

POWER PRACTICING

“THE QUIETER YOU BECOME, THE MORE YOU CAN HEAR.”

--BABA RAM DASS

Since most of us have been practicing from an early age, at some point we need to take stock of our work habits and retool. Our work habits and attitudes shape us as musicians. Without getting too intellectual, I think it helps to think of practicing as programming computer software. Every time we play or sing anything, we're telling our brains, "This is how I want to do this every time." Have you ever noticed if you make a mistake once, it has a tendency to happen again, if you repeat it without correcting it first? When we correct in an immediate and effective way, our brains think, "Oh, that's how she/he wants it. I'll do that from now on."

When we practice, we are developing muscular memory. Our bodies have all sorts of muscular memory. When we brush our teeth, pick up food with a fork, and tie our shoes, our bodies draw on hundreds of muscularly remembered tasks. Playing an instrument or singing is no different. At first, learning an instrument may seem foreign and impossible, but after a couple of weeks, our hands, arms, face, and feet seem to know what to do without consciously thinking about every motion. Muscular memory gives us the ability to let go in a performance, let our bodies do what we have taught them so well, and enjoy the ride.

Our minds constantly need new angles to stay interested and attentive. The traditional notion of practice is to repeat and repeat until we get it right. **The mind hates this method!** When we practice the same passage over and over again in the same way, our minds turn off after a few repetitions and we start making mistakes. *When we continuously provide our mind with new angles to look at a difficult passage, our mind pays close attention.* It thinks, "She/he is doing something different here, I better watch carefully." So, the more we can mix things up while practicing, the more focused our mind is and the more effective and efficient our practicing becomes.

The following sections go into more detail about

- General practicing principles
- Physical preparation
- How to “work all the angles”
- Equipment suggestions
- Infusing artistry into practice

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

Keep a notebook. Enter detailed notes about what you learned in your lesson or class. You can then refer to your journal throughout the week. You may be surprised at what you wrote down!

Regularity of practice is of utmost importance. It’s much more effective to practice half an hour every day, than an hour every other day. Daily practice is the path to strength, consistency and enjoyment.

PHYSICAL PREPARATION

Take a few minutes to unwind before a practice session. Here is a relaxation technique that works for me. Use this as a starting point. Experiment and develop your own process to achieve a relaxed feeling before you practice.

- Place your feet flat on the floor, get comfortable in your chair, and close your eyes.
- Breathe in through your nose for three counts, and out through your mouth for four long counts.
- Notice the difference between the sound of the breath coming in and the sound going out.
- Repeat this several times.
- Open your eyes slowly.
- Leave the day’s distractions behind you, and begin your practice session with a fresh mind.

Seek out a room that is comfortable to play in. The room should be free from distraction and interruption, and acoustically not too resonant but not too dry. We need accurate acoustical feedback from the room in which we regularly play.

Practice when you are physically and mentally rested. Effective practicing takes a surprising amount of mental energy. If we're too tired, the practice session may have a negative effect on the other good work we've done.

Stop practicing before you get overtired. One of my teachers used to say, "Always do 99% of your physical capacity, never 101%." Negative habits tend to crop up and take hold when we practice tired.

Exercise! The best professional musicians I know do regular aerobic exercise. For singers and wind players, being physically fit and toned in the abdominal area makes deep breathing and breath support much more natural and leads to stronger sound production. Exercise is a stress reducer.

Always warm-up and cool-down. The warm-up reminds our bodies about basic technique on a daily basis. The best way to stay injury-free is to perform a daily routine, which eases us into and strengthens us for a practice session. Hand and facial muscles, lips and vocal chords, are small and delicate and need to be finely tuned. Think about athletes who stretch and tone their bodies before any practice or event, and then stretch again afterwards, so they're flexible the next day.

WORKING ALL THE ANGLES

Play passages in s l o w m o t i o n the first time through. This is much more efficient than running through a passage at tempo and then having to go back and correct many things. *It's the first impression of a new passage that's the most lasting to our bodies and brains.* Use a metronome at a slow tempo to provide structure.

Change rhythmic patterns while using a metronome. This is one of the most effective techniques for getting our brains to pay attention.

For example:



Analyze what happened. Mistakes are to learn from. When we make mistakes, we need to slow down, go back and solve the issue. Perhaps we don't understand something clearly, or perhaps we weren't concentrating carefully enough. We need to ask ourselves a series of questions, like "Was I singing the right pitch in my mind? Did I breathe deeply enough? What would my teacher say in this situation?"

Stop on the note that feels unsure. This helps our minds become more definite about an awkward leap or an unusual turn of phrase.

Sing (out loud) passages with expression before you work on them. This gives us a break, and helps us quickly focus our minds.

Practice passages with eyes open, and then eyes closed. When we close our eyes we hear more keenly. Also, the notes we are less sure of become clear to us. We can open our eyes, revisit these specific places and practice them slowly and carefully. We then close our eyes again and see how we do. Every passage is very deeply learned when we go through this process. It's an excellent way to prepare for auditions.

Work sdrawkcab (backwards). Most people start practicing at the beginning of the first movement of a given piece. Try starting at the last section of the last movement and work backwards in sections. *This keeps the mind interested and helps us learn each piece thoroughly.* Our concentration is usually best at the beginning of a practice session, so working backwards or from the middle ensures that all passages will be given equal concentration.

We can do this with excerpts as well. Look at the Beethoven *Fidelio* example. Break the excerpt into short segments. Start with the last segment and work backwards. The openings of Strauss's *Ein Heldenleben* and *Till Eulenspiegel* also lend themselves well to this method.

Beethoven: *Fidelio* Overture

Horn in E

The musical score is divided into six numbered segments for practice:

- 1.** Bass clef, quarter notes: G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3.
- 2.** Treble clef, quarter notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4.
- 3.** Bass clef, quarter notes: G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3.
- 4.** Treble clef, quarter notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4.
- 5. solo.** Treble clef, quarter notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4. Dynamics: *p dolce*.
- 6. Adagio** Treble clef, half note: G4. Dynamics: *p*.

Below segment 6, there is a section marked **Allegro** with dynamics *cresc.* and *p dolce*, and a final bass clef segment.

EQUIPMENT

Use a metronome at least 70% of your practice time to develop a strong inner pulse, and maintain a disciplined practice atmosphere.

Use a tuner regularly. Tuners give us objective feedback about intonation (how our pitch matches up to standard pitch) just as metronomes give us feedback about tempo and rhythm. Intonation can be elusive and tricky. Room temperature can play havoc with intonation on all instruments. Many professionals I work with are constantly checking their pitch on a tuner.

When playing long tones in a warm-up, check on the intonation tendency each note has. Does the pitch go up or down when you play louder or softer? Try hearing the correct pitch in your mind before you play it into a tuner. Often, we need to recalibrate our hearing with a good standard. If you don't have a tuner, try checking your pitch with a well-tuned piano, or electronic keyboard.

Record Thyself. If we sing or play a wind instrument, our ears, mouths, and nose are connected and we really don't hear ourselves the same way the audience does. It's the same phenomenon that happens when we hear a recording of our speaking voice. The usual reaction is, "I don't sound like that!" The process of learning how our playing sounds to a listener takes time, experience, and good feedback. We want to make sure our sound is projected and clearly articulated to the audience. A decent recording device can give us objective feedback about many aspects of our playing that we can't always hear in practice. It's like having a second set of ears. But like everything, use moderation in recording.

ARTISTRY

Involve the artist side of your brain. Although it's important to be analytical about technical matters, don't lose sight of the fact that *we are artists, not machines*. Sometimes a technical issue can be overcome by singing a phrase out loud. *When our brain knows what the musical goal is, it finds a way to reach that goal.*

Emulate great singers and string players. Listen to lots of recordings; go to lots of live concerts. When working on Bach, Mozart, or Wagner, listen to vocalists sing works by those composers. See how other artists convey the moods in these different styles.

Develop a vision of how you ultimately want to sound. What is your dream horn sound, or bass baritone sound, or violin sound? What words would you use to describe your ideal sound on your instrument? Ideal staccato? Ideal legato? Once you have your artistic vision, go for it!

Perform the impossible. The way we improve as musicians is by stretching ourselves beyond what may seem possible. How can I make this legato as smooth as a clarinetist? How can I slur up to a high note and diminuendo like that great singer I heard? How can I sound as powerful and as warm as Fischer-Dieskau when I play this Brahms solo? How can I make my lip-trills sound like a great soprano singing Mozart? How can the sound on my instrument become my natural voice ?

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Let's be encouraging and positive with ourselves. When a conductor or teacher says, "That sounded terrible, you had better shape up," it tends to make one feel anxious and uptight, and negatively affects our playing and our attitude.

Practice is about change, and change can only happen in a positive atmosphere. When a teacher or conductor says, "Okay, you're doing very well, there are just a couple of things we need to address," we can more easily make the necessary adjustments from a positive suggestion. Yet many of us talk to ourselves in a negative way when we practice. I think it's important to learn to be gentle, encouraging, challenging teachers to ourselves. This is what empowers us as performers.

Build the foundation brick by brick. Every time we practice well, we build on every other effective practice session. Before we know it we've had hundreds of effective, positive practice sessions. Our brain and muscular memory retain this excellent work and we develop a solid, reliable, focused, positive approach that leaves us free to express and enjoy ourselves as we play or sing.

"WHATEVER WE REPEAT, THAT IS WHAT WE BECOME." –ARISTOTLE.

If we regularly infuse quality, artistry and gentleness in our daily practice, our playing becomes full of consistency, beauty, and confidence.

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“Mistakes are your best friends. They bring a message. They tell you what to do next and light the way. They come about because you have not understood something, or have learned something incompletely. They tell you that you are moving too fast, or looking in the wrong direction.

Mistakes might be detailed instructions on how to take apart and rewire physical motions, muscle by muscle. Or they might show you where you have not heard clearly, where you have to open up the music and listen again in a new way.

Examine a mistake as if you had found a rare stone. Run over the edges with your tongue. Peer inside the cracks of it. Hold it up to the sun, turning it this way and that. When you have learned what you can from it, toss it away casually, as if you didn't expect to see it again. If it shows up later, be patient and polite, and make a new accommodation. A mistake knows when it isn't needed, and eventually will leave for good.

The goal is not to make music free of mistakes. The goal is to be complete in learning, and to grow well.”

--W.A. Mathieu. *The Listening Book*. Boston and London: Shambala, 1991.