

Researchers suggest amount of practice is not what differentiates great musicians from the merely good

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A pair of researchers with Case Western Reserve University has found evidence that contradicts the findings of an earlier study reporting that

practice time differentiated great violin and piano players from the merely good. In their paper published in the journal *Royal Society Open Science*, Brooke Macnamara and Megha Maitra describe their attempts to reproduce the results of a 1993 study and what they found.

In 2008, author Malcolm Gladwell published a book called *Outliers* that outlined the results of a study carried out in 1993. In that study, a team of researchers had looked at the practice habits of a group of accomplished violinists and pianists. After analysis, they concluded that greatness in players was not attributable to genes or talent, but to the number of hours that musicians had practiced before reaching the age of 20. They found that 10,000 hours of practice was all that it took to master either instrument. Since that time, others have cited the number to make a point about success in any given field. Now, in this new effort, the researchers suggest that the findings by the team were in error—they report that genes, environment and a host of other factors account for violin mastery. In short, they suggest that the 10,000 rule is not based on reality.

The researchers came to their conclusions by attempting to replicate the results of the earlier team. They interviewed three groups of aspiring violinists—those who were deemed the best, those who were rated as good, and those who were politely described as less accomplished. They also asked the volunteers to keep diaries to track how much they practiced.

The researchers report that they found that less-accomplished players had practiced on average only 6,000 hours before reaching the age of 20. But both the best and the good averaged 11,000 hours of practice before reaching age 20—a finding that suggested practice alone could not account for master-level violinists. They also found that other factors such as genetics played a role. They also noted that the earlier team did not differentiate types of practice. The [volunteers](#) in the new effort

reported that practicing alone was more fruitful than with an instructor, but they varied in how many hours were spent with each.

More information: Brooke N. Macnamara et al. The role of deliberate practice in expert performance: revisiting Ericsson, Krampe & Tesch-Römer (1993), *Royal Society Open Science* (2019). [DOI: 10.1098/rsos.190327](https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.190327)

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