Positive Preparation For Practice

by Katherine Borst Jones and Christopher Weait

Practicing is an activity that musicians will do all their lives. Through practicing, in the long term, musicians will find their own voice, their way of communicating. But practicing needs to be learned. Let us explore the various ways in which we can prepare ourselves for productive practicing.

WHY DO SO MANY MUSICIANS HATE TO PRACTICE OR PUT IT OFF?

Musicians often dislike or avoid practicing for a number of reasons:
- we have never learned HOW to practice;
- we must be the teacher as well as the student, it can be difficult to give ourselves direction;
- as we learn new or unfamiliar music we are “beginners” again;
- we might be “wrong,” make “mistakes,” be less than our usually perfect selves;
- we may believe we are not making progress.

FACTORS INHIBITING PRACTICE

We often “don’t feel like practicing” for some or all of the following reasons:
- lack of regularly scheduled practice time;
- lack of goals for practice session;
- inability to concentrate;
- fear that people may be listening;
- fear of being alone, unguided, responsible for decisions, fear of the unknown;
- distractions of family, friends, telephone, other media;
- minimal sense of closure, and little tangible evidence of work done/time spent;
- we desire instant gratification, and progress appears to be slow.

WHY PRACTICE? WHAT ARE POSITIVE FACTORS FOR PRACTICE?

Musicians must practice to improve or maintain skills. Performing music is a highly complex activity consisting of a wide variety and range of physical and mental habits. Practice time consists of opportunities to establish those habits, learn new music, conquer musical and technical problems, review known material, maintain acquired ability and extend musicianship. It is time to reflect and to grow. It should be a positive, reaffirming, optimistic opportunity to learn and improve. It should provide a sense of personal accomplishment and steady progress.
WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A POSITIVE PRACTICE SESSION?

When practicing, our goal should be to learn the most material, accurately and efficiently. Designate an uninterrupted period of time as a regular daily occurrence in a pleasant, well-equipped, safe and distraction-free environment. In addition to the music, have your tuner, metronome, pencil and note pad, (sticky notes are useful!) with you. Occasional use of a recording machine or mirror can be helpful. Develop the discipline of concentration and a positive, non-judgmental attitude about correcting your errors and making improvements. Use constructive self-criticism as you solve your problems.

Set short-term goals for practice sessions based on your long-term goals for the future. Include in your practicing: relaxation and concentration exercises, mental rehearsal, and positive visualization of future performances. Be “in the moment,” mentally and emotionally—focus on your goals. Be in good shape physically by exercising, eating properly and sleeping enough.

HOW CAN I LEARN TO CONCENTRATE?

“To concentrate you must learn to direct your thoughts, and to prevent them from wandering away from a thing, you must train them instead to wander around it.” (MacKinnon, p.1) Try this exercise. Focus your attention on a pencil. Notice everything about it as you describe the object out loud for two minutes. Consider every detail. Notice how you were able to concentrate when you gave your mind a reason for looking at the pencil. Each day describe a different object, increasing the time spent by thirty seconds up to a period of five minutes. “If you wish to increase your power of concentration, you must form a habit taking one thing at a time, doing it thoroughly, whatever it may be. Let nothing exist for the moment but the thing at hand.” (MacKinnon, p.3) Practice forming habits separately and accurately so that combining them will be more efficient. As Trevor Wye likes to say, “It is a question of time, patience and intelligent work.”

WHAT KIND OF SCHEDULE SHOULD I MAINTAIN?

Practicing sessions are different for every musician. If you are not confident about your practicing try the following: decide how much practice time you have available; make a list of what you must practice; assign a time span for each task; practice using the time schedule. Notice if the time you allotted to each task is sufficient, adjust it if necessary. Have a plan for each practice session. Think about plans for your next session at the end of each practice.

Decide what is your best working time. Are you a “morning person?” If so, practice in the morning. More frequent short sessions are more effective than fewer long ones, especially when learning new skills. To avoid overuse of muscles schedule five minutes of rest after every twenty-five minutes of practice. When resting move your body away from the practice posture—stand up and walk around if you sit to practice, or sit down and relax if you stand.

NOW, YOU HAVE YOUR PLAN, YOU ARE READY.
HOW DO YOU START?

Dorothy DeLay, the great violin teacher said, “Studying a new piece is like astronomy: the music is similar to a new spot in the sky. The study of basics is
microscope work, you study smaller and smaller, finer and finer details. You start with basic principles but you must remain aware at all times of the almighty detail." (DeLay, p.14) To do this, then, practice by noticing various elements, one at a time. Remember the concentration exercise? Put those skills to work to learn the music.

**HERE IS A PRACTICING STRATEGY TO FOLLOW**

- First, play the correct pitches using an even, steady rhythm at a very slow tempo.
- Next, play the pitches using accurate rhythmic proportions at a slow tempo.
- Then, add the accurate articulations at a slow tempo.
- Now add the required dynamics at a slow tempo.
- Finally, work toward the required tempo.

So, the order of practice is: pitches, rhythm, articulations, dynamics, TEMPO. If the music is rhythmically very difficult one can learn the rhythms before the pitches. As you learn the various elements you should be considering the phrasing of the music. We’ll discuss working up to faster tempos later in the article.

It is a huge waste of time to attempt to play the music up to tempo before the other elements are learned accurately. You will just have to learn it all over again—a much more difficult task than learning it correctly in the first place.

**HOW DO I START PRACTICING THAT CHALLENGING INDIVIDUAL PASSAGE?**

We learn habits in simple links which form chains of action. In the first stage of habit-forming you should be very slow and accurate. This requires a lot of patience—something which is hard for some of us to acquire nowadays. Start with small, correct links to build a sequence of links. Be sure you can play each link easily before playing them in sequence. String together correct links one after the other. The more established each link is, the fewer repetitions will be necessary. Keep adding more links until the task is finished. Every time you play it correctly, your ear will remember it for the next time, your chances of playing that way again are maximized and you are MAKING POSITIVE PROGRESS.

Review the links and smooth out any rough spots with additional repetitions. Think of fast notes as slow notes and vice versa. We tend to rush the hardest passages making them even harder. Try practicing the final notes of a passage first then gradually add the notes in front of the final notes. In this manner you are heading into “known territory.” Remember, it is harder to repair a broken chain than to string it together properly the first time.

**HOW MANY TIMES SHOULD I REPEAT THE PATTERNS?**

Practicing involves repetition. A useful guideline is to do no less than three nor more than eight repetitions before changing (no matter how slightly) any repetitive pattern. Keep track of the number of repetitions you make while practicing. For example, every time you play the passage correctly, move a penny from left to right on the stand. However, trying only for pitch error-free passages while rushing the rhythm would be counterproductive. Keep the imagination and mind engaged all the time. Avoid thoughtless practice and “busywork” rep-
etitions. Here's a good motto: "No Repetitions Without Thinking!"

After notes, rhythms and articulations are established, consider any balance problems between other instruments and within your own part. On the flute, long notes sound louder than short ones, high notes sound louder than low notes and slurred notes louder than tongued notes. Knowing this will help you to make good decisions about dynamics, vibrato and tone color. Try different solutions then make appropriate changes. Continue to develop your interpretive ideas. "Every valid interpretation thus represents not an approximation of some ideal, but a choice: which of the relationships implicit in this piece are to be emphasized, to be made explicit?" (Cone, p.34) As the great teacher Robert Willoughby tells his students, "Make me love it, make me hate it, but don't bore me." Make decisions and choices!

**HOW CAN THE METRONOME BE USED FOR EFFICIENT PRACTICE?**

The metronome is an important tool for every practice session. Here are some useful metronome techniques:
- Put the click on beats other than the main beat, like the after-beat or every other beat.
- Difficult rhythmic passages can be played using the "Johnny-One-Note" technique: practice the rhythmic patterns on one pitch.
- Instead of steadily increasing the speed of the clicks, increase up three clicks, practice, then decrease by two clicks and practice, continue until desired tempo.

**HOW CAN I LEARN TO PLAY THE NOTES FASTER?**

Here are some techniques for learning to play faster:
- Increase the speed of the metronome beat as suggested above.
- Play short groups of notes (3–6 "spurts") as fast as possible.
- Alternate fast and slow notes and reverse them.
- Fit more and more notes into the beat, one, then 2, 3, 4, 5, etc.

**CAN I STUDY THE MUSIC WITHOUT MY INSTRUMENT?**

It is very useful to practice without your instrument! Sing the music. This helps passages to be internalized by the ear and insures you can hear the notes before you play them (solfége is a great help). Rhythms could be sung, clapped or chanted with or without a metronome. Analyze the breathing points. Do you need more, less? When inhaling are you hurrying or dragging rests? Do you need to breath OUT anywhere?

Study the piano part or score to learn the complete piece. Play your part on the piano. Mentally perform the piece to map out the phrasing. Consider the relationships of tempos in multi-section works. Do breathing and stretching exercises. Read about the composer and the style. Listen to recordings or live performances of your piece.

**HOW DO I KNOW WHEN I AM READY TO PERFORM A PASSAGE OR PIECE?**

When you really know a passage or piece it should feel "easy" to play. A useful, quick check is to play a passage with your eyes closed. Even if you do
not know a passage “from memory,” try to play it by ear. Be able to play a passage ten times in a row without a problem. To test whether a piece is memorized try writing it out! Play pieces often for a small group of colleagues, family or friends. The quality of your performing should improve with each performance. As you perform notice those things which need to be improved. To perform well, one must practice performing by taking one step at a time.

Keep in mind what Edward Cone said, “The convincing performance is one that absorbs the listener so deeply into the flow of the music that, even though he may know perfectly everything that lies ahead, he can still savor each moment as if for the first time.” (Cone, p.55)

Good luck! Have happy, positive practicing!

REFERENCES


RECOMMENDED READING


ABOUT THE AUTHORS

KATHERINE BORST JONES, Flute Professor at The Ohio State University since 1985, is Co-Principal Flutist of the ProMusica Chamber Orchestra of Columbus, a member of the Columbus Symphony Orchestra and Principal Flute of the New Sousa Band. Ms. Jones has taught at Oberlin Conservatory and Capital University and has recorded for CRI, d’Note and Summit labels. She has served the NFA in numerous capacities: President 1994-96, Secretary/Treasurer, Convention Program Chair 1992, Young Artist Competition Judge and Conductor of the 1997
National High School Flute Choir. Ms. Jones studied with Keith Brion, Robert Willoughby, Kyrit Magg, Donald E. McGinnis and Julius Baker and holds degrees from the University of New Hampshire and The Ohio State University.

CHRISTOPHER WEAIT has been Professor of Bassoon at The Ohio State University since 1984. He was Principal Bassoonist of the Toronto Symphony from 1968 to 1985 and performed often as soloist with the orchestra. He was also a member of the Chamber Symphony of Philadelphia and the USMA Band at West Point. He has been a Visiting Professor at the Eastman School of Music and at Indiana University. He taught at the University of Toronto, was founder the Toronto Chamber Winds and supervised their notable recordings of the Mozart wind serenades. He has been Conductor of the Central Ohio Symphony Orchestra since 1988 and is a Soloist with Keith Brion and his New Sousa Band. His compact disc Telemann for Bassoon on the d’Note label also features his colleague Katherine Borst Jones.