

THE FINE ART OF PRACTICE

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Every music student knows that practice is necessary in order to learn to play a musical instrument. Unfortunately, many students "put in" time without knowing how to practice. In order for practice to improve your playing, it must be directed toward proper goals and efficiently carried out.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN TO PRACTICE

In order to practice well, you should know what you are working towards. You should have a picture "in your ear" of how a truly excellent player can perform in order to aim your study in the right direction. Take every opportunity to hear excellent playing, both live and on recordings so you will know where and how you have directed your practice.

Be aware of your immediate goals. What is your greatest weakness right now? It might be sound, strength, facility, reading or simply the need to increase your repertoire. What technical problems do you most need to overcome? How does the music you are practicing relate to these problems? If you don't know what your greatest problems are, by all means ask your teacher or fellow students. Someone will be glad to tell you!

With goals in mind, you can begin to practice more effectively.

HOW MUCH SHOULD YOU PRACTICE?

Practice as often as possible. I recommend the following guidelines:

Junior High - 45 minutes a day
High school - 1 hour a day
College and beyond - 2 hours a day

Most musicians who want to become excellent professional players practice at least four hours a day while in college or an equivalent level of study.

If you are beginning a campaign of extensive practicing (three or four hours a day or more), don't try to do the full amount on the first day. Practice an hour or two on the first day. Add a half-hour or hour the second day, and so forth, until you have reached the number of hours you have set for yourself.

The more you practice the better your progress will be.

WHEN SHOULD YOU PRACTICE?

Try to practice at the same time or times every day. You'll find it's much easier that way. Practice at least a half hour at a stretch. It takes this long for your muscles and brain to sufficiently warm up.

I recommend practice each morning when you are fresh and fully awake.

WHAT SHOULD YOU PRACTICE?

Be sure you play your entire lesson every day. Make sure you spend adequate time on each instrument you are studying (or each technique), (or each piece of music). Do not play snare drum one day, mallets the next, or scales one day and literature the next. You need consistent effort in each subject you're working on in order to make the best possible progress.

WHAT QUALITIES DO YOU NEED FOR GOOD PRACTICE?

1. Concentration.

Try to use your complete mind. Don't think about other things while you're practicing. Concentrate on the music to be accomplished and improved.

2. Care.

Make sure you are playing notes, rhythms and dynamics correctly. Check and double check to make sure mistakes aren't creeping in. Check other factors, such as hand position, evenness, sound, etc.

3. Patience.

Many students learn pieces badly because they are impatient. Don't play anything faster than you can play it well. Don't try to learn too large a section at one time. Don't be too impatient to count aloud. Don't be dismayed if you can't play something as well today as you could yesterday. Play it more slowly until it is comfortable again.

HOW SHOULD YOU PRACTICE

1. How to warm up.

When you practice, you should always try to be very relaxed physically. Therefore, it seems to work best to begin the day's practice with a piece of music or a technique which is very familiar to you and which you can play comfortably. Then begin the more difficult work, trying to stay relaxed at all times.

2. Slow Careful Practice.

Slow practice is probably one of the most important aids to learning any instrument. Many students practice an exercise or a piece much faster than they can play it accurately and cleanly. Everytime you practice too fast and make mistakes, you are learning those mistakes! Always practice at a tempo that you can play correctly!

3. Using the Metronome.

The proper use of the metronome goes hand in hand with slow practice. Set the metronome to a tempo at which you can play a phrase (or a larger section) easily and without mistakes. Play it once or more at this tempo. Move the metronome up one or two notches. Play it once or more at this faster tempo until you reach the correct tempo as indicated on the music. If you begin to make mistakes, move the metronome to a slower speed.

4. Repetition.

Divide the music into short phrases usually from one measure to a line or two in length. Practice each phrase many times consecutively. You will learn more quickly this way than if you work on long sections. Be sure to also play the beginning of the next phrase each time, or you will have trouble connecting the phrases later. Whenever you have a technical exercise (scales, arpeggios, etc.), repeat it many times.

BEGINNING TO LEARN A NEW PIECE OF MUSIC

When you start to learn a new piece of music, ask yourself these questions:

1. What is the character of the piece? Is it tranquil, excited, song-like, fast, slow, staccato, legato? What is the character of the different sections? How does the piece increase and decrease in excitement and resolution.
2. What are the most difficult sections of the work? You may want to start practicing on these first.
3. What is the suggested tempo of the piece? You will need to keep this in mind in order to determine stickings, phrasings, etc. Write in unusual stickings so you don't have to figure them out from one practice to the next.
4. In working on an exercise, determine how fast you should be able to play the exercise. Work on it until you have reached that tempo.

MEMORIZING

Some people memorize very easily, while others find it very difficult. Memorizing, like everything else, becomes easier with practice.

If you're having trouble memorizing, try the following:

1. Learn the piece so that you're fairly comfortable with it. It doesn't have to be up to tempo yet.
2. Practice one phrase at a time. Set the metronome to about one-half the suggested tempo. Repeat the phrase ten to thirty times. By then it should be memorized. You may have to repeat this procedure for as much as two or three days for the phrases to be correctly memorized.
3. Combine phrases into longer units. Repeat slowly if necessary.
4. Take the piece up to proper tempo.
5. Check the music from time to time to make sure you have not altered the music in any way.

PLAYING IN PUBLIC

If you're preparing to play a solo, make as many opportunities as possible to play for other people. Invite family, friends, and neighbors to hear you play. If possible, have a knowledgeable musical friend make note of the mistakes you make during these mini-recitals.

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