

Productive Practice: Understanding and Applying Practice Techniques

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Rockwell Hall

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- Practice “gut check”
 - Why do we practice?
 - Improve through repetition and self-analysis
 - Gain familiarity with repertoire
 - Gain competency in instrument/voice operation
 - **YOU SHOULD LOVE TO PLAY!!!**
- Establishing time
 - Schedule your practice to formalize your commitment
 - If it is “on the books”, much harder to skip
- Practice plan
 - Not just taking instrument out then saying, “Now what??”
 - Keep a practice journal
 - Write down what you will work on, and possibly for how long
 - Recap practice session and plan next sessions’ objectives
 - Keep it simple yet thorough
 - Helps avoid over-repetition and show what is neglected
- Choosing repertoire
 - Sometimes deciding on **WHAT** to practice is the biggest challenge!
 - Ensemble repertoire is required of you – learn it, and learn it well
 - Fundamentals
 - The difference between great players and good players is fundamentals
 - **You need to do the simple things on an Olympian level**
 - Etudes
 - Etudes are a vehicle to improve not only your technique, but your musicality
 - A variety of stylistic etudes can develop musicianship, not just note-getting
 - Excellent preparation for concert pieces
 - Solos
 - Choose works within your ability level, or just above
 - Choose works that have a practical application
 - Jury, recital, public performance

- Too often, works are selected arbitrarily that you may *never* have the opportunity to perform
 - I find knowing several short pieces to be more beneficial than one long concerto
 - Many more performance applications
 - More diverse musical styles
- Record yourself
 - Keep your recorder in your case or backpack
 - Record your 'mundane' practice
 - Warmup, scales, fundamentals, etc
 - This is where you need to hear and correct your tendencies
 - Two critical listening strategies:
 - Listen back right away to compare what you heard in the moment to what actually happened
 - Was your perception correct?
 - How was it different?
 - Listen back a day or two later when you are disconnected emotionally and physically from the recording
 - Much more objective critique
 - I recommend Zoom products
 - H2n (audio)
 - Q4n (audio and video)
 - iQ7 (iPhone/iPad adapter)
 - buy a huge SD card so you can record a lot!!
 - You've spent a lot of money on an instrument and school, don't cheap out by not buying a ~\$200 recorder!!!!
- Practice buddy
 - Find someone you can play with and will keep you motivated
 - As with scheduling practice, holding yourself accountable to another person can strengthen your commitment
 - Play warmup and fundamental exercises together
 - Arpeggios/scales
 - Drone
 - Contrary motion
 - Arpeggio/scale routines from method books
 - Long tones
 - Be creative! Use resources you have and modify for 2
 - Etudes in unison and octaves (great for developing pitch)
 - Excerpts/solos
 - One person drone, the other play
 - One person play piano or bass line
 - One person plays rhythmic subdivision
- Intonation
 - Using a tuner
 - Tuners don't lie!

- Tuners often used incorrectly
 - Teach us to be visual responsive, not aurally
 - Easy to adjust to a display
 - Use tuner to calibrate your *ear*
 - Once warmed up, keep tuner close by for slow practice
 - Don't watch the tuner, but "check in" from time to time
 - Use tuner to calibrate your *instrument*
 - Tuner helps you to learn your tendencies
 - Be aware of when you are most often sharp/flat
 - Using drones
 - Many drone recordings on mp3 or YouTube
 - Some are long tones, others are chords
 - Incorporate drones into scale and arpeggio practice
 - Also helpful in repertoire that is scalar or chordal
 - Helpful to hear **relationships** between pitches, not simply reacting to a tuner display
 - Important for building ensemble intonation skills
- Using a metronome
 - A common error in metronome use is simply to "play along"
 - Comparable to playing with a drumset:
 - It is easy to play in time when someone is keeping time, but **individual integrity of pulse** is paramount to your success
 - Great tool to work into your scale/arpeggio and fundamental practice
 - Keep track of your working tempi in your *practice journal*
 - Exposes what tempi you have been ignoring
 - Work slow, medium, and almost fast tempi
 - Ex: I play chromatic scales at very slow, manageable tempo, then 10-15 BPM faster, then another 10-15 BPM faster to push my technique
 - Metronome can help expose your flaws
 - The key is to find where you fail to keep time
 - Set up a recorder across the room, and a metronome alongside
 - Set metronome volume low enough so that you can hear it when not playing, but cannot hear it while playing
 - Record yourself
 - Playback will expose where you are differ from the metronome
 - You will start to notice tendencies
 - Learn from your tendencies!!
- Practice cold
 - It is nice to have a warmup and feel comfortable before going about our daily repertoire practice and ensemble rehearsal, however...
 - The professional world does not always afford this luxury
 - Knowing you can play 'cold' gives you confidence

- Also shows what skills are truly habit and which ones are fleeting
- Miscellaneous
 - Practice starting/finishing pieces
 - Don't let the performance be the first time you "perform"
 - We are actors as well
 - What the audiences sees, they also hear
 - Stage presence
 - Smile!
 - Confident posture
 - Practice *in time*
 - Too often, we simply start playing
 - Hear the pulse of the music
 - Start the piece *before* you actually come in
 - Minimizes missed notes
 - Establishes better time
 - Ear training
 - Always be working on solfeige/pitch recognition
 - Can you sing your repertoire?
 - Try plucking the first note out of thin air
- Battling lack of motivation
 - We *ALL* go through times where practicing is a chore
 - Figuring out how to motivate your self is so important!
 - If lack of motivation is endemic, the problem is bigger
 - Why are you a musician?
 - Do you like to play/sing?
 - Is the lack of motivation repertoire-based, mood-based, or inspiration-based?
 - Things I have done to get motivated:
 - Clean my instrument
 - Sometimes just handling the trombone and having it work better is enough to make me want to play
 - Listen to recordings
 - I'll listen to recordings of my past performances, which ultimately puts me in "analysis mode"
 - Listen to favorite ensemble or artist
 - Listen to current practice repertoire
 - Play duets
 - Playing with someone else can engage your musical and creative mind
 - Keep a practice journal
 - *Seeing* what you need to practice is often motivation
- Musical citizenship
 - Improving as a musician cannot solely exist in the practice room

- **Music is a language; you must submerge yourself in it**
- Attend concerts, even if not your instrument
- Listen to recordings
- Research pieces
- Support your peers
- Commission new works
 - Join or start a consortium!

Thank you for your attendance and participation today. Obviously, there is much more than can be covered in 45 minutes, but the goal today was to get you thinking creatively and give you a “launch pad” of ideas. If I can clarify or elaborate on any of my discussion points, please do not hesitate to contact me via the methods below. Have a great year and happy, productive practicing!!

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