How To Practice
by Jeffrey Khaner

Practicing can be one of the most enjoyable activities in the life of a musician or it can be a tedious chore that must be completed regularly under threat of losing precious ground already labored over. We all—amateur or professional, serious student or dilettante—know the happiness and sometimes the anguish of having to practice. Nonetheless, it is crucial that we are as efficient and goal oriented as possible when picking up the instrument and practice in a controlled and methodical manner.

We first must understand clearly why practicing is necessary. We practice in order to reliably execute a composition's technical and musical requirements. An instrument does not necessarily need to be in our hands in order to contemplate how a phrase should be played. Often some of the most valuable and insightful revelations come from thinking about music—playing a passage over inside one's head rather than working on it endlessly on an instrument. In an imaginary, ideal world we would merely pick up an instrument and be in great "shape," with flawless technique and able to perform any piece in any interpretation. However, reality dictates that we pursue this ideal with a daily practice regimen that reinforces the technique we already have while extending it to new heights.

EXERCISES

Exercises are the best way to start a practice session, not just to "warm up," but to augment and expand our abilities. The regimen should address all the technical aspects of the instrument—tone, breathing, vibrato, articulation, scales (major, minor, and modal), intervals (diatonic and chromatic), trills, as well as any "extended" techniques (e.g. whistle tones, double stops and chords, throat and tongue flutter tonguing). Remember to always use a metronome. The metronome allows us to monitor progress, and provides an objective, controlled environment to assist us in developing a disciplined technique.

To maximize efficiency, it is important to execute all exercises throughout the complete range of the instrument. Though some skills are easier in certain registers, we must be equally adept throughout. For example, it is considerably more difficult to vibrate at a fast rate in the lower register, however the control of vibrato speed must be consistent from low to high. Similarly, scale exercises should include the lowest and highest possible notes, not simply tonic to tonic. Articulation work should encompass several types of tonguing (staccato, tenuto, sostenuto, marcato, etc.) not just tongued and slurred.

We can create efficient exercises which work on several different aspects of technique simultaneously. An exercise focusing on long-tones can also be used for breathing and vibrato. A scale exercise can help develop breathing and articulation. An exercise for diatonic thirds can also cover seconds and fourths. It is important to remember never to become too comfortable with the execution
of any particular exercise and to constantly attempt to press the limits of our abilities. Spending a concentrated hour daily on efficient technical work will maintain the best possible shape while building a clean and facile technique.

ÉTUDES

The next step in a well organized regimen is to practice études. Études are invaluable to us in several ways, but only if practiced in an organized and serious manner. They are a wonderful tool for building discipline, learning to sight-read, familiarizing oneself with different musical styles, and identifying flaws in one’s technique (which then can be eliminated with exercises). Each student should have a goal of completing a certain number of études weekly. One étude is not enough to maintain sufficient interest or intensity in practicing. (I assign my freshman Curtis students a minimum of four études a week.) “Completing” means that each étude be up to tempo, with all the correct notes, dynamics, and well-considered breaths. This practice encourages the student to start solving problems on his own, before resorting to instruction, and creates a clear target to aim for. It is necessary to spend a good deal of time practicing to accomplish the weekly goal. However, it is critical that after a week the student moves on to new material regardless of the level of completion, so that he never becomes bored. One of the most important aspects of this approach is to encourage reflection as to why an étude was not completed and address that issue in the following weeks: Was not enough time spent practicing? Was the time spent inefficiently? Was the metronome used improperly? With such reflection, a student identifies how to learn quickly and efficiently.

Études also provide an opportunity to practice sight-reading. By constantly reading new repertoire, one’s sight-reading skills can be greatly improved. (Of course it is the responsibility of the teacher to provide the appropriate level of étude.) Études should be in contrasting styles—for example, one each from Andersen, Bozza, Karg-Elert, and Moyse/Chopin. Other excellent volumes include studies by Altes, Bitsch, Briccialdi, Castérède, and Schade; caprices by Boehm and Paganini; and the Fantasias of Telemann. There are countless others, however the important factor is the technical demand placed on the student. When an étude presents a technical difficulty, it is best to address that particular weakness with an exercise. Ideally, the exercise selected would be an original one which addresses the problem throughout the full range of the flute or, instead, one from the collections by Taffanel and Gaubert, Baker, Moyse, or Maquerre, to name just a few. Études are designed to root out weaknesses and exercises to fix them. One must remember that the student will refer back to these études throughout his career, and the progressively easier execution at each review will be a constant source of encouragement. Even rereading the first étude immediately after completing the volume should show a marked improvement.

REPERTOIRE

After exercises and études, we come to solo repertoire. Approach all solo pieces in the same manner—slowly, with a metronome, and with the intention to commit the work to memory. It is imperative to start very slowly in order to ensure accuracy and to imprint the correct notes and rhythms from the outset. The metronome helps one understand the relationship between the notes at any given tempo, which then permits freedom of interpretation. The benefit of memorization is not
just to learn the notes but is invaluable for understanding why a phrase is written a particular way. All of the composer’s (not editor’s!) markings must be remembered, understood, and interpreted. (If at all possible, avoid editions that have been edited. It is very difficult to ignore printed markings. Sometimes these editions may be interesting, however a student should be encouraged to create his own edition from the beginning, derived from the music itself.) Remember that phrasing is a musical issue, whereas breathing is a technical one. Always carefully consider and practice breathing options—never breathe arbitrarily.

DON’T BE TEDIOUS

While it is important to emphasize thoroughly studying the technical and musical aspects of solo repertoire, it is advised not to spend so much time on any particular piece that it becomes distasteful. Nothing is more tedious to both student and teacher than to work week after week on the same music. A balance should be struck between careful preparation for performance and the necessity to cover as much ground as possible for educational purposes.

ORCHESTRAL EXCERPTS

It is a good idea to become familiar with orchestral excerpts as soon as possible. Perhaps the easiest way to do this is to be aware of the local professional orchestra’s repertoire for the season and to work a week in advance of whatever will be performed. Then take advantage of the opportunity to hear the work in live performance. If this is not possible, look for live radio broadcasts of various orchestras from around the world. It is important and invaluable to hear live, unedited performances in order to more clearly experience what can occur in the concert hall. Try to practice the entire part, not just the solos (many of the parts with prominent flute solos are available in their entirety from sheet music distributors) and look at the score while listening. Hear as many interpretations as possible. Make note of differences between performances and try to understand what makes the interpretation distinct. Refer closely to the music before deciding which is your favorite. Even if one is not intending to pursue a symphonic career, it is a grave injustice to overlook getting to know and love much of the greatest repertoire in western music. One may find the lure of playing the flute part to a Mozart piano concerto or a Bruckner symphony irresistible.

THE JOY OF MUSIC

It is for the joy of music that we work so hard to master our instrument. Every note must have meaning within the phrase and every phrase carefully thought out but perhaps the most important point to remember when practicing is to enjoy oneself. Whether preparing for a lesson or rehearsal, for an audition or a concert, we play because we love to...because it’s fun!
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JEFFREY KHANER joined the Philadelphia Orchestra as Principal Flute beginning with the 1990-91 season. He was Principal Flute of the Cleveland Orchestra from 1982 to 1990. Mr. Khaner was born in Montreal, Canada. He received his Bachelor of Music degree from The Juilliard School, where he studied with Julius Baker. Before joining the Cleveland Orchestra, Mr. Khaner served as Co-Principal Flute of the Pittsburgh Symphony. Prior to that, he was Principal Flute of the Mostly Mozart Festival in New York and the Atlantic Symphony in Halifax, Nova Scotia. He has appeared as soloist with the Montreal Symphony, the Milwaukee Chamber Orchestra, the Mostly Mozart Festival, the Atlantic Symphony and, on numerous occasions, with both the Cleveland and Philadelphia Orchestras.

Among the summer festivals, Mr. Khaner participated as a performer and teacher at the Solti Orchestral Project in Carnegie Hall, the Grand Teton Festival and the Sarasota Music Festival. Mr. Khaner has been on the faculty of the Curtis Institute of Music since 1985, and has given master classes and recitals throughout North America as well as in South and Central America, Europe and Asia. His students occupy principal positions in major orchestras in the United States, Canada and Europe.