

Name:

How to Practice, Part 1
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“**Practice makes perfect**” is an old adage that everyone has heard, but it doesn’t do much to help musicians understand *how* to practice, to set reasonable expectations or goals, or even to know when they’ve actually been successful. So, let’s break that down a bit.

What is *practice*?

- Practice is time you spend *alone*, in a quiet space, free from distractions, working on your instrument independently and trying sound better.
- Playing in an ensemble is not *practice*. When we play with others, we should strive to *bring with us* good practice habits; in other words, rehearsals and performances are where we *apply* what we know.
- We can and should learn and improve whenever and wherever we are playing, but the overall goals in a rehearsal are to blend with others, make music, and have fun – if we are also trying to learn our own part or fix skills, it detracts from the entire group.
- “What if I already know MY part, do I still have to practice?” – Of course you do! There is always more to learn, new skills to master, and ways to make your performance better. Don’t settle!

What is *perfect*?

- Perfection isn’t real – not for me, and not for you....not for anyone!
- When we focus on perfection, we rob ourselves and others of musical expression – we drain the life out of playing and are never satisfied with performances.
- If we get caught up with judging ourselves for every tiny error, it’s almost impossible to function, and we certainly will not play our best. Everyone is allowed a certain number of mistakes – it really is okay! Try to focus on what you *want to play* and let go of errors.

If not perfect, then...what?

- Let go of perfectionism and replace it with *high expectations*.
- Hold yourself and others to the highest standard possible, but accept your own essential humanness, and recognize that perfectionism is an unhealthy habit of mind.

So, practice makes....?

- Practice makes you better!
- This is a lifelong process. When we get better, we play with better musicians, who challenge us to keep progressing.
- It’s about improvement and reaching goals – we never reach the finish line!

How much practice do I need?

- This is based on your level, needs, and goals, but in general:
 - High school students: 30-60 minutes, 4-6 times per week
 - Music majors: Start with the schedule above, working toward 1-2 hours, 5-6 times per week

“I’ve always considered myself to be just average talent and what I have is a ridiculous insane obsessiveness for practice and preparation.” -Will Smith

What to do when you practice:

1. Set goals: Think about your long and short term targets for learning and improvement
2. Develop a positive mindset: Recognize that you are learning, and choose to give yourself the space to make mistakes, while developing your skills; Celebrate improvements, no matter how small
3. Create a routine: Identify the exercises and drills you need in order to improve, and commit to playing them every time you practice
4. Track your progress: Keep a practice journal and record yourself, so that you know when goals have been achieved

Setting Goals

What would you like to be able to play, that you can't play right now?

1. What pieces or songs would you like to master?

2. What skills do you need in order to play new repertoire?

3. What skills or techniques always pose an issue for you, and could be improved?

4. What have you admired about other musicians, and wished you could also do?

Short and long term goals

- Short term goals are the things you want to do within days, weeks or months
- Long term goals are things you want to do within months or years, and should include auditions, attending a new school, achieving a specific career path, or other milestones you hope to achieve.

- Short- and long-term goals should be related – the things we do today, help us to achieve in the future

Think about the questions you answered above and use those responses to clearly state three short- and long-term goals. Fill out the chart below:

| | |
|--|--|
| Short-term goals: What do you hope to accomplish this semester? | |
| 1. | |
| 2. | |
| 3. | |
| Long-term goals: What do you hope to accomplish over the next 1, 3, and 5 years? | |
| 1 year | |
| 3 years | |
| 5 years | |

When we set goals, there are some important factors which contribute to success. Goals should be:

1. Specific
 - a. What are you really looking to do?
 - b. What do you need, in order to get there?
 - c. What will you sound like when you achieve your goal?
2. Attainable
 - a. Can you envision yourself accomplishing the goal?
 - b. Do you understand what is needed to accomplish the goal?
3. Applicable
 - a. How do your goals relate to each other?
 - b. Where can you use this skill, once it is achieved?

Go back and look at your goals above. Do you need to make any revisions?

Goals vs. Systems

Once we have a goal in mind, we need to chart a path for achieving it.

1. Goals -> What we want to do
2. Systems -> What we do everyday, in order to achieve goals

One of the challenges of practicing is that you do it alone. In band, orchestra, or any other ensemble, your director tells you what to do, and you do it. You can depend on them to know the next step, and to set goals for you. When you are working alone, that is not as easy. One of the first great voices in the world of self-help said:

“Plan your work, and work your plan.” – Napoleon Hill

Creating a system is about making a plan, and then putting that plan into practice.

What can you do, to become a better musician?

The great thing about systems is that they create the habits we need in order to be successful, so that progress becomes progressively easier, and more achievable. Without a system, we can have all the desire in the world, but find ourselves spinning our wheels, with little progress to show for our efforts.

Basketball great LeBron James tells a story of his training regimen, and commitment to working at it all the time, no matter the time of year. One day, during an off-season tour to promote the Nike brand in Italy, he was outside, digging in on his daily workout. He was really pushing hard – the day was hot, and he was sweating and out of breath. One of his friends from a rival team walked by and, seeing LeBron’s determination, heckled him a bit, asking if he was getting ready for the season. LeBron said:

“Season?! Nah. I’m training for the play-offs.” – LeBron James

Even champions have a system, and they work hard at it everyday. Here is the definition of “system” that we want to think about:

A SET OF PRINCIPLES OR PROCEDURES ACCORDING TO WHICH SOMETHING IS DONE; AN ORGANIZED SCHEME OR METHOD.

In short, a system is whatever you plan to do everyday (or every time you practice), in order to get better. The great thing about putting this down in paper is that it can give you some confidence that you are pursuing your goals, and making progress. Plus, it generates *intent* – you are letting yourself know what you want to do.

Further, on those occasions when you might have a bad practice session or fall short of your intended goals, you can remind yourself that you’ll be back again the next day, with a brand new chance to get on track. This makes it easier to move past setbacks, and consequently, to build both confidence and skills.

It takes **time** to develop a reliable system for practicing, so give yourself the space to learn and grow throughout that process. As with anything worthwhile, the most important step is to **start**, and to set your **intention** on **improvement** and **progress**, rather than perfection.

“I was obliged to be industrious. Whoever is equally industrious will succeed equally well.” – JS Bach

In the last step, you identified three each, short- and long-term goals. Now, make a list of the some of the skills you know you'll need in order to reach those goals.

| New skills needed to achieve short-term goals | |
|---|--|
| 1. | |
| 2. | |
| 3. | |
| New skills needed to achieve long-term goals | |
| 1 year | |
| 3 years | |
| 5 years | |

Daily Routine

For musicians, the first step toward building a system, is to develop a **daily routine** for practice. This is a set of tasks, drills, or exercises that you will do every time you practice, with the intention of getting better at your instrument. When I say “routine,” sometimes students ask if I mean “warm-up,” and the answer is *sort of*. For most musicians, the actual time needed for warming-up, i.e. getting the body ready to play, is rather short – maybe 5-10 minutes. A routine, on the other hand, is focused on expanding technique, and improving skills, in a systematic way, and it usually takes longer than that.

When we employ a routine in our practice, we are setting ourselves up to improve all of our skills, so that any music we are working on will become both better, and easier to play. This frees us up to focus on the fun parts of the music!

As I always say:

“It’s more fun to sound good, than to sound bad.” – Karen Marston

In general, aim to structure your practice time as 40% routine and 60% music-practice. If you practice an hour, that’s about 25 minutes routine, and 30-35 minutes practicing whatever music (etudes, parts from ensembles, solos, etc.) you might be working on.

In developing a routine for brass players, I like to think in terms of five areas:

1. Long tones: Sound and airflow
2. Flexibility/flow studies: Connecting air and sound, note-to-note
3. Range: Expand both high and low, while maintaining a good tone
4. Articulation: Practice a variety of style, and strive for consistency
5. Technique (scales, arpeggios, etc.)

If you're not a brass or wind player, your teacher can help you identify five core areas of focus for your routine. In addition, I'd be willing to bet that your teacher will give you practice materials to focus on each day – use these!

The important thing to remember about your routine is that it is a work in progress. You can always revise what you are doing, in order to better meet your skills and goals. You might attend a master class with a favorite player, and you adopt some of their ideas. Or, you might come across something in a piece of music that stumps you – put it in your routine! Keep building and adding, so that you are always challenging yourself to improve.

To begin, let's identify five exercises that you plan to put in your routine. Fill out the chart below.

| Exercise | Description | Why this should be in your routine/what you will accomplish |
|----------|-------------|---|
| 1 | | |
| 2 | | |
| 3 | | |
| 4 | | |
| 5 | | |

Lastly, your assignment is to take this worksheet to your next lesson, and ask your teacher for advice! Discuss these concepts with them, and get feedback on how best to proceed.

Happy practicing!