

Practicing

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Practicing is the process of acquiring new skills and making them into good habits. It is basically a set of learned behavior patterns and responses. Good practicing requires thoughtful self-analysis and self criticism in the process of improving one's ability.

The bottom line, telltale sign of successful practicing is if it achieves results. If a student goes into a lesson and is able to play the assignment competently, then that is a sign of successful practicing. If a performer goes on stage and is able to perform well, then that is the result of good preparation. How this is achieved differs from person to person: it is the responsibility of each of us to figure out how we work best and then to replicate those conditions on a regular basis.

The following is a checklist of important practice skills. It is not *the* list, but *a* list. There are many other things that can be added to this list in order to allow the individual to truly grow.

Proper environment: Are you practicing in a space conducive to thoughtful work? Is there good light? Are there distractions, such as phone, etc.?

Regular practice: Have you established a routine for your practicing? Do you practice at the same time and place every day? Do you purposefully vary the time and location? Are you aware when is your best time to practice? Do you allow for “discovery practice” or do you merely do basic work? (discovery practice = different tonal colors, new vibratos, etc.)

Planning: Have Goals! It is useful to divide your total practice time into smaller units and to have very specific goals for each segment. Research has shown that most people are able to sustain their best concentration for about twenty minutes at a time. After that the mind may wander and they are unable to maximize their efforts. (this does not mean that 20 minutes will get the job done—this is a maximum time for one thing)

In general, having time for daily routine, style etudes, and solos/excerpts is a good rule to follow. Do you set specific goals? Realistic goals? Do you really know what you are working on at that moment? Is it technique, tone, intonation, phrasing, speed, endurance, sightreading, dynamics, articulation, range, etc..... A distinction should be made between a “workout” and a “playthrough”. These differences will require one to wear either “teacher ears” or “audience ears”. In a workout, you can start, stop, analyze, criticize, try something, or experiment. This requires “teacher ears”. In a playthrough you cannot allow yourself to stop under any circumstance, as you try to mimic a performance situation. A playthrough can be as short as a few measures, or as long as an entire movement, or piece. This requires “audience ears” that are not overly critical.

Disciplined and intelligent practice: Are you strict with yourself in practicing? Are you focused and concentrating on what you are doing, or are you wasting precious time? Does your mind wander away from the tasks at hand? Do you practice methodically, or are you all over the map? Do you keep a practice journal? A practice journal can be used wither for planning the next session(s) or for reflecting on what you just did, to aid in preparing mentally for the next time. Paul Bazelaire (1960) defined intelligent practicing in the following steps: “Locate the problem. Penetrate and analyze the problem. Fix the problem”.

Left Brain: Be Analytical..... Are you using your left brain to think about what you are doing and to learn a new task, or are you just relying on your creative right brain? Remember that the left brain can only handle one new piece of information at a time. Are you giving yourself time to absorb that one piece of new information before going on to the next, or are you overloading yourself and getting frustrated? Are you moving sequentially through the new tasks as you learn a passage of music? Are you analyzing the technical difficulties in a passage and breaking them down into “chunks” that you are able to solve? Just as a successful military strategy is to divide and conquer, a useful musical strategy is to work on small sections of a difficult passage by tearing them apart before putting them back together. Are you thinking, or just playing?

*Right Brain: Be Musical.....*Are you using your right brain to solve musical problems? Are you thinking metaphorically and using images to elicit a variety of tonal colors and schemes? Do you have a story, or other extra-musical concept for your piece that will help you connect it to something larger? Are you thinking of color, pulse, motion, energy, or expressivity in your playing? Are you practicing purely mechanically? If so, you probably are going to perform mechanically.

Use successful strategies: The central tenet of good practicing is the development of good strategies and techniques of learning. Since there are probably enough methods for dealing with this issue to fill several books, a brief overview of the seven basic categories of practice will go here: Rote Practice (this is the most basic practice technique, and the most misused.....while it can be useful to a point, it is better to *think* ten times and *play* once, than to play ten times *without* thinking.) Imitative Practice, Aural Practice, Mental Practice, Memorization Practice, Discovery Practice, Performance Practice.

Relaxed practicing: Are you in a constant rush while practicing? Are you patient in your practicing? Are you aware of reducing tension in your playing? Do you practice breathing? Every 10 minutes in your practice sessions, you should stop, relax and breath—use a breathing bag, if possible—as eventually, this will become an important part of your performing—to stay relaxed.

Be your own teacher: Are you constructively self critical about your practicing? Do you try to improve your practice techniques? Do you record yourself? Do you use the metronome, tuner, etc.?

And finally,

Enjoy Practicing: This is the crux of it all. For if you do not—at least on some level—enjoy playing your instrument, improving your technique, deepening your music understanding, discovering new ideas, working on new music, getting satisfaction from your efforts, and at least to some extent enjoying being by yourself in a practice room, then you will not want to do the necessary work that is required to be a successful musician. It's not “practice makes perfect” it's “perfect practice makes perfect”.

Other considerations:

Daily routines: Basic Playing vs. Playing Basics

In your daily routine (hear that, “daily”.....?) you should make sure that you are spending time on: breathing, long tones, flexibility (lip slurs, etc.), articulation, dynamic work, range work, and speed work. It's imperative to have the metronome, tuner and recorder out, on, and implemented during this time.

Remember, too, that airspeed affects lots of things. Basic tenet=air speed (velocity) effects pitch, air quantity (volume) effects dynamics. (higher pitch=faster air)(louder dynamic=more air)

The Order of Importance in learning a new work:

Rhythm: Without an understanding of the rhythm, one cannot truly move forward within any piece of music. Adhere to the pulse Do dictation (1e&a, 2e&a etc.) Once you feel the rhythm, REPEAT IT 5-10 perfectly.

Learn the Notes: Place the right notes with the ALREADY CORRECTED rhythm. Check pitches on the piano or play down the octave if you are unsure. Check even if you think you are right!!!! REPEAT isolated passages 5-10 times perfectly

Begin to pay more attention to Dynamics, Articulation, and Intonation: As important as right rhythms and notes are, you cannot start be musical without these 3 ingredients. REPEAT isolated passages 5-10 times aiming for consistency

Tempo: With a metronome, practice at a tempo that you can perform #1-3 flawlessly. Once that is established, push the tempo ahead to the desired marking. MULTIPLE REPETITIONS of each passage should be performed before increasing the speed. Ever so often during this process, jump to the desired tempo to see how far you've come and how much farther you need to go. Once you have the desired tempo and you are comfortable with it, stop the metronome so that the pulse starts to be more internal. Alternatively: try perfecting the section in question at a very slow tempo, repeat this at least 5 times, then, jump straight to tempo. This will allow you to see exactly what needs to be practiced further, at slower tempos, and what you already can do.

Explore the Idea of Being Musical: Here's the other 40% of being a good musician. Dynamics, articulation, and intonation were the first steps to becoming musical. Never allow the music to sit. Let the music rise and fall. Listening will help you find the natural peaks and valleys. Come up with a story to help get the music across to your audience (OR TEACHER!!!!)

The suggestions above have come from a variety of places, including Robert Jesselson, Demondrae Thurman, and Rex Martin, among others. This is a starting point, not the end all be all—your own routines will be yours alone, and can be any or all of the above, plus some.....