

At the beginning of a new school year, we are presented with a most tantalizing buffet of delectable musical possibilities. We are so enthralled by the menu laid before us that we want to indulge immediately and fully in everything that is available to us. We are passionate about our art and hungry to learn and grow as violists. Why shouldn't we avail ourselves of all of these delicious treats offered by our wonderful institutions?! We want to maintain the excitement we feel at the beginning of the semester throughout the entire course of study. In order to do so with success, joy, and good health, it is important that we pace ourselves sensibly at the buffet!

Depending on your age and your year in school, your violistic dietary needs will vary significantly. It is important to discuss with your major teacher what he or she thinks your priorities should be in terms of the balance between solo work and ensemble playing. If you are a freshman, for example, much as you would like to dive into everything you see, it might be important that you retool some aspects of your technique. In this case, playing in a lot of ensembles could be detrimental to the ultimate outcome you are seeking in terms of making technical changes; the majority of your time spent with the viola needs to be "you" time, as you focus on developing a healthier and more efficient technique. If you are an upper classman or graduate student and everything is functioning smoothly on the technical front, you could benefit greatly by exploring large bodies of repertoire and networking with your colleagues on a large scale. What better way than delving into an abundance of meaningful and challenging ensemble work? In other words, is this a semester best spent as an introvert, working at your own pace and responding to your own inner cues, or as an extrovert, collaborating and gathering intellectual and musical information?

Once that important strategy has been established, it is very important to commit to some serious time-management consideration, so that you are certain to achieve the goals you have set for yourself in terms of your development as a violist. As your calendar quickly becomes jam-packed with lessons, rehearsals, and classes, if you are not careful, the day is over before you know it and you have not fulfilled your obligations to yourself in terms of individual practice and self-care. It is not uncommon for freshmen to arrive at college never having been responsible for planning their own schedules. If you are new to being your own self-manager, planning your entire week out ahead of time can be very beneficial. Look at your class and rehearsal schedule for each day of the week and decide when and where you will practice and for how long. Add this to your written schedule so that you are just as responsible for showing up for yourself in the practice room as you are for showing up for class or a rehearsal. Actually planning which part of your lesson assignment you are going to practice during which practice segment is also very helpful. Of course, you must be flexible here, as once you delve into the work, you might find that something is taking more time to learn well, and something is taking less time to learn well. Be both vigilant and flexible in your practice. When doing a technical overhaul, it is very helpful to work on the new skill you are trying to implement often throughout the day, but for short periods of time. You will learn it more completely if your mind and muscles are fresh each time you approach it.

Included in your schedule should be some time for self-care. Playing the viola is also an "athletic" endeavor! If you want to do it to the best of your ability, you must commit to taking good care of yourself both physically and psychologically. (Of course, this is a good strategy for

a happy and healthy life anyway!) Having a regular warm-up/ cool-down routine of stretches, breathing exercises, and flowing movements before and after practicing is essential for good health and stamina, as is a regular exercise program away from the viola, which includes some combination of both cardiovascular and strength training and stretching. I find core strengthening work especially helpful for violists. Well-taught Pilates or Yoga classes and lessons can be both fun and beneficial.

Committing to some form of mind-body work such as The Feldenkrais Method, Alexander Technique, Tai Chi, Chi Gong, or the aforementioned Pilates or Yoga, is also extremely beneficial for your playing and for your general well-being. The better we know ourselves from the inside-out, the more communicative, healthy, and joyful we can be as performers. All of these modalities can help us to deepen our awareness of how we move and why and how we do what we do.

In addition to physical exercise and the development of mind-body awareness, I also encourage students to find a meditation practice that works for them in order to strengthen their ability to concentrate and focus.

And then back to the diet! You need to eat well if you want your mind and body to function at their viola-playing best. You also need to get enough sleep and to be mindful of your caffeine intake, as relying on caffeine rather than sleep can result in a shaky bow or excessively tight muscles.

And finally, cultivate your joy in your work process. Attend as many concerts as you can. Avail yourselves of that rich resource that is your school library. Pick your professors' brains and brainstorm with your classmates. In other words, do "pig-out" at the buffet, but do it mindfully and in a way that is healthy and beneficial for you!

Wishing you all a healthy and happy new school year!