

Otakar Ševčík's Op.18 as a Prescribed Method for Attaining Expert Performance

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Otakar Ševčík (1852-1934) remains one of the most influential pedagogues in the history of violin playing, not to mention a highly-accomplished soloist. Many of Ševčík's pupils also became leading players in their own right, including such figures as Jan Kubelík and Efrem Zimbalist. His most enduring influence, however, is the prodigious amount of technical material he published related to violin playing, which remains widely-utilized to this day. His later works, which consist of exercises targeted towards solving problems within specific standard violin repertoire, are of particular interest as they are less well known and rarely studied. The focus of this article, his Op.18, is a collection of this type of repertoire-tailored technical studies—written to aid the violin player in preparing for a performance of Brahms Violin Concerto in D major. Using Ericsson's "expert-performance framework" and literature addressing deliberate practice in musicians, this discussion elucidates the strong connection between Ševčík's Op.18 and behaviours associated with expertise acquisition and expert performance.

According to Ericsson, "new cognitive mechanisms are gradually acquired during the extended period and they mediate the superior performance, thus leading to qualitative differences in structure compared to untrained performance."¹ This assertion forms the basis of the expert-performance framework, in which expert-performance is defined as "consistently superior performance on a specified set of representative tasks for a domain without any age conditions."² The focus of the expert performance approach is to explain the "structure and acquisition of expert performance," with the central finding that "deliberate practice is the most promising proximal variable with a plausible mechanism for explaining change (improvement) of performance."³ Under this framework, the term deliberate practice is defined as "a highly structured activity, the explicit goal of which is to improve performance."⁴

Deliberate practice behaviours of musicians have been documented to a considerable degree by existing research. Drawing on the work of Smith, Lammers suggests that deliberate practice by musicians is largely analogous with the utilization of

¹ K. Anders Ericsson, "Why Expert Performance is Special and Cannot be Extrapolated from Studies of Performance in the General Population: A Response to Criticisms," *Intelligence* 45 (July-August 2014): 81.

² *Ibid.*, 83.

³ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

problem-solving skills, including problem identification, problem definition, problem analysis, diagnosis, alternative generation, and evaluation.⁵

In musical contexts, the ability to accurately identify errors is one such characteristic that has been shown to be a crucial aspect of deliberate practice. Similarly, the role of the teacher is vital in the mediation of deliberate practice, with their most important function being the effective teaching of problem-solving strategies, and fostering the student's ability to effectively apply these strategies on an independent basis through the use of creative thinking (which is also referred to as the generation of "candidate solutions").⁶

The importance of "alternative generation,"⁷ which consists of creating more than one solution to a given problem, is also identified by Ericsson et al.⁸ and Smith as a key characteristic of expert practice, as it facilitates attaining higher levels of performance compared to those relying on mere repetition.

The variables of quantity versus quality of practice are also a key issue in the literature on deliberate practice. While the literature appears to be preoccupied with assessing whether quality or quantity is the more determinative variable, it is sensible to suggest that expert performance is achieved through a combination of high quality (deliberate) practice, done over an extensive period of time (as suggested by Ericsson et al.).⁹

Practice structure is also identified as an essential component of deliberate practice for musicians. Multiple authors agree that expert performers structure the learning of a new work into three distinct periods in preparing the work for performance.¹⁰ The fundamental strategy effectively used by expert performers in this process is undoubtedly that of segmenting the score into smaller units in order to facilitate more targeted deliberate practice. The first period is marked by the selection of "performance features,"¹¹ shown by the literature to be crucial in the successful memorization of a work. The second stage, in which the mastery of technique becomes

⁵ See Will Lammers, "Factors Affecting Performance Proficiency: A Case Study Involving Intermediate Piano Students" (Masters Dissertation, Brock University, 2006), 13-15.

⁶ Gerald Smith, "Towards a Comprehensive Account of Effective Thinking," *Interchange* 32, no. 4 (2001): 367.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ K. Anders Ericsson, Ralf Th. Krampe, and Clemens Tesch-Römer, "The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance," *Psychological Review* 100, no. 3 (1993): 365.

⁹ Ibid., 370.

¹⁰ Kacper Miklaszewski, "A Case Study of a Pianist Preparing a Musical Performance," *Psychology of Music* 17 (1989): 95-109; Roger Chaffin and Gabriela Imreh, "A Comparison of Practice and Self-Report as Sources of Information About the Goals of Expert Practice," *Psychology of Music* 29 (2001): 39-69; and Aaron Williamson and Elizabeth Valentine, "Quantity and Quality of Musical Practice as Predictors of Performance Quality," *British Journal of Psychology* 91 (2000): 353-376.

¹¹ Chaffin and Imreh, "A Comparison of Practice," 42.

the main focus, is characterized in deliberate practice by the gradual lengthening of practice segments (that is, practicing gradually longer sections of the score). The shift in focus through these two periods leads towards a largely interpretive emphasis in the final period, resulting in practice runs of the whole work. The use of alternate practice methods, whilst not identified as critical to expert performance, are also shown to contain potential benefits. The two most useful alternative methods identified in the literature are mental practice and the use of recorded models.¹²

When considering the complexity, depth of information, and breadth of skills that expert performance requires, it is no surprise to find that a defining factor of effective deliberate practice is the performer building an elaborate knowledge base of practice strategies. As Hallam suggests, “practice will only become purposeful and self-determined when the pupil has a range of 'task oriented strategies' to draw upon.”¹³ The same can be said about expert performance. Sloboda states that expert performance “is the result of the interaction of specific knowledge of [a] piece . . . with general knowledge acquired over a wide range of musical experience.”¹⁴ Indeed, Ericsson suggests that “what distinguishes expert performers is mostly more and better-organized knowledge, which had to have been acquired.”¹⁵

With this in mind, let's now consider Ševčík's Op.18. Ševčík describes the work as “Elaborate studies and Analysis bar by bar to J. BRAHMS CONCERTO IN D-MAJOR with revised solo voice and complete piano score.”¹⁶ His preface to the work states as follows:

An analytical study of the separate parts of a work is essential to guarantee a safe reproduction of the whole. Only by these means technical, dynamic and other effects are to be gained.¹⁷

Further, Ševčík views this approach (analytical study) as a “criterion”¹⁸ for developing and sharpening the musical development of the individual. Ševčík reasons

¹² Roseanne Rosenthal, Mary Wilson, Madeline Evans, and Larry Greenwalt, “Effects of Different Practice Conditions on Advanced Instrumentalists' Performance Accuracy,” *Journal of Research in Music Education* 36, no. 4 (Winter, 1988): 254; and Steven J. Morrison, “The Use of Recorded Models in the Instrumental Rehearsal: Effects on Ensemble Achievement,” *Applications of Research in Music Education* 20, no. 2 (Spring-Summer, 2002): 21-26.
<http://journals.sagepub.com.ezproxy.library.uwa.edu.au/doi/abs/10.1177/875512330202000206>.

¹³ Susan Hallam, *Instrumental Teaching: A Practical Guide to Better Teaching and Learning* (Oxford, England: Heinemann, 1998), 140.

¹⁴ John Sloboda, *The Musical Mind: The Cognitive Psychology of Music* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1985), 94.

¹⁵ Ericsson et al., “The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance,” 397.

¹⁶ Otakar Ševčík, “Op.18 J. Brahms: Konzert D-Dur” (Brno, Czech Republic: Ol. Pazdírek, 1930), 1.

¹⁷ Ševčík, “Op.18 J. Brahms: Konzert D-Dur,” 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

that studying the “separate interval and analytic studies” thus allows the user “an inspired, absolutely perfect and ideal execution, rid from technical difficulties.”¹⁹ These comments strongly suggest that Ševčík conceived the exercises with expert-performance in mind.

In addition, Ševčík seems to be acutely aware of the role of the teacher in his conception of these exercises. It can be argued that the exercises themselves effectively function as a proxy in this role, remembering that the most important function of the teacher in deliberate practice is to equip the performer with practice strategies and the knowledge required to apply them effectively and in an individual manner. The parallels between the deliberate practice literature and Ševčík’s exercises are demonstrably strong in this area as he not only identifies the importance of fostering the need for individuality in solving problems and effecting musical interpretation, he critically acknowledges that the efficacy of his exercises is ultimately determined by the ability of the performer to engage with them meaningfully. This is evident from his comment noting that “good will, perseverance, and zeal are the soul of the work.”²⁰ Further, he remarks on the first page of the exercises proper that “it lies entirely with the pupil to treat each section according to [the] grade of difficulty resulting from it.”²¹

The edited solo part of Brahms’ concerto includes figure/bar markings used by Ševčík as an analytical overlay for referencing the segments of the concerto addressed by each set of exercises, consists of a mere nineteen pages (see, for instance, the marking D 8-20 in Figure 2). Ševčík’s exercises far eclipse this in terms of quantity, consisting of a monumental eighty-six pages in volume. This equates to four pages of exercises for every page of the solo part! Considering that the solo part also contains the orchestral tuttis, the level of detail inherent in Ševčík’s exercises becomes immediately clear. Indeed, Ševčík considers this level of detail to be a particular strength of the exercises, stating that: “the scrupulousness of the analysis shall not frighten the player, but rather awaken in him a desire for solving further problems, thus enabling him to distinguish the better the nature of the musically beautiful in its subtlest components.”²²

This attention to detail is consistent with the findings of much of the research discussed earlier, including that of Chaffin and Imreh, Miklaszewski, and Williamon and Valentine, who suggest that solving technical difficulties early in the process of preparation affords a more fluid and musically expressive interpretation in performance.²³ In addition to this, the sheer volume of material is strongly indicative of

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 5.

²² Ibid., 3.

²³ Williamon and Valentine, “Quantity and Quality of Musical Practice,” 371–72.

the use of alternative generation, regarded by Smith as characteristic of higher-order thinking and shown by the literature to be crucial in the implementation of deliberate practice.

Ševčík provides the following instruction: “Each section of the concerto should be played only when one has finished its relative study.”²⁴ By looking at the studies themselves, we can see that each ‘section’ in fact consists of around one to ten bars. This represents the use of segmentation by Ševčík, shown by the literature to be perhaps the most important technique used in deliberate practice. Further, each set of exercises can clearly be shown to evidence the key concepts indicative of higher-order thinking—including problem solving; problem identification; problem definition; problem analysis; diagnosis; alternative generation; and evaluation. Even from this brief initial perspective, the parallels between the literature on deliberate practice and Ševčík’s Op.18 are quite obviously strong. However, the true test of this approach cannot lie in theory but rather in performance, so let’s now look at a sample of his exercises from a practical perspective.

Figure 1 is taken from the third movement of the Brahms concerto and has been selected as an example for its high level of inherent difficulty. This high level of difficulty stems from the combination of constant shifting in both directions, string crossings, extensions (which consists of extending the fingers out of their usual span) and playing in very high positions, all of which have to be performed at a break-neck speed. It is perhaps no surprise to find that these ten bars are the subject of two pages worth of exercises in Ševčík’s op.18.

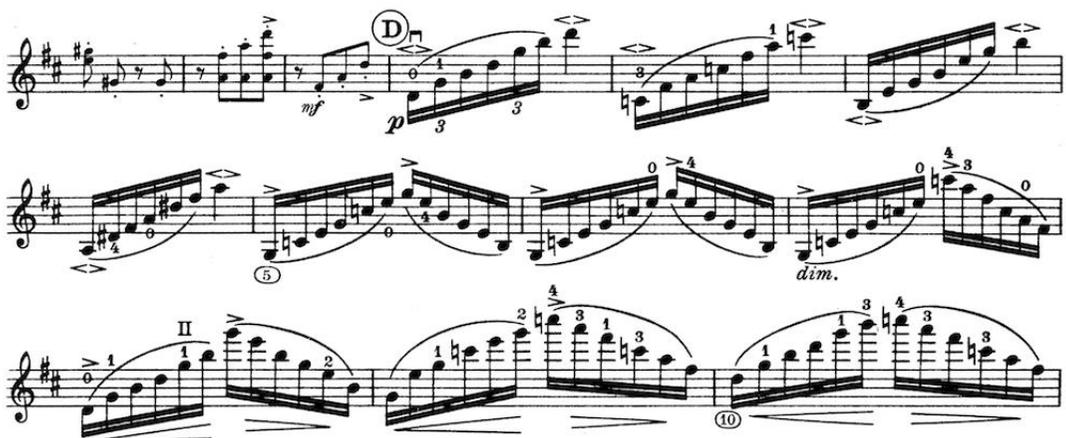


Figure 1. Allegro giocoso, ma non troppo vivace, from Brahms’s “Violin Concerto in D major, Op.77,” ed. O. Ševčík (measures D1-10)

²⁴ Ševčík, “Op.18 J. Brahms: Konzert D-Dur,” 5.

The first set of exercises, as shown in Figure 2, is typical of the approach in general, in which Ševčík reduces the solo part into a series of two-note intervals, which are then repeated once. Marked as “Interv.” by Ševčík, an abbreviation for interval studies, this type of exercise is regarded by Ševčík as “indispensible for developing precise intonation.”²⁵ Indeed, Ševčík almost always treats the solo passage using this method first, before continuing with more analytic, targeted exercises.

D 8 - 20

Figure 2. Ševčík’s “J. Brahms: Konzert D-Dur’ op. 18,” 67

Another characteristic clearly identifiable in these exercises, which perhaps best encapsulates the overarching principle of Ševčík’s methodology, is the isolation of technical challenges. In these exercises, each shift, extension and string crossing is isolated and played by the user in a slow, controlled tempo. This serves as a solid foundation, which is then built upon in subsequent exercises. After isolating every technical aspect and allowing the user to gain mastery over it, Ševčík then begins to combine multiple challenges within subsequent exercises, until the passage itself is mastered.

²⁵ Ševčík, “Op.18 J. Brahms: Konzert D-Dur,” 5.

D 1-9

Figure 3. Ševčík's "J. Brahms: Konzert D-Dur' op. 18," 68

The more complex exercises (an example of which is shown in Figure 3) are often labelled by Ševčík as *Anal.*, meaning analytic. In this case they begin by reducing the arpeggios of the first four bars into their harmonic essence. These arpeggios alternate between ascending and descending, which is in contrast to the solo part, in which they are all ascending. This is a clear example of the use of alternative generation by Ševčík. Following this, the top four notes of the arpeggios are then scrutinized (with the middle note present in both versions). After bars 5-7 are treated in a similar way, the format is visibly changed. Instead of common time, the exercises are now in compound 6/8, and utilize a repeated rhythm of a quaver, two semiquavers and another quaver. Aside from again representing the use of alternative generation, this sort of rhythmic alteration is frequently employed by Ševčík throughout his exercises.

Such strategies are utilized for different purposes throughout the exercises, but here, can be shown to serve a particular purpose. In this case, the use of rhythmic alteration allows for a mix of intensity within the following exercises. By combining slower rhythms with faster ones (i.e. quavers and semiquavers), the exercises consistently fluctuate between fast and slow challenge requirements. Remembering that this passage of the solo part contains a combination of string crossing, shifting, extensions, and playing in high positions, we can see that each of these challenges is present in these exercises, and each is represented in both the faster and slower tempos. If we look at the first bar,

for instance, we can see that the string crossing is done over a quaver, then the following two notes, of the semi quaver rhythm cover the first shift. Following this, the next string crossing is done again between two quavers, before the final string crossing is then played over semi quavers. A further advantage of this particular slow-fast-slow structure is that it allows time between each segment for the user to remain in control and calm while working through the full complement of exercises.

Another example of the use of alternative generation is also prevalent in Figure 4 below: namely, the use of retrograde combinations. This is perhaps most easily demonstrated by looking at the shifting exercises. In the solo part, the particular shift from e-g appears in the ascending version only, but here in the exercises, Ševčík makes a particular point of practicing the shift in its descending form. When repeated, this has the added effect of teaching the muscles in the arm the distance between the highest and lowest position, by juxtaposing one after the other. This saturation of information, in excess of what is required to execute a particular challenge or even passage, is also typical throughout the Ševčík exercises, and critical, in my opinion, to the overall effectiveness of the method.

Figure 4. Ševčík's "J. Brahms: Konzert D-Dur' op. 18," 68

The level of segmentation present in the exercises is worth noting, as is the level of specificity in notated fingerings. As discussed earlier, the research on expert practice suggested that the most successful performers used segmentation more extensively as the perceived difficulty of the music increased. Using Figure 1 as reference, if we consider

that bars D1-9 are covered by half a page of exercises, and that D10 itself is covered by the same amount of material, it is clear that this is also the case in the Ševčík exercises. The exercises for D10 are of further interest, as they are one of the few instances in which Ševčík provides an alternative fingering. Essentially, there are a number of different ways in which any particular passage can be fingered, and the particular technical challenges can differ considerably in type and scope depending on which fingering is used. It should be acknowledged that this is perhaps the source of the greatest limitation in Ševčík's exercises. That is, that the complete set of exercises is constructed around Ševčík's particular fingering, which may not be comfortable for every user, and indeed will in most cases not be for the entire concerto.

In summary, the techniques and concepts identified in Ševčík's analytical studies for Johannes Brahms Violin Concerto in D major have been shown to encompass many of the key characteristics indicative of deliberate practice, as represented by the literature. Thus, according to Ericsson's expert-performance framework, Ševčík's Op. 18 can be said to represent a prescribed method for facilitating expert performance of Brahms's Violin Concerto in D Major. Arguably, this analytical approach (used here, in considering Ševčík's Op. 18) could also be fruitfully applied in the evaluation of other key pedagogical works in the violin repertoire, and indeed other genres. What remains clear is that Ševčík's utilization of practice techniques and strategies is systematic and detailed to an astonishing degree, affording a fresh appreciation of his profound contribution to violin pedagogy. An analytical understanding of Ševčík's approach clearly merits further attention in light of his elegant alignment with the recent literature on deliberate practice, with which it precedes by almost fifty years.