

How to Practice*

When you are told to practice, do you feel overwhelmed, frustrated or confused? When faced with a new piece of music to prepare, do you wonder, "Where do I start? How does it go?"

If this sounds like you, you are in luck. The following information will tell you exactly what to do when you practice. If you follow the instructions here, you will be able to learn any music, no matter how difficult or long. All you need is a game plan.

"When should I practice?"

Practice on days that you eat. A comment originally made by Sinichi Suzuki, one of history's greatest violin teachers, simply stated, you should practice regularly. A little bit every day is better than a 2 – 3 hour cram session once a week. The great concert pianist, Vladimir Horowitz said, "If I miss a day of practice, I know it. If I miss two days, the orchestra knows it. If I miss three, the audience knows it!"

Set a regular time. Make a commitment to a specific, daily time to practice, not just when you have a chair test, playoff, concert or audition coming up. If you wait till you are in the mood to practice, it will never happen. Plan out your practice week the same way you plan your social schedule.

"Where do I practice?"

You need to be alone, in a quiet place, where you can think without distractions. Practicing in the main part of the band hall is more a social activity. For some, it's not practice, it's performance. Real quality time comes without the TV, radio, phone or friends. Sometimes it takes a bit of bravery to do, but go work on your own!

"What do I need in order to practice?"

Instrument, music, stand, metronome, valve oil/reeds, etc., a straight backed chair. Do not sit on the edge of your bed and read your music off the floor! You should always have a pencil with an eraser, a cassette tape and recorder and honestly, this packet wouldn't hurt either.

"How long should I practice?"

That depends on what you want to accomplish. How much better do you want to be? What do you want to be able to play tomorrow? Next week? Next month? Next Year?

To get the most out of practice, **set short and long range goals.** Beginners may only be able to play 15 to 20 minutes a day to start. An advanced player won't even be finished warming up after 15 minutes.

You should strive for consistency in everything you play. It's best to focus on completing the task, than how long you have played. (ed. Note – I personally practice for repetition, rather than time. Sometimes you need to do something hundreds of times.) The more efficient you are, the more you get out of practice. Don't count getting your instrument out and organizing your stuff as practice time!

For all band assignments, practice as much as it takes to play perfectly. Always listen to your tone and time. You cannot get any better without personal, private, efficient practice.

*This article was taken from Rusty Wells, assistant band director in Cedar Hill. Who he got it from is anybody's guess (actually, I think he wrote it), but a quick Internet search will show that the music community universally accepts the concepts and practices presented.

"So now what do I do?"

Always start with a Warm-up. Scientific Studies show that muscles work most efficiently at 102 degrees. All athletes warm up before workouts or games to prevent injury and increase performance. The same holds true for musicians. You use about 200 muscles for every note you play. But warming up is about much more than that. It's about preparing your body to be the best musical instrument possible for the entire day. Your warm up sets the foundation for your playing. Warm up haphazardly and you will be unstable the rest of the day. Warm up correctly and you will feel secure and confident in your playing.

Wind players warm up these things in order:

Brain - by focusing your attention and increasing oxygen from deep breathing. Clearing out excess noise.

Airstream - focus on deep, yawning breaths, that fill your lungs to the bottom.

Embouchure – treat it with care. Form every note correctly, concentrating on ease and comfort of response of lips or reed.

Tongue – play legato, keep it soft and relaxed.

Fingers – allow them to move freely. Play easy scales and arpeggios first

Percussion:

Brain - by focusing your attention quieting your mind. Clear out excess noise.

Forearms/wrists - play easy, even beats. Think about rebounding the stick off the head. Don't play too hard.

Fingers – faster notes need to be closer to the drum and controlled with the fingers behind the fulcrum.

Your private lesson teacher should have instrument specific materials. If you are not taking lessons, you are encouraged to do so. The personal attention for a professional is very valuable.

"What next?"

After your warm up and not until you have mentally prepared yourself.

Technical studies – scales and wiggly things. Play for accuracy before speed. Accuracy takes strength and discipline.

Slow, melodic studies – for tone, musicality and vibrato for those instruments that use it.

Sight-reading - Stress counting first. Counting is actually a very logical process, but so many young players neglect to work on it.

Here's a proven method for sight-reading well:

- A. At a slow tempo, count through the entire piece. Tapping your foot, clapping and saying the rhythm using the counting system you've been taught. Make sure you are secure, really secure in the rhythms, before going on.
- B. At the same tempo, tap your foot and finger through the piece and say the letter names of the notes in rhythm. (Don't say the accidentals, you'll already be fingering them.)
- C. Repeat step B, but sing the expression marks as well. This is where making music begins to occur.
- D. Repeat B, but blow air through your instrument and articulate!
- E. Repeat D but at the tempo that you wish to play.
- F. Play the piece. You have a 90%+ chance of reproducing the composers intent on the first hearing. Now, go back and practice the places where you made mistakes.

As you use the above sequence, you will get better at sight-reading, singing and counting. DO not be discouraged the first few tries. Learning to play an instrument is not like running a computer program, it's more like writing one, and it takes time to get the bugs out. Performing is running the program you wrote and should feel automatic, because now the piece of music is habit.

Review – Play through music that you have learned and would like to maintain.

Play something you enjoy remember that you got into music because you thought it would fun!

Record yourself playing what have just practiced – Listen back to it and make notes for tomorrow's session.

Warm Down - Especially brass and drummers. It's critical to reset your body back to center before you stop

"So how do I work on my music?"

SLOWLY!! Just as in the sight-reading steps above. The "master musicians" of the world do not practice at high speed. They practice slowly, accurately and carefully. Again computer programmers have a phrase: "Garbage in, garbage out". This applies to your practice. Practice carelessly and you WILL learn.....you just will learn to play carelessly.

There are no shortcuts, but there are some tricks.....

1. Get to a quiet place, with no distractions. This means physically AND psychologically. Find a room where you can be alone.
2. Go slowly and use your metronome. The fastest way to learn to play fast is to play SLOW!!
3. Work one small area at a time. Isolate the problem and fix it first. Practicing is like eating an elephant. You do it one bite at a time!
4. Begin any new piece at a tempo that is slow enough for you to play successfully. If that means it takes 30 minutes to play 32 measures, that's fine. Only speed up when it is easy and accurate at the slow tempo. Mark the tempo you stop at and pick up there tomorrow.
5. Practiced tongued passages slurred to be sure your fingers are moving accurately.
6. Practice slurred passages tongued to reinforce the rhythm.
7. Use your Tuning CD every day. If you have a tuner, use it. You should know the pitch tendencies and problem spots of EVERY NOTE on your instrument!
8. Tape your self and listen back to it daily. It is painful, yes, but it like holding a mirror up to see how you look. You do that every day!
9. Mark on your music. Every mistake you ever made should be cataloged on your music. A marked mistake is one that is not likely to happen again.
10. When isolating, practice just the two or three notes that are the problem, then add a note on the back and front until you are successful, keep adding.
11. The opposite of this is "Super Mario Practice". In Super Mario Brothers and most early video games, if you die, you go back the beginning and do the whole thing again until you get it right. Start at the beginning and play until you make a mistake, then go back to the beginning and try to get farther next time. This is goal oriented practicing and the added excitement of getting past last time versus having to go back to the beginning makes this sort of fun. The danger, of course, is that you may never finish the piece, so use this technique sparingly!
12. Change Even rhythms to dotted and dotted to even.
13. Play passage forward and then backward. Just the act of thinking about it backward makes forward easier.
14. Ask others to hear you. This can be very difficult to do, but be brave! After playing for friends and family, playing for a faceless audience is easy.
15. FOCUS! FOCUS! FOCUS! If you get distracted, stop, breathe and get your mind back in the game. If you just can't get your concentration back, it's time to do something else.
16. Do fundamentals daily. Pro golfers always start on the driving range. Pro tennis players always start with ground-strokes. Musicians ALWAYS start with long tones.
17. Practice standing up. It improves posture and allows you to move expressively when you play.
18. Use the "three two one" method for learning technical passages. Play every note 3 times, then 2 times, then 1 time. Do it SLOW and when you get to 1 time, it should be much easier.
19. Get a private teacher. The best athletes in the world work with a coach and so do the best musicians. Andy Roddick has a coach. Tiger Woods has a coach. Yo-Yo Ma has a coach. Isaac, one of the greatest violinists of all time, worked with a coach well into his 80's! You need a private teacher to realize your best potential and be competitive. If being competitive is not your thing, then being good at what you do makes it more enjoyable and that is reason enough alone!
20. Buy a duet book and play duets with a partner on a regular basis. Your sight-reading gets better and so do your ensemble skills, not to mention your chops! Besides, it's making music with a friend for fun.

Now that you know how:

GO PRACTICE!