

# HOW TO GET AHEAD IN JUST ABOUT ANYTHING

In his latest book, pop sociologist Malcolm Gladwell asks why some people achieve great things while others flounder. But what can his conclusions teach the string world? DAVID KETTLE investigates

Ten thousand hours of practice. That's what it takes to become a true master of anything. So now we know, we can all go away, start our mammoth practice session and in a few years we'll be as good as Joshua Bell.

If only it were that simple. Well, according to *Outliers*, the latest book by cultural commentator Malcolm Gladwell who achieved great success with his previous offerings *Blink* and *The Tipping Point*, it is. Sort of.

In *Outliers*, Gladwell sets out to examine the reasons behind success. Why do a few select individuals establish computer companies that change the world, write symphonies that revolutionise music, or spearhead a project that turns the US into a nuclear power, while others simply flounder? Innate talent? Sheer determination? Luck? Instead of providing a recipe for success, Gladwell aims to show that it's a product of hard work, opportunities (and knowing when to grasp them), family background, place and time of birth, social skills, and so on. Circumstances, in other words.

Why, for example, do the overwhelming majority of Canadian ice hockey champions have their birthdays in the first three months of the year? Simply because the selection of young children for junior teams has January as a cut-off point, clearly favouring kids with a few months' extra growth and strength.

How did South Korea's culture of deference to superiors give the country one of the worst records for plane crashes? Because South Korean co-pilots were culturally conditioned not to question the decisions of the more senior pilots they

were supporting — even when they knew that they were wrong and that their actions would lead to tragedy.

All thought-provoking stuff, but what lessons can we learn from these assertions? And how do they relate to the string world? Gladwell's whole aim is to discredit the notion of the gifted individual from a humble background who battles against adversity to achieve success, as if by magic.

He gives no easy answers, and certainly no checklist for things that will immediately put you head and shoulders above the rest. In fact, if you weren't born at a certain time, or don't come from a certain background or class, you're probably already at a disadvantage.

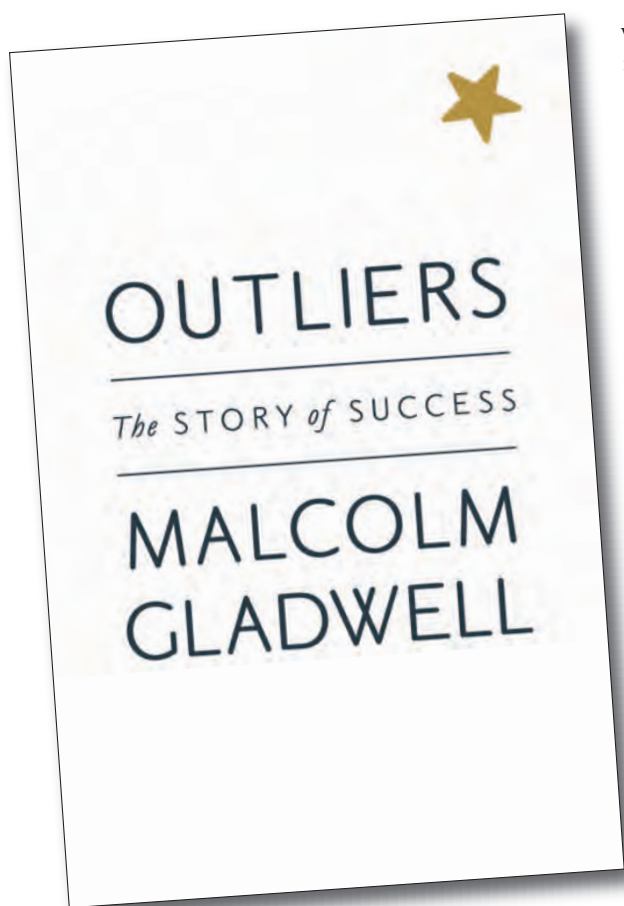
But back to the 10,000 hours theory. He gives several examples of the rule in practice — Mozart (hailed as a boy genius, >



Malcolm Gladwell claims that it takes ten thousand hours of practice to master any art

BROOKE WILLIAMS

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*Outliers* examines the circumstantial factors that go into building success

but in fact the earliest masterpieces come from his early twenties – after he'd put in about 10,000 hours of composing); the Beatles (whose early months playing eight hours a day, seven days a week in Hamburg clubs helped them reach their requisite 10,000 hours); and computer whizzkids Bill Joy and Bill Gates (who both enjoyed early access to mainframes as teenagers and would regularly put in all-night sessions).

Gladwell asserts that the 10,000 hour rule is pretty watertight: in studies, there

were no 'naturals' (people who rose to the top despite putting in significantly less time practising) nor any 'grinds' (those who practised as much as everyone else yet failed to achieve the same standards). So at least we know that if we practise for eight hours a day, seven days a week for four years, we'll become masters of our art. (As if.)

But as we all know, when it comes to music, there's practice, and then there's practice. Simply playing a violin or cello, no matter for how long, won't get you anywhere. And Gladwell admits that it's not ten thousand hours on its own that will guarantee success. If you were born in a demographic trough, then there are simply fewer people of your age to compete against.

Coming from a middle-class background will also help. You'll already have picked up an attitude of 'entitlement' and expect a high level of service from your instrumental teacher. Your parents will have had the time and money to ferry you around to lessons and orchestra rehearsals, and you'll have picked up the social skills that will allow you to exploit your network of contacts and that will ease your passage through difficulties in adult life. And it won't harm to have been given opportunities to practise your skills early on – if you come from a musical family that plays chamber music together every weekend without fail, for example, it

won't be long before you've amassed a few thousand hours' ensemble practice.

Significantly, Gladwell nowhere dwells on the concept of innate talent. In fact, he dismisses the notion early on in his book. It's a fuzzy concept anyway, and it's refreshing to look at the circumstantial factors that go into building success. While it's easy to believe that high-achievers are naturally born with their skills and rise magically to the top, Gladwell provides a valuable service in unpicking this easy notion and showing that the issue is far more complicated.

But the big question here, surely, is how we define success in the first place. In his chapter on the 10,000 hour rule, Gladwell quotes a study looking into the relationship between practice and 'success' in violin students at Berlin's Academy of Music carried out by three German psychologists in the early 1990s. And in doing so, he (rather worryingly) goes along with the scientists' somewhat simplistic division of students into those with the potential to become world-class soloists (very successful), those who are merely 'good' (less successful), and those unlikely to play professionally and who intended to be music teachers (even less successful). To rank teachers as failed concert violinists seems to be rather missing the point – and that's without even acknowledging the possibility that there might be such a thing as a high-flying, world-renowned pedagogue.

So what can string players learn from all this? Sadly, that in a lot of cases, according to Gladwell, it'll already be decided by your background and circumstances whether you're going to rise to the top or not. But in any case, as any teacher will tell you, the secret to excellence is simply practice, practice and more practice. ■