3 in E-flat Major, op. 97** (1893)

There is also a stand-alone work — the Rondo in G Minor for cello and orchestra, op. 94 (1893) — originally for piano and cello, which Dvořák himself arranged for cello and orchestra.

In addition to the composer’s style, it is beneficial to also acquaint oneself with the contemporaries which influenced Dvořák. This includes the Victor Herbert Cello Concerto No. 2, op. 30 (1984) — known as the piece that encouraged Dvořák to write for an instrument he previously believed was unsuitable for the concerto genre. Another famous Czech composer contemporary with Dvořák, was Bedřich Smetana (1824 - 1884): a bit older than Dvořák, but certainly an influence on the style of Czech composition. To round out the list of contemporaries, a general pursuit of the orchestral works of Johannes Brahms is suggested. Brahms is cited as a major influence on Dvořák on multiple levels. When listening, try to identify the similarities and differences between the two composers, to aurally define important elements of Dvořák’s style. Determining the traits of Dvořák’s style that make the music unique can inspire an artist to find those same attributes in the concerto. I make it my job as an interpreter to bring out those compositional quirks so that I can highlight them for my audience; it is the details that
make it the Dvořák Cello Concerto, instead of a concerto by Brahms or Herbert. Building a detailed interpretation will result in a nuanced and convincing performance.

Of course, there is also listening to the concerto itself. I strongly recommend listening to *multiple* interpretations, to gain a understanding of the wide variety of interpretation that exists. However, once earnest study of the concerto begins, I discontinue listening to the concerto unless I have a specific question to address: *is the text of the score actually represented in these recordings? What are the creative solutions others have invented for the most troubling feats of technical virtuosity?* This method is especially helpful when a question of technical execution arises in practice. Perhaps I want to hear various ways of executing the chromatic octave passage in the first movement, or determine how many (if any) cellists choose to perform the *ossia* passages.

*Imagination Exercises*

The final practice activities for expanding interpretation are *imagination exercises*. Bruce Adolphe’s book *The Mind’s Ear* is a collection of exercises designed to expand the imagination and creativity in musicians. As I read through the exercises, I realized that many of these could be modified for use with the Dvořák concerto to expand the imagination and draw the mind away from the worn paths of “traditional” interpretation to exciting new possibilities.

There is much to be gained by doing the exercises as originally presented in the book, though I have adapted a select few to relate specifically to the Dvořák Cello Concerto. The majority of these exercises are effective only if used *after* the initial phase practicing the text of the score, with at least basic understanding of the rhythm and pitch content of the concerto. Some require memorization for best use.
#1: Play the Dvořák Cello Concerto for Laughs

To break the illusion of the chimera concerto, choose a section (I recommend the opening solo statements of the first and third movements) and play it in a humorous way.

One of the favorite jokes in my undergraduate studio was to play the first movement’s opening statement as if it were from the Baroque era: changing the bow grip, adding decays on every long note, and with all of the stereotypical affect of what we perceived to be an up-tight musical style. In revisiting this joke as I told it to colleagues throughout the years, I’ve realized that executing this is actually quite difficult, requiring control and an understanding of style. If one is able to play a passage in a joking manner, with all the details of that style, the same skills are required to play it with the “appropriate” meaning.

#2: Tell Me Something—Anything!

Choose a passage from the concerto — something that might appear to have more technical than musical meaning (such as the long, noodling accompanimental passage in m240 - 256 in the first movement). The idea is to play the passage multiple times, imagining different scenarios each time with some sort of subtext. Most of these ideas will be unusable for formal performance, though you may surprise yourself. Invest meaning, not just the notes: playing with any sort of intention will be more interesting than playing emotionally flat — even if it is absurd.

First play the passage with no inflection or dynamics, as if it bores you. Next, play the same passage as if someone is forcing you, as if you hate the music. Then try again, as

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12 Based on Play the Moonlight Sonata for Laughs, Adolphe, 69.
13 Based on an exercise of the same name, Adolphe, 95-6.
if the music is nonsensical, written in a language you can’t quite understand. Play the passage in as many subtextual scenarios as you can imagine: the possibilities are endless.

#3: Single-Chord Improvisation

It can be difficult to imagine a creative character for a passage so incredibly iconic as the opening statement of the first movement. However, this theme actually undergoes a transformation throughout the movement; one that begins in the orchestral tutti before the soloist even enters. Use this exercise to explore the many possibilities for that moment.

Using the non-judgmental mindset of The Performer discussed in Chapter 3, imagine you are on stage. Imagine a B major chord — then play it, feeling way the cello reacts to this chord. As a mood strikes you, feel it — and then improvise using that mood and the B Major chord. Play as long as the mood lasts, without hesitation — and stop when the mood leaves you. I would also suggest using this in B minor, or even using the two-bar motive instead of only the single chord. Afterwards, reflect: what words would you use to describe the mood you embodied? What characterized each mood you experienced, and how did the music change with each mood?

#4: Improvisation/Composition

Choose a repetitive, symmetrical section — such as m110-14 in the first movement. Begin by playing the phrase as written. Then play the same phrase in a different tonal mode — such as B major instead of B minor. Next, play in the new mode

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14 Based on an exercise of the same name, Adolphe, 113.
15 Based on Bach Away—Improvisation/Composition Adolphe, 114.
again, but changing the tempo, dynamics, phrasing, and/or articulation. How surprising can you make this phrase? Step back occasionally and compare the results with the original passage. Experiment with all possibilities to further understand the choices that are already made by the text of the score — and those which are still negotiable.

#5: Hiding in Dvořák’s Music Room\textsuperscript{16}

Imagine you are a fly on the wall of Dvořák’s music study, listening to him play his own music. What would that sound like? He might stop or improvise a new section on the spot. How would he embellish? How would he play music of other composers — Brahms, Bach, or Beethoven? What is it about his style that is so strong as to come out in the performance of another composer’s music?

#6 Playing in the Dark\textsuperscript{17}

This is less a special exercise, and more of a practice technique. In order to open the ears, sometimes it is necessary to shut off the eyes. Practice passages or sections in the dark, memorized, tracking anything you might hear differently than in the harsh light of the practice room. Try not to judge, but keep track of the changes. Do you feel more free to take artistic liberties? Do some passages work better, or worse than you thought? Listening will be more acute, so take a chance to focus on sound, tone, clarity, articulation, and dynamics. For example, isolate the chords of the opening statement. These chords are often slammed through in an effort to crunch out the biggest sound: what is the quality of sound for each of these chords? How are you breaking the chords — is it different with each one? How does each chord follow the other? Be attentive to every aspect of your sound.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{16} Based on \textit{Hiding in Beethoven’s Music Room}, Adolphe, 120\textsuperscript{−21}.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Based on an exercise of same name, Adolphe, 74.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
#7: Converse With the Orchestra

There are many instances where the solo cello voice responds to or instigates conversation with other voices in the accompanying orchestra. Unfortunately, it is difficult to practice this aspect alone in the practice room, and most soloists have minimal time with the ensemble before performance.

To develop a sense of conversation between the solo line and other important voices in the orchestra, choose a passage featuring woodwind soloists (clarinets’ opening theme, flute responses in the quasi cadenza of the second movement); any response to orchestral tutti; or the duet moments with the concertmaster in the third movement. Imagine the music is a spoken dialogue in these sections — what might the words be? What is the conversation about? If you have a colleague you can pull into your practice room, ask them to play the passages with you, alternating who plays the soloist/orchestra role. Does the responding character agree, affirm, answer, oppose, or ignore the statement made by the first voice?

#8: Why Are You Performing?

For each of the following scenarios, choose a section of the concerto you find appropriate. The scenario should affect your performance as well. Try recording each of the passages with and without the following scenarios, to later objectively decide if there was any difference in your performance.

1. You have been asked by your favorite sports team to choose and perform the music as they hit the field at their next game. It is an important game, and it is your job to inspire them to try their hardest.

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18 Based on *The Debate for Two Players*, Adolphe, 85.

19 Based on an exercise of the same name, Adolphe, 101.
2. You have an ill family member that has lost hope. Use your performance to help them momentarily forget their sickness, and feel hope again.

3. Your friend has a major test in school tomorrow, and won’t stop worrying. Your goal is to distract her from the problem at hand, and help her laugh it off.

4. You are playing the concerto to a room of people who have never heard the cello, let alone Dvořák cello concerto before. Share this beautiful piece with them, showing everything the cello has to offer.

5. You are playing in a masterclass, in a hall filled with all of your colleagues and everyone you know who has played the concerto before. It is your job to convince them to listen to what you have to say, instead of how well you play the piece. You want them to hear the concerto as if they are the audience in described the previous situation (the ones hearing the concerto for the first time).

By no means comprehensive, these exercises are a starting point for exploring the potential for emotional truths in the concerto in a creative way. Many of the exercises pull the music away from the black and white of the score, helping realize the possibilities for personal expression. This practice process can help to distance one’s personal interpretive vision for the concerto from the various pressures of The Concerto.
CHAPTER 6: Conclusions

Many of the topics covered in this document are applicable to similar works in the repertoire. Other concerti of a virtuosic nature — such as the Shostakovich Cello Concerto No. 1, or the Prokofiev Sinfonia-Concertante — would also benefit from an approach similar to the one detailed here for the Dvořák concerto. The issues of patience, endurance, and mental focus in Chapter 2 are directly relevant to other long, technically and artistically demanding virtuosic works. The ethical concepts described in Chapter 4 — faith and honesty in practice, and the three mindsets of practice — are useful virtues for all forms of practice.

In fact, I would suggest that the overall design of this document could be a useful template for styles of music other than virtuosic concerti. By including a section on prerequisite technique, the unique practice process, a trouble-shooting problem solving guide, and a discussion on interpretive issues, one could, for example, approach the idiosyncratic practice of contemporary cello techniques. This format could also be applied to stylistically similar repertoire of other instruments. Lastly, the process of visually demonstrating exercises for practice explored in Chapter 5 could be a useful pedagogical tool across the cello repertoire. Some students have a difficult time visualizing this process without visual cues, and they would benefit greatly from this supplementary teaching tool. Each artist must develop the ability to construct their own exercises, to solve problems and create an efficient practice method.
This document is the product of years of reflection, study, and performance of the Dvořák Cello Concerto. Over time, my relationship with the work has developed into something unlike any other in my repertoire, similar to the lifelong connection many musicians feel with the unaccompanied works of J. S. Bach. An artist will perform some works only once or twice in their lifetime, without a chance — or perhaps a desire — to repeat the experience. However, the complexity of the Dvořák concerto invites introspective artists to pursue different avenues with each performance, bringing new perspectives of life with each attempt. This is one of the reasons why the concerto has remained in the standard repertoire for so long. Each new point of view breathes life into the concerto, contributing the greater timeline of the work’s existence. I wanted to develop an approach to learning the concerto that would guide young cellists down a contemplative path towards a personal method practice, to enable them to pursue their interpretational ideas. Each artist should be allowed the opportunity to put her stamp on the work by building a version backed by intimate knowledge of the entirety of the concerto — not just the text of the score.
Bibliography

Practice and Interpretation


Dvořák


APPENDIX A: Blog Posts

Dvořák Redux: Defining Creative Methodology

by Elisabeth Jeremica

As part of my preparations for a recital performance of the Dvořák Cello Concerto in b minor this coming April, I am reaching out to my colleagues near and far to gather our collective experiences in producing an artistic product. This work is part of an interdisciplinary ISP at The Ohio State University in Columbus, OH researching the creative methodologies employed by varying artistic fields to more clearly define my own.

Wednesday, January 29, 2014

Project Origins

At the beginning of my doctoral studies, my advisor and I compiled a list of musical, academic, and career goals that we hoped to tackle during our time together. We revisit them occasionally, as a way to focus our priorities each term. Publish to a major journal; take auditions; hone my performance focus; find a job, etc.. Yet there is one slippery goal that has been difficult to describe, and even more difficult to tackle: to clearly define the process by which I take a piece of music from zero to artistic product. This serves many purposes. One, I will better understand my own process so that I can be more efficient in my preparation. It can be frustrating to near the end of your study of a work, only to realize you skipped a pertinent, early step that will now cost you extra time. The other benefit is pedagogical. If I am to have any
I hope to produce intelligent, independent artists from my own future studio, I must clearly understand my process before I can help others build theirs.

I have therefore tasked myself with clearly defining this next goal, via the platform of this blog. The third (of four) recitals I will be preparing is a concerto recital performance of the Dvořák Cello Concerto in b minor this coming early April. It is a work I studied to the highest of my capabilities at the end of my undergraduate studies, but never felt I completely owned. This project is also in line with my prevailing goal of complete mastery and artistry at the instrument, which I am excited to pursue with the re-study of this work. Future posts will include ruminations on the issues I face with the practice and performance of this concerto, such as:

how does one decide the most efficient way to practice the technically demanding passages of the concerto to utterly reliable mastery;
how does one decide the proper sound for a particular theme;
how do we push past the decades of traditional interpretation without breaking the original intent of the composition;

and so on. I hope to garner a discussion through you, my varied readers, on all of these subjects - all in service of the initial question: what is the process by which (we) take a piece of music from zero to artistic performance? Whether your perspective is a musical one or not, I welcome the discussion of the issues you face in similar goals of artistry and a clearly defined voice.

Wednesday, February 5, 2014

Showy versus Difficulty: When Does Showmanship Impede Artistry?

Last weekend I had the pleasure of attending a live performance of the Dvořák Cello Concerto, right here in downtown. In the past I have enjoyed the recordings of this particular visiting soloist, and this would be my first Columbus Symphony concert. I had a clear objective in listening to this performance: what would he, the soloist, do with the piece? Puzzlingly, I found myself not drawn to this type of performance,
which led me to this next topic: showy performance, versus veritable difficulty.

Having attended the concert with fellow musicians, each of us voiced our immediate verdict at the intermission. I had much to say, but I realized I was having a hard time tracing the cause of my reactions. I knew I was being harsh, but why?

I started to question virtuosity. At what point do the histrionics of a performer start to negatively affect the perception of the performance? I clearly remember the first time this was an issue for me, as an audience member. It was a performance of Ravel's Tzigane, given by Joshua Bell and the Seattle Symphony. Until that point I had greatly enjoyed a few recordings by Bell, but seeing as how this was the pre-YouTube era, I had never seen him perform. I was completely distracted by near back-bends paired with extreme facial expressions, and I left the performance shocked. Is this what is takes to give a convincing performance? I wondered. I now understand that this is a style of performance that exists on a sliding scale all the way from gentle rocking to violent tornado, though with varying artistic results. Yet in my opinion the ultimate reason Bell's style is popular, and his concerts are well-attended, is that the artistic performance is still there. It can be hard to see visually, but there is ingenuity and creative risk in the recordings. Perhaps one can outweigh the other.

In this performance of the Dvořák there was a fair amount of physical showmanship, but that itself is not what bothered me. It was the fact that this virtuosic energy was applied towards the "simpler" aspects of the concerto (whipping the bow dramatically at the ends of phrases, or indulging in technically-straightforward melodies), while the difficult, virtuosic passages of the concerto where not pristine. Now I am by no means saying that 1) the best performance is one without any mistake, and we should therefore be practicing perfection or 2) I myself could at this very moment execute these beastly passages better. These are both noxious ideals pervading many reviewers of live performance, especially in this age of digital enhancement. My concern is that the virtuosic energy of the performance was in the wrong place. If the passages built to show off the soloist are serving their purpose, showing the mastery of the soloist, then trying to make the rest of the concerto seem more difficult isn't going to average out the performance.
This also runs up against the issue of virtuosic writing - that is, compositions suited for virtuosos. What is the difference between a work built purely to showcase the extremes of a soloist (a virtuosic vehicle) and one that is difficult, but also happens to have some very, very difficult writing - serious music? This is the essence of showy versus difficult -- what is in service of the musical work, and what is in service of, well, showing-off? Generally a work can be easily categorized by examining the orchestral accompaniment. A work such as the Prokofiev Symphonie Concertante for Cello and Orchestra, one that utilizes the cello and orchestra with equal vigor is firmly in the "difficult" category. A Paganini Violin Concerto that focuses primarily on the acrobatics of the violin is therefore more of a "showy" nature. While "showy" has a negative connotation, in this context it is simply a fact. It is a showy piece!

So what kind of work is the Dvořák Cello Concerto? I believe it is of the "difficult" category, for a few reasons. One, it begins with an involved orchestra introduction that lasts approximately 3 minutes, introducing not one but all of the major themes before the solo has a chance at them. Also, other single instruments of the orchestra are featured prominently: french horn, clarinet, and the concertmaster are some of the most important voices in this work. If the objective is to feature the solo line, then any attention drawn away from it would only hinder this goal -- which does not seem to be of concern in this case, with the solo cello line frequently taking a backseat to other voices in the orchestra.

The last clue, is the type of virtuosic passages. The virtuosity required for this concerto is very unforgiving -- frequently the most difficult passages are sometimes accompanimental in nature. For instance, there is a dreaded bit that dominates the second page of the International Edition solo part, that begins after the the cello states the pastoral second theme about 6 minutes into the first movement. It is delicate, finicky, and doesn't scream "LOOK AT ME!" Granted, the infamous line of technical writing that comes a little later in the development section certainly does demand attention, ending with quite an exit.

All of this is to say that the concerto itself is not built for the sole purpose of "showing off", but rather to be a musical work demanding considerable artistry. There are moments to be a virtuoso, and moments to be an artist -- and the two and blurred well in this concerto. This is where the energy - my energy - must go.
Monday, February 17, 2014

Practice Faith

“Sometimes you just have to have faith that it will get there."

Some parts of practice involve passages you simply have to figure out - pull it apart a little, inspect how it works - before you will be able to play it. I find this especially true for melodic passages, or sections with a vocal quality. I love this kind of practice. I feel confident in my abilities to make decisions in this kind of work, and look forward to experimenting with phrasing and color, searching for my own message.

Then there is the rest of practice.

Most of my work for this concerto so far has been what I can only describe as glacial. Each session I chip away at these complicated, finger-twisting passages, pulling them apart like the worst kind of etude work. All in the hopes that the slow, gradual addition of this work will eventually payoff in mastery of the passages.

A colleague described this kind of mindset as practice faith: you have to, in a way, suspend your anxieties and have faith that eventually it will all come together -- as long as you put in the work. Unfortunately, there is still no replacement for the work itself!

What kind of experiences have you had that might resemble practice faith? Or do you have another mindset that you find helps you maintain your sanity through the "scunt work" in your practice?

Thursday, March 13, 2014

recording practice

I have to come realize that I have a strong aversion to recording myself. Perhaps if I can articulate why, I might be able to understand the barrier and push past it: let’s try.

It’s not that I dislike sharing my craft with others - I enjoy performing, especially the sense of communication and camaraderie with the
audience. But that stage (pun unintended) is an example of a finished product, which hopefully reflects all of the careful thought I have put into the manipulation of my interpretation and mastery of the work. Recording during the process? Keeping evidence of the times when I cannot execute a passage? Sounds as enjoyable as a weekly physical exam: unnecessary and humiliating.

I used to diligently record, for a time -- though it was only a written record. In a way, I controlled what was recorded. Which is probably why I enjoyed this kind of record, feeling stable in my progress since I could literally see my progress.

Though I am unwilling to digitally capture the process - why? I initially wondered if I was trying to protect what Newman calls the "Creative Spark" -- is there some sort of magic that will die when I hit record? It sounds absurd, but we do behave differently when someone is watching (even if that someone is a blinking red light).

Yet there are so many benefits to recording yourself at all stages, especially visually. Try as I might, even after years of building body awareness I am still surprised by something I see in a video of myself. A slightly raised shoulder, a hitch on a difficult bow change, a sour expression on my face, a stiff upper body.

Then there is simply the act of recording. Putting yourself through the gamut this way, intentionally freaking yourself out, is powerful. It lets you know where you stand. Where are you strong, at this moment? Where are you weak? Where are you stagnant? Where does your attention waver? That last one was big for me last week. I recorded the first page of the concerto three times in a row, and was amazed at my inability to maintain focus. That page in particular is in sharp detail for me: I know it the best, and have some of the most specific details figured out. Yet I am too slow on the uptake to implement each of the elements right before they need to happen, which I have attributed to a lack of focus. For now, the best solution to change this I have is what I am already implementing: record, focus, break it down, and record again. So for now I have a goal of recording that first page at least every Saturday, if not more often.
There is one last attribute to this video documentation -- the fact we even can! There is a stubborn part of me, a very persuasive voice, that believes I shouldn't have to do this, since others before me were able to manage without it. This is ridiculous. Why not use all of the tools I have? I will only look back later and wonder, if I do not use everything in my power to make this a powerful performance.

What are your thoughts on recording, or documenting, your practice? How do you use recording (visual, aural, or even written notes) to supplement your process?
APPENDIX B: Listening List

Dvořák

Symphony No. 8 in G Major, op. 88 (1889-90)
Suite in A Major for orchestra, op. 98 (1895)
Slavonic Dances, op. 46 (1878) and 72 (1887)
Piano Trio in E Minor, op. 90 “Dumky” (1891)
String Quintet No. 3 in E-flat Major, op. 97 (1893)
String Quartet No. 14 in A-flat Major, op. 105 (1895)
String Quartet No. 13 in G Major, op. 106 (1895)
Piano Quintet No. 2 in A Major, op. 81 (1887)
Piano Quartet No. 2 in E-flat Major, op. 87 (1889)
Rondo in G Minor for cello and orchestra, op. 94 (1893)
The Noon Witch, op. 108 (1896)
The Golden Spinning Wheel, op. 109 (1896)
The Wild Dove, op. 110 (1896)

Contemporaries

Bedřich Smetana (1824 - 1884) — Má vlast [“My Homeland”] (1874 - 79)
Johannes Brahms (1833 - 1897) — Symphony No. 2 in D major, op. 73 (1877); Double Concerto in A Minor for violin, cello and orchestra, op. 102 (1887); Symphony No. 2 in D major, op. 73 (1877); Hungarian Dances (1869, 1880). [Originally for piano, Brahms only orchestrated Nos. 1, 3, and 10. Dvořák and others orchestrated the rest of the set of 21.]