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Melia Watras  
on Building a  
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Country-pioneer Roy Acuff's fiddle goes on display  
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## ABOUT THIS DEPARTMENT

Practice can be a frustrating experience when you're trying to learn a stringed instrument. Ever wonder what the most accomplished string players focus on during their daily practice regimen? Here is some advice—and encouragement—from an expert.



# HONESTLY ASSESS YOUR PRACTICE HABITS

Violist Melia Watras stresses knowing your tendencies, strengths, and weaknesses when developing a daily practice regimen

## What do you feel you need to do on a daily basis to maintain your skill level?

One part of my skill maintenance is focusing on what I do away from my instrument. Thinking and conceptualizing is important for me to keep me inspired. **Overall physical health is important.** I do Pilates, which teaches me how to use my body efficiently and makes me more physically aware. On the instrument, I pay a lot of daily attention to my basic sound production.

## Do you have your own daily routine of scales or technical exercises?

I start my practice day with open strings. This helps me build the connection between my arm and bow, so that I can feel that the bow is an extension of my arm. It also helps reinforce how to be as relaxed as I can, while getting maximum sound. **When I practice scales, I take them from the repertoire that I am currently working on.** This is something I learned from [violinist and Indiana University professor] Atar Arad.

**'There are no problems, only solutions.'**

## Do you still use études and study guides?

Though I no longer practice études as I did when I was in school, I use them with my students at the University of Washington. Some of the études I teach include Kreutzer, Lillian Fuchs, Paganini Caprices, and Garth Knox's "Viola Spaces." In addition, **I find Mimi Zweig's DVD, *String Pedagogy*, to be a wonderful resource.**

## Was there a particular teacher who was instrumental in developing your practice regimen?

Atar Arad. He had me extract scales from repertoire that I was working on, and use those as my daily scale routine. I would first practice the scale technically, making sure the sound, intonation, and facility were of the highest quality, and then I would try out

different types of colors, shapes, and phrasings. This gave me a specific goal of exploring diverse musical expressions in the scales that I worked on, while not forgetting to improve my technique. Above all, **professor Arad taught me to make sure that music-making leads the technique.**

## How has your daily practice regimen changed as you've advanced as a player?

I spend even more time on slow exercises, to focus on intonation and sound. This helps me to be able to get deeper into the world I want to create. **I also like to practice without my viola in hand.** Being able to have my imagination lead without any physical constraints is freeing. Part of my practicing now includes improvisation—I find that improv has very meaningful effects for me technically and artistically. It helps me make connections to the fingerboard that I hadn't thought of before. Often, after warming up with an improv, and then going to a written piece, I will see things in a different way.

## How do you know when you need to brush up on fundamentals?

**I try to maintain my fundamentals,** so that I don't have to brush up on something that gets rusty. It's like the old saying, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

## What advice can you offer about developing a daily practice regimen?

Know your tendencies, strengths, and weaknesses. **Good practicing comes from honestly assessing your playing as well as your habits,** and finding what works for you. Some players are morning people, others night owls. Some prefer long sessions, while others excel in shorter spans. Discover what your best conditions are for practicing, and as much as possible, stick to them.

Another useful tool is to track your work. I keep a practice log and schedule to make sure I'm budgeting my time well, and covering everything. It's easy for things to fall through the cracks.

*Melia Watras is a recording artist and performer, a soloist and cofounder of the Corigliano Quartet. She champions the works of living composers: commissioning, premiering, and recording numerous new works for solo viola and string quartet.*