

Fiddler's Shop Talk *

By Roy Johnstone

As with everything else in life, your mental attitude makes all the difference and fiddling is no different. There are as many different reasons for playing the fiddle as there are fiddlers. Everyone has their own twist on why they spend hours trying to draw a horsehair bow across the strings. I too, play for many different reasons: to make a living, to enjoy the company of other musicians, to watch with delight when someone gets up and dances, but mostly I play because I love it. Playing the fiddle is part of who I have become. It hasn't always been like that and at times I still have to remind myself to just appreciate the joy of making music. It's an ancient pastime and I believe it's a part of our genetic cultural make-up. For me music is as essential as air to our well being. So why do YOU play the fiddle? Your answer may seem obvious or even different from one day till the next, but whatever your answer, let it guide your practice.

So let's talk about practice. For many this word conjures up images of forced labour or detention after school. Practice is putting your motivation to play the fiddle "to work, or perhaps I should say "putting it to play". Both work and play can bring very meaningful rewards. To make your practice time enjoyable, you need to have a good space in which to practice, preferably in a well lit room where you won't disturb and you won't be disturbed (if necessary, a mute will help). Have all the stuff you need handy, music stand, tapes and CD's to play along with, etc. We are creatures of habit so if you can develop a regular routine for practicing all the better.

What to practice is a key question and here a good teacher will be very helpful but a good book on fiddling geared to your level will also be very useful. Here are a few pointers that I've picked up along the way to guide my practice. Loosen up before you begin playing, play slowly and listen closely to the sound of each note, stay as relaxed as possible, watch that your bow crosses the strings tangentially (at roughly 90 degrees), play double notes to check your intonation (eg. open G string with 3rd finger on D string), learn your scales and listen closely to other fiddlers. Playing the fiddle can be a lifetime pursuit so don't expect to play like the masters right away. Enjoy the ride as your playing evolves and improves little by little. Have fun, play with other musicians, and enjoy the experience of playing and practicing!

Till next time keep the bow rosined and the fiddle in tune!!!

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