

W. A. Mathieu writes beautifully about this in *The Listening Book*.¹ He says,

. . . you cannot achieve speed by speedy practice. The only way to get fast is to be deep, wide awake, and slow. When you habitually zip through your music, your ears are crystallizing in sloppiness. It is OK to check your progress with an occasional sprint. But it is better to let speed simply come on as a result of methodical nurturing, as with a lovingly built racing car.

Yet almost everyone practices too fast . . . We want to be the person who is brilliant. This desire is compelling, and it can become what our music is about . . .

Pray for the patience of a stonecutter. Pray to understand that speed is one of those things you have to give up - like love - before it comes flying to you through the back window.

When you play slowly you can much more easily notice and pay attention to the sounds you are making and the physical movements and positions that you are using to make them. How can you change and improve if you are not aware of these things?

To the extent that you can, you should practice playing well instead of playing poorly. This sounds ridiculously obvious. But the repetition of playing well is what builds the desired skills. Repetition of poor playing reinforces itself.

SOME WORDS OF WISDOM FROM MARTIN HAYES

Martin Hayes is one of the finest musicians, and he is deeply insightful and highly articulate about his art. In an interview in *Fiddler Magazine* he was asked how he chooses the pace for a particular tune. This was his response.

. . . I tend to *not* start out a maximum speed and maximum volume, but somewhere at a medium to slow speed and volume. When I want to heighten the expression into excitement or vigor, I can do that. I can strive upwards and outwards . . . I think it's foolish to start out at full speed and at full volume. You're eliminating all sorts of possibilities . . . Playing a tune at full speed would be like driving through a country road at full speed. You may get the excitement of driving fast through a country road, but there's a lot of little gaps and avenues and trees and houses and such that you miss along the way. And it's like that with a tune. There's all these little dips and hollows in the tune that are self-explanatory, but time should be taken to go through them slowly. They explain themselves, they interpret themselves. They almost show what should be done.¹¹

THE METRONOME: A GREAT TOOL

A metronome can be a great aid to slow, conscious practice. By keeping a steady beat for you, it frees up part of your mind which you can devote to deeper listening.

Let's say you are sitting down to practice long rolls, or a phrase of a tune. Use the metronome to help you find a comfortable speed at which you can play your best. Stay and play at that tempo for a while, listening to and reinforcing your best playing. When you are ready, increase the tempo just a notch or two and see how that feels. If the new tempo is too challenging, return to the slower tempo. If you can do fairly well at the new tempo, if it stretches you but doesn't break you, stick with it until it feels quite comfortable. Then stay there for a while before moving on to try a faster tempo. And so on.

When doing metronome practice and gradually increasing your speed, try this approach, too. Adjust the metronome faster by three notches and play there for a while if you can. Then adjust the metronome slower by two notches. Play there for a while and notice the differences in your playing and sound. Then increase by three notches, decrease by two, increase by three, decrease by two, and so on.

Don't be in a rush. It seems that our muscles learn more slowly than our minds, but muscle memory is very long-lasting and dependable. There are intriguing physiological reasons for this, which will be discussed a bit later in the chapter.

A metronome provides a rigid time reference which can be extremely revealing. For example, you want to gain control over your cuts so you can place them wherever you want them. It is easy to fool yourself into thinking that you