

# **PRACTICE AND STUDY TIPS**

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# Practice Strategies

**Matt Belzer**

When approaching a difficult passage, it is helpful to have a variety of strategies for practicing. These strategies have worked well over the years. Before you practice, though, you need to establish your criteria for success. What does it mean to really know a piece of music? Merely sight-reading it perfectly the first time does not guarantee mastery. As a performer, knowing a piece of music means that you can play it flawlessly every single time. Always remember that we are aiming for mastery. This should not be a discouraging thought. This is the best and worst thing about performing music: there's always more to do. And now for the strategies:

## **Small Bites**

Music is like pizza. Much as we'd like to, we can't pick up an entire pizza and swallow it whole. But we can break it into slices and then into bites. The idea here is to break the music into pieces small enough that it seems easy. Turn on the metronome and play each "bite" correctly five (or ten) times in a row. If you get to the fifth time and make a mistake, then you need to be disciplined enough to start over. Then you do the next "bite," and then you do two "bites" at a time.

## **Slow Motion Practicing**

Usually, the thing keeping us from playing a fast passage correctly isn't our ability to move our fingers quickly. It's our ability to play evenly and cleanly. Slow motion practicing can help with that. If a piece is marked quarter note equals 120, then set the metronome at eighth note equals 120. Set as a goal performing an entire passage (or movement) perfectly in slow motion. This includes dynamics, articulations, and everything else. Want to get up to speed? See the next strategy.

## **Two-Steps Forward, One Step Back**

When speeding up a passage, you can gradually increase the tempo without increasing tension in your hands. Start at a relaxed, slow tempo. Move the metronome up two clicks. You're going faster, but you're tense. Now move the metronome back one click.

You're faster than where you started, but now you've removed the tension. Repeat. This process can be combined with the first two techniques.

## **Jagged Style**

When there is a really note-y passage to play and your fingers trip over themselves, jagged style is helpful. In this style we purposely play the passage extremely unevenly. Alternate long-short-long-short, then alternate short-long-short-long. This seems to help get the kinks out of a line. This is usually the first thing I try.

## **Memorization**

I've noticed that as performers we often get distracted by all of the visual clutter on a page. For example, there could be too many accidentals or the rhythm is complicated. It helps to memorize that passage even if the memorization is only temporary. It can help to get you over that particular wall. Remember that the music is what is coming out of your instrument, not what you are seeing.

## **Lisa Cella**

### **Calendars**

To stay organized and on top of deadlines, I suggest a physical calendar that has one month per page - not computerized. Put big school events in different colors: for example - red for papers due, green for tests, and blue for concerts. This way you can see at a glance the kind of month you will have and it will help you budget your time and not have any surprises.

### **Learning Music**

Divide and conquer. One way of dealing with having too much music to learn is to map out a week long schedule: divide the pieces into more manageable chunks based on how much time you have to learn them. For example, an etude that is 10 lines long might be divided this way: 2 lines a day for 5 days (always reviewing the previous lines), and then 2 days on the whole thing. You can divide up your pieces that way as well. Using this method, the amount of music you need to learn in each practice session is more reasonable and you can concentrate fully on it rather than spend your time trying to get through everything and panicking.

### **Learning Difficult Passages**

There are many techniques for learning difficult passages, but the best advice is to always understand the patterns. Break the passages into small chunks and practice each chunk and the link from chunk to chunk.

### **Phrasing**

Difficulties in phrasing are often the result of the dynamic trajectory of the phrase not being balanced. I often find that first notes are too loud and immediately thwart the direction of the phrase. Always know where your high point of the phrase is and work backwards to make sure your first notes are a lesser dynamic. A solid understanding of the harmonic structure of the work you are playing is necessary to understand phrasing.

## Linda Dusman

Composing works best for me when I have a set time of day to do it. This way, when I approach that time, my mind already begins to move in that direction. I also have found that I am a "morning person"- my mind is clearest, and my imagination works best then. But I know plenty of composers who work best at night, so the main thing is to discover for yourself what the best time is, and then work regularly at that time if possible. Composing is just like being a performer in this way: if you don't "practice" regularly, you don't have the skills at the ready to be able to "perform," which in our case is creating good music.

When I compose, I try to clear my mind of everything else. If something comes to mind, I jot it on a piece of paper to get it out of my head, and deal with it later. I turn my computer and my phone off. I compose at a desk that faces a window where I can see a beautiful tree. Being able to look at it helps to clear my mind, and the natural world always inspires me.

I find beginning a new piece to be the most challenging, with ending it the second most challenging. At the beginning of a piece, I don't know it so well; I am at the beginning of understanding what I want to say and how I want to say it. It takes a lot of patience and nurturing. I try not to be too critical, and I never erase. But I cross out a lot, sketch ideas beside other ideas, and think a lot about the form. What is the big shape? How will the music move across that shape? Where will important changes occur, and how will I express that? I do not work at a piano initially, as color is very important to me and I want to be sure that I imagine the color of the sound very accurately at the beginning. If I am not writing for piano, working at the piano can thwart this (as do computer notation programs).

Time management constitutes a big challenge: how can I find the time to do everything that needs to be done? Being a composer also involves a lot of logistical work: responding to emails about my work, setting up rehearsal schedules and recording sessions, sending out scores and recordings, etc. One strategy that works for me involves having a running "to-do" list in my head (and sometimes on paper) divided into categories based on the amount of time tasks will take. So some things can be accomplished in a minute, some things take 10 minutes, some things take 20-30, some things take an hour, and some things many hours. Then, if I have a gap of 15 minutes in my schedule, I fill it with some of the short items. If I am working on a multi-hour task and get tired, I fill in with some of the shorter things to keep myself from getting discouraged ("At least I've accomplished something!") If I know a task will take an hour to do, I make sure I have that amount of time to work on it so I don't get half-way and have to quit.

My "to do" list includes music I want to listen to, poetry I want to read, etc. as well as items that feel more like "work": correspondence, editing my music, etc. As a result I can also fill in my schedule with different sorts of tasks. If I am feeling short of patience, listening to music or reading poetry rejuvenates me; if I have lots of energy then I do the more trying tasks. I discipline myself to do the things I like the least first, to get them out of the way.

## Tom Goldstein

Practicing is the only way to become a good player. There is no other way. There are no shortcuts. You've got to really want it. These may be clichés, but they're true.

Practicing is often a meditative process—one of self-discovery. It's also other things. It's problem solving. It is difficult to make generalizations about practicing because it is a very personal experience; at least it should be, and that's what I love about it.

Every teacher has his or her own things to offer. Try to be open to getting those things from that person. Your time with him or her is limited.

Perform often. No amount of talking about performing, or being talked to about performing, can substitute for the experience itself.

Practice A LOT with a metronome. (Tip: Sometimes, play with the metronome sounding on the offbeat, i.e., 2 and 4, or on the "and.")

Listening to good singers or choirs is a great way to learn how to phrase. Singing yourself, not necessarily well or publicly, helps enormously.

Play the music of the present. If you have a composer friend, ask him or her to write you a piece. Play the music of the past, too.

## Lori Kesner

When practicing an etude or solo, instead of playing through the piece and stopping for each mistake, choose how big a chunk of music you want to work on at that moment — be it a phrase, a section, or even an entire movement — and then play through that whole chunk without stopping. As you play, pretend you are performing. Really go for it; don't hold back, and don't worry about making mistakes. After you have played through the predetermined section, go back and fix the problematic areas one by one. Don't just put a Band-Aid on each mistake, but really FIX each problem.

When working on a problematic passage, first identify where the problematic notes are and then divide the passage into two parts: 1) the notes leading up to the problem and 2) the notes from the problem onward. Start by practicing the first part several times and then the second part several times. Once the two parts are secure, play the first part, then PAUSE (maybe even take a breath), and then play the second part. Continue practicing this way, gradually making the pause between the two parts shorter and shorter until the only thing that remains is a mental break between the two parts, but not an audible one.

If you encounter a passage in which your fingers are moving unevenly, practice by intentionally elongating a certain note in the passage. Play the passage again and choose a different note to elongate. This way your fingers don't get used to moving in the same uneven pattern each time.

When practicing a fast passage of running triplets or sixteenth notes, alternate between playing one beat at tempo and the next beat at half tempo. When this feels comfortable, play two consecutive beats at tempo followed by one beat at half tempo, and so on.

When confronted with a difficult fast passage that you have trouble getting up to speed, I recommend the following two approaches:

- 1) Choose a tempo at which you can play the passage with ease five times in a row perfectly (I usually start at about half tempo). Once you can execute this flawlessly, move the metronome up one notch and repeat (for "modern" metronomes that literally move one number, move the metronome up four digits, i.e. quarter note = 92 to quarter note = 96). If you make a mistake, even if it's on the fifth repetition, start again from one. Continue in this way moving the metronome up one notch at a time until you reach your target tempo.
- 2) Take a very small chunk of the passage - something that you can play flawlessly, even if it's only three notes - and play it MUCH FASTER than your target tempo. Once this is easy, add a few more notes onto the passage and again practice faster than your target tempo, though you will most likely have to play it slower than your original very fast tempo. Proceed in this way until you can play the whole passage at your target tempo.

## **Janice Macaulay**

### **Concerning Academic Work**

The single most valuable study tip I can offer is to pass along advice that was given to me by a stranger just before I began my freshman year at Brown University: do not get behind on your schoolwork for even one day. Do whatever it takes to keep up with every single assignment every single day. The old tortoise-and-hare tale is still very true.

### **Performance Tip**

Always do a complete harmonic and formal analysis of the pieces you are preparing to play. By studying the music, analyzing it as thoroughly as you can, and thinking about it carefully, you will be able to express what you have found in each piece. Your performances will become more personal, more intelligent, and more musical, and in the process, you will develop your own musical personality and your own distinctively individual style.



## Christian Tremblay

Practicing a musical instrument can be a very fulfilling and rewarding activity but can easily become a repetitive and boring one if we don't have clear goals. I often wonder what a Martian would think if he landed and saw us spending three-four hours standing there with our pretty wood boxes,...

On a more serious note, I believe that the first step to take when we practice is to acknowledge who we are doing it for. Growing up playing an instrument, we might think that it is to please a parent or teacher. In college, pleasing the teacher matters, and getting a good grade is also part of the equation. These are all realities, but we cannot enjoy practicing unless we realize that we are doing it for ourselves. The time that we spend practicing is our time, and since it is a personal project, we need to decide: "what am I doing here?"

As we clarify our practicing objectives, we need to have long, medium, and short-term goals in mind. The long-term objectives may seem obvious, for instance: "I want to become a professional violinist." They are however very important, because they can keep us focused and define our commitment to the activity.

I think the medium-term goals are the physical changes we make which help us achieve our long-term goal. The good news here is that the private teacher is there to help set the medium-term goals. I cannot emphasize how important I think these goals are! For example, when a new student comes to me, I will encourage some technical changes/improvements to achieve better vibrato, intonation, or legato for the semester. Those changes will make the student a better player and bring him/her closer to the long-term goal. However, these changes are often incorporated in the study of repertoire, and the short-term goal of learning the piece will take over the focus of the practice. The quality of the practicing will determine whether the student simply learned a new piece, or if there are actual changes happening, making him/her a better player.

To discuss the short-term goals which are more specific to daily practice, structure and focus are the key. I often tease students by asking them: "If I gave you a million dollars to learn this whole piece by tomorrow, could you do it?" The answer is always yes. To learn the piece with that incentive, the student thinks like a good cab driver: "how can I get from point A to point B in the most efficient way?" When the incentive is absent, it can feel more like getting on a bus without knowing where it is going. Here again, it is important to remember that the private teacher is giving you directions on where to go, so your journey is more productive and efficient.

### Daily Practice

Daily practice should start with some gentle arm stretches, loosening of the neck, and relaxed shoulders. Playing an instrument is a physical activity, so you need to prepare your body to get the most out of it. I believe strongly in practicing technique first, as early as possible in the day. Practice all your scales before 9am, and you will have stolen the day!

When you first pick up your instrument, it is absolutely okay to play for fun and noodle around to remember that you love it. This, however, is not practicing, so make sure that you turn on the practicing switch in your head and get to work soon.

Intonation is a non-negotiable requirement for good playing, so very careful scales, with various bowings and beautiful sound should be done every day.

Most problems for string players happen between notes, so doing some shifting exercises in the technical portion of your practice will go a long way.

Though they are not always popular, etudes are the best vehicle to help you work on those medium-term goals. If you don't want to be looking at the clock while doing them, put all your focus on achieving the etude's goal carefully and you will forget about time.

### **Practicing the Repertoire**

One of the greatest joys of learning our instruments is to have the opportunity to work on some of the great repertoire by composers such as Mozart, Beethoven, and Brahms. You will enjoy it even more if you organize your work.

Listening to the pieces, live if possible, and then selecting various recordings can be a great source of inspiration and information.

Know all the parts (piano part in a sonata or orchestra score for a concerto), so your part makes sense when you work on it.

Learn about the composer, the historical context, and about trends of the time.

Always listen to what is actually coming out of your instrument.

Don't wait to work on music! The phrasing and dynamics should be present from the moment you pick a fingering and a bowing and learn a passage. It will make more sense.

Work in small sections first, and always know why you are repeating a passage. Be analytical and find why you missed something. Isolate the problem. For example, is it the note before the shift, the shift itself, or the high note that you missed?

The music of the past and present that we receive is an extraordinary gift. Listen, listen, and listen! There is so much music to be discovered. Go to concerts and listen to live performances. It will feed you, and help you practice with enthusiasm.

### **For Student Composers**

Keep a composition journal where you note down musical ideas several times during the week. It may be nothing more than a note to yourself about a texture you thought of, a wonderful chord, or an idea for a text to set, or you might find yourself writing quite a bit.

Writers find journaling essential and composers can benefit also. In terms of composing, it is helpful to have several regular times/week of at least 2 hrs. during which you commit to sitting down and composing. Some sessions may not produce anything more than material for the circular file, but the regular practice of sitting in front of blank paper is a wonderful discipline. The 'muscle' of composing is strengthened by regular practice. No composing session is wasted.

When the music isn't coming, listen to something new or a favorite piece. Copy down quotations that inspire you and put them in your workplace or journal. One of my favorites is from Mel Powell: "You can't force originality. Neither can you prevent it." If you are inspired by visual art, have some favorites on your wall. Read a few biographies per semester of favorite composers. Finding out the details of their lives is inspiring, humbling, and contextualizes their achievements. Try keeping up with what's current by reading/listening to NewMusicBox at [www.newmusicbox.com](http://www.newmusicbox.com). Go to as many concerts at UMBC and in the community as you can. Go to dance concerts and art galleries as well to see what your artistic peers are doing.

## E. Michael Richards

Break up your practice time (for example two 90-minute practice sessions instead of one 3-hour session) — it will allow you to concentrate better. Even if you are incredibly busy on a particular day, have your instrument out so you can take advantage of small time chunks. Even 20 minutes is better than nothing!

Practice pieces that you are working on "slower than you can imagine." A friend of mine in the Boston Symphony spends an hour at a very slow tempo playing only 1 page of music!

Use a metronome frequently to help you find (and remember) the appropriate tempo, and to structure your practice. Use a tuner to help you remember both the sound and "feel" of playing in tune with yourself.

Listen like crazy!!!! Always strive to create a beautiful sound and fluid technique. The definition of beautiful must always be appropriate for the music you are playing. Attend as many concerts, and listen to as many recordings as you can to develop an idea of how you want to sound.

Warm up properly. Focus on exercises that build tone and technique at least 30-40 minutes per day. One of my favorites to build smooth legato intervals is the fulcrum study below — the "fulcrum notes" on the bottom system are for clarinet, but this can be adjusted for any instrument. Play the first line with each set of four notes, progressing from minor 2nds to octaves. Be sure (wind players) to breathe after the first 2 measures and re-enter on time (and in tune!) at subito piano; do not breathe until you finish the line; repeat the eighth notes until they are perfectly even and legato with uniform sound (practice at 120, then faster or slower tempos with a metronome; warm-up with one fulcrum tone for a couple of days, than change it).

**FULCRUM STUDY** (for smooth intervals)

(EXAMPLE ON E)

$\text{♩} = 120$

m2

f p f

m3

p f p

m4

p f p

m5

p f p

m6

p f p

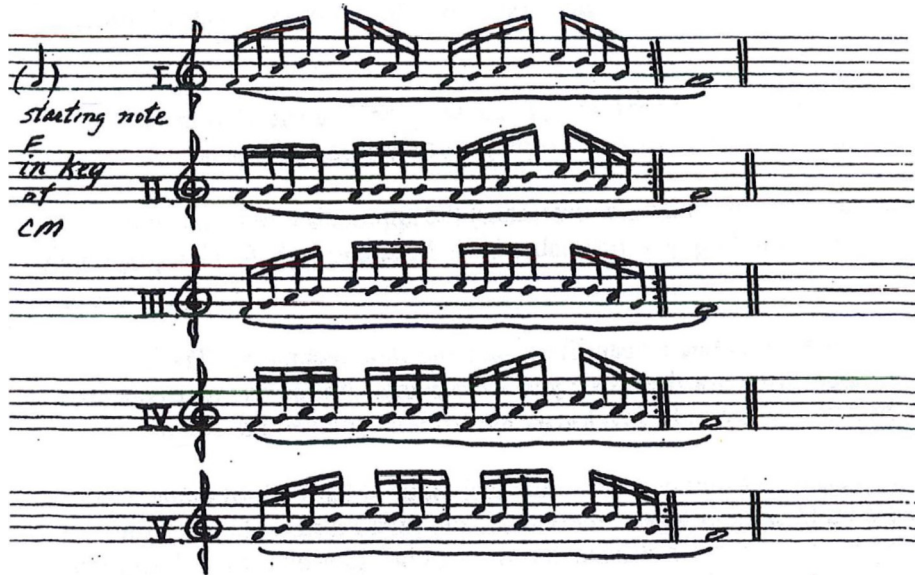
m7

p f p

OCTAVE

fulcrum notes: p f p

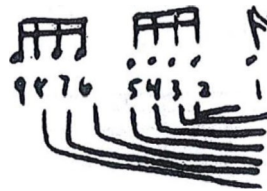
Another exercise that is a variation on practicing scales is the "4-5-6-7-8 study." Use this to warm-up in the key of the music that you will be practicing:



Here are some ideas for practicing and perfecting a difficult passage, like the one below:



- 1) Pay attention to your finger movement (minimum motion for maximum effect). Finger the passage slowly without playing, and watch your fingers move together precisely. Then play the passage slowly, gradually increasing the speed on each repetition.
- 2) Backwards chaining practice (at performance tempo): last 3 notes (3-2-1); last 4 notes (4-3-2-1); last 5 notes (5-4-3-2-1), etc.



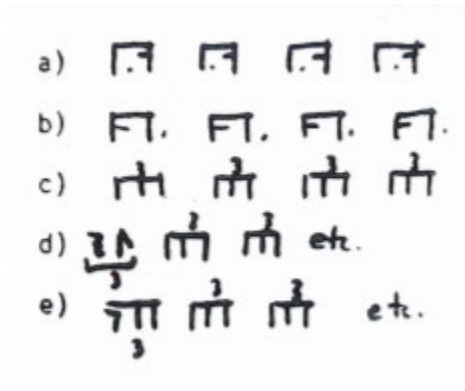
- 3) Interval stretching: identify the most difficult interval, place a fermata on the 1st note of that interval, and play the passage (notes before and after the fermata); gradually shorten the fermata until it is the same length as the duration in the music.



4) Beat to beat practice:



5) Practice the passage with uneven rhythms (this encourages finger preparation):



6) Accent the beat.

7) Accent the problem note, or point of control (first note of most difficult interval).

8) Play the passage and deliberately play the wrong note — then deliberately correct it.

### Phrasing

- Mark breaths when you begin working on a piece of music so you can practice them (they are just as important as the pitches and rhythms).
- Identify the primary goal tone, then any secondary goal tone(s) — they are most commonly found on a strong beat, c.3/4 of the way through the phrase (informed by the harmony). Make these notes special by approaching them with a crescendo, or by stretching the rhythm just before you arrive, or with a tenuto on (or just before) the goal. These are just a few of countless other possibilities of musical shaping informed by the design of the music. Use what you have learned in music theory! For example, resolution tendencies of each note of a key; non-harmonic tones; musical sequences/repetitions (never let a repetition or variation sound the same as the original!!)
- Music is made up of repetition, variation, and contrast.
- Be faithful to what the composer has written. Meld your "voice" to this, but don't turn the music into your vanity show (check your ego at the door!).

## Kazuko Tanosaki

### Organize Your Thoughts and Time

Practice basic technique and musical pieces separately. It's much faster and productive to master each basic technique separate from pieces and not try to master technique in the actual music.

My basic practice technique, the "Multi Vitamin Effect," consists of small efforts that have big payoffs. I practice every day:

Hanon - 1 piece (hands separate)

First slowly for warming up, sound creation, and finger independency, and then in slow staccato for wrist up/down motion. Then in fast staccato for French technique, and also at a fast speed for circular wrist motion.

Pieces from Czerny 40 and 50 for warming up in various musical forms.

A few pieces from Chopin and Liszt Etudes, for checking the level of each day's technique. (Also, these pieces can be ready for a sudden performance opportunity.)

### Learning Music: Activate Your Musical Intelligence

Study the score before playing and try to understand its contents.

I use Solfege and try to imagine how a score sounds. At this point, I try not to depend on a recording so I can start from my own imagination/interpretation.

I start from the big picture, figuring out the structure and form:

- 1) (Classical or Western style) AB or ABA' form or
- 2) (Non-classical or Western style) open form: A, B, C, D

Then I look in more detail to understand the themes.

- 1) Classical era: the character of the theme or motive
- 2) New music: this is more general and depends on the composer and piece, such as the beauty of dissonance, mathematical time changes through metric modulation, etc.

Combining the big picture and the themes, I plan the musical flow. Is there a climax? Where is it? How to accomplish it? (Harmony, dynamics, tempo changes, and basic tendency of timbre, etc.)

The first time playing a piece, plan your practice schedule, combining the above two methods.

How long do I need in order to realize the musicality with my technique? If I have a performance date already set, I calculate backwards. For example, if I have 8 weeks, I may make a plan like:

Sight read with a precise musical reading: 2 weeks

**Build up musicality with memorization: 4 weeks**

Prepare for the performance, using the hall and piano I will perform on (if possible): 2 weeks

## Helpful Hints

- 1) 10 x 10 - circle difficult measures, and practice 10 to 100 times until they are mastered. Count out loud: one, two, three, — (I usually can master something in around 37-45 times.)
- 2) Mark in color different dynamics — this is useful for new music. I make a copy of the score and color it: f = red, p = blue, mf = purple, etc. This way, the energy flow becomes clear, and it is easy to concentrate on pitch and rhythm.

## Airi Yoshioka

Practicing is time for investigations, discoveries, reinforcements, and growth. When done with care and consistency, the process is extremely rewarding and fun! Enjoy the journey of finding yourself through the art of practicing.

Some guiding points:

- Daily practice is better than skipping a day and "making it up" the next day with extra hours. You can take one day off a week for refreshment and rest (which is very important) but make sure to practice daily even if some days may be shorter.
- **Length of practice:** Generally, for string players, four to five hours is optimal. Discuss with your teacher what is the appropriate length depending on where you are in your development.
  - Please keep in mind that it's not the length that you are after but the quality of practice. Bad practice can be worse than no practice.
  - Divide up the practice sessions so that you maintain full concentration the entire time. Gauge your mental/physical stamina.
  - If your concentration is wavering and you intended to practice longer, go and get a drink of water, read a couple of pages of a book, etc., but be sure to come back before your body gets cold and you need to warm up again.
  - Keep in mind that some days you may feel great about your playing and others, not. Accept and embrace the cycle!
  - Never push your body to the limit. Insert a few minutes' break if you are practicing for an extended period of time. If any discomfort/pain starts up anywhere, stop and investigate the cause.
- While there is a time and a place to work through a passage technically, you need to move away from thinking about it from a technical perspective only and play it with musical intent. Once you start to think musically (using vibrato to give color, changing articulations, etc.) this could potentially present other technical challenges. You need to foster MUSICAL TECHNIQUE, and not just dry technique. After all, you are developing technique so that you can express yourself fully with ease and comfort.
- If you are learning a difficult piece, divide up the practice so that you are practicing the difficult passages not all in one sitting (you may start to feel like you are banging your head against the wall...) but at multiple times a day. This allows you to look at the passages with a fresh and new perspective every time you come to them.
- Along those lines... When I'm learning a piece with multiple difficult passages, I create a sheet of paper with the excerpts of the difficult passages pasted on 11x17 paper that I can whip out and practice when I have 5 minutes to spare. This extra practice session can do wonders—you can look at the passages with a fresh perspective, as discussed above. Sometimes, I try playing it cold and as musically convincing as possible without any warmup to assess if I'm close to getting it, determine what the problems are, and brainstorm different ways to improve.



- To keep the continuity of the practice, I often clip a sheet on each piece of music and write down exactly what I need to start practice the next day. For example, I will write, "Work on the sound quality in mm. 25-30" or "memorize the development section", etc. Not only will this add continuity from day to day, but it will also reinforce the reflective/assessment component to the end of every practice session.
- Include a performance component in every practice. This puts the detailed practice in the context of the piece rather than just isolated technical challenges. Often the challenge of a given passage is the result of what comes before or after.
- If there is something you are trying to improve/change in your playing (strengthening a particular finger, changing a component of your embouchure, etc.), spend 5-10 minutes on it every day. Spending a few concentrated minutes can get you thinking about it during the rest of your practice and lead to a major change.
- Record yourself to develop the inner ear. A good recorder is a musician's best friend and your own best teacher. Record yourself periodically so that you have the chance to assess if what you are hearing is how you really sound. Start bridging the gap between the two and you will see an improvement.
- If you are giving a recital, I recommend making a chart of all the pieces in your repertoire (for a multi-movement piece, give each movement an entry) a couple of months before the recital and checking off the pieces you practiced that day. The point is not to practice every movement every day, unless that is your goal, but to assess if your daily practice is covering the materials adequately enough to lead to a successful recital.
- Be sure to warm up by doing a few stretches without the instrument first. Discuss with your teacher about what would be a good warm-up routine for you.
- Make sure that you are listening to your body ALL THE TIME. Do you experience any tension or tightness anywhere? Immediately attend to any physical tension or pain—bring it to the attention of your teacher immediately. Be sure to make exercising (cardio/strength training) a part of your day. Maintaining good physical/mental health is critical to your being an effective musician and embracing your life in general.

### **Mental Practice/Practice without the Instrument**

- Having a clear picture of how you want to sound/play a phrase/perform MENTALLY is critical to how you sound. Be sure to spend time away from the instrument to form a comprehensive understanding of the piece. This is especially critical with a technically difficult work since you might feel the necessity to constantly drill the challenging passages. What kind of story are you telling with the piece? Make the piece personal to you. (Interestingly, some technical things fall into place once you have a clear picture of what you are trying to communicate.)
- Analyze the piece for harmony, form, and structure. It is very important for you to have a large picture of the piece and understand what makes the piece special from a compositional angle.

- Phrasing can often come alive through singing. If you are not quite sure of the direction of the phrase, sing it vocally. It will help you with the landing points of the phrase as well as open up your singing spirit. (Don't worry about how you sound. Do it behind closed doors!)
- Research the context of the piece. Under what circumstances was it written? What was the composer going through with his/her life when the piece was written? I find reading diaries of composers inspiring as it allows me to get into the mindset of the composer. This research unleashes your IMAGINATION, a critical component in transporting yourself and your audience to the world of your piece.

### Perfecting a Difficult Run



Example: Concerto in A minor, op. 35, by Dvorak, 1<sup>st</sup> movement

- 1) **Rhythms and articulations** (string players: bowings). Practice by combining different rhythms and articulations. Start with the basics:  
 Make it more difficult by breaking out of the given pattern by doing different rhythms and articulations and longer patterns. (In this example, try 3, 5, 6, 9, 10, etc.)
- 2) **Add one note at a time.** This is an amazingly effective way of solidifying the passage. Play it exactly as you would in a performance, at the final tempo. Play the first note exactly where you would play it on the bow. Then, add the next note and **DO NOT GO ON** until it sounds exactly as you want. At each stage of adding a note, make sure to identify the technical problem. Keep in mind that the issue in the passage may not be the actual problem note but how you prepare for or come out of the note.
- 3) **Backward practice.** Play it backwards.
- 4) **Create patterns.** For example, go forward 4 notes and back 3 notes.

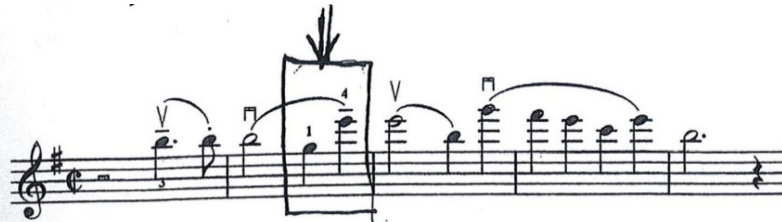
### Effective Shifting Practice for String Players

Shifts can be the cause of intonation problems and this is often due to the fact that we are not completely confident of where the hand is going. This method is effective for learning the exact distance that the hand must travel and fool-proofing your shifts. Even doing a couple of sets of these exercises will improve shifting in general.

- Always use the metronome. Depending on the difficulty, put it at 40-50 per quarter note (slower if the shift is harder.) No matter what the note value of the note, practice them as quarter notes (as seen below) and at this slow tempo.
- Shift between the 2nd and 3rd beats: Pace the timing so that you are measuring your shift during the one beat. Always release your finger before shifting.

- The bowing affects the shift so always observe the bowings so that you are doing the shift in the exact bowing marked. (In the Mendelssohn example below, both G and E should occur on a down bow.)

- 1) Do the shifting as written and return back to the original note, respecting the exact motion of the shift both going towards the note and away from the note, WITHOUT VIBRATO. Stay on this step until you are hitting the notes in tune with your hand relaxed. In the example below, there is an intermediary note but some shifts don't have one. Do the exercise exactly as you would shift in the piece.
- 2) Vibrate the departing note, both going towards and away from the note.
- 3) Vibrate the arrival note.
- 4) Vibrate both the departing and arrival notes.



Example: Violin Concerto in e minor, op. 64, 1<sup>st</sup> movement

no vibrato

vibrate the departing note

repeat vib as necessary

vib

vib

vib

vib

vib

vib

vibrate the arrival note

vibrate both the departing and arrival notes

## Engaging New Music - E. Michael Richards

(with ideas from R. Murray Schafer and Philip Yenawine)

It is quite clear that one can like/understand more than one kind of music without having a crisis of conscience over it. This is a very important distinction between the appreciation of music and other kinds of intellectual activity. With religion - and the same is true of politics or philosophy - you accept the one system which seems to you to be the most reasonable, but in doing this you automatically negate all other systems as being invalid. You can't be a communist and a capitalist at the same time any more than you can be Jewish and Christian at the same time. But the understanding/appreciation of music doesn't work this way at all; it's rather an accumulative thing; you keep discovering new things of interest, but these new things in no way negate the things you understood and enjoyed before.

I suppose what I really want to tell you is above all to be curious about music. Don't be content to stand still in your musical tastes, because you are not going to betray your old favorites by acquiring new ones. The horizon can go on expanding and expanding; all your life you will find new things to explore. It's just the same as going to a library. You may look through twenty books before you find one you want to read, but if you hadn't looked through the twenty, you'd never find anything worthwhile to read. And the strangest thing is that the book you choose this year will not be the same as the one you may choose next year. Time really forces us to go on acquiring new tastes.

Someone once said that the two most important things in developing taste were sensitivity and intelligence. I don't think this is so; I'd rather call them curiosity and courage - curiosity to look for the new and the hidden, and courage to develop your own tastes regardless of what the majority may say or think.

Before ear training it should be recognized that we require ear cleaning. Before we train a surgeon to perform delicate operations, we first ask them to get into the habit of washing their hands. Ears also perform delicate operations, and therefore ear cleanliness is an important prerequisite for all music listening. The ear, unlike some other sense organs, is exposed and vulnerable. The eye can be closed at will; the ear is always open. The eye can be focused and pointed at will; the ear picks up all sounds right back to the acoustic horizon in all directions.

As an artist/teacher of music obsessed with the idea that music is vital to our well-being, I am convinced that the art music of our time is an accessible resource of various thoughtful and interesting ideas and sensory pleasures. To start to learn about it requires little background, although a spirit of open inquiry is essential. We then need to use our ears in a more demanding way than is normal. The thinking process begins as we relate what we hear to things we know.

We also need to probe the evidence, to contemplate and speculate about meaning. Unlike much commercial music, or a newscast that essentially predigests information, modern art music is configured to make us think for ourselves. Music is not meant to be just beautiful, appropriate for a setting, entertaining, or easy. Its most satisfying function is that it allows us to exercise our minds. A work of music will establish certain boundaries by its subject matter, style, materials, and techniques. By finding its ambiguities, we can proceed in a game of speculation and interpretation. The real core of the musical experience comes from seeking symbols and relationships, making analogies and metaphors, and finding ideas and implications that emerge

from given observations. These are the activities that are ultimately most useful to us, particularly in a time when most experiences ask too little. Such critical thinking is the most useful tool we have for negotiating our complicated, ever-changing world.

Modernism's history is one of redefining music's roles, methods, parameters, and meanings, and it should be no surprise that musical traditions or existing conditions have not been binding. Musicians, like scientists, have refused to believe in limitations and impossibilities and thus have striven to break boundaries and surpass expectations. However, music is still of utmost significance to our ability to engage meaningfully with the world, just as it always has been. Although it often sounds radically different from music of the past, music today continues to contain useful messages in spiritual, inspirational, and even quite rational terms.

Confusion may stem partly from not-so-deeply buried memories of yesterday. As recorded in the histories of most cultures, the traditional role of music was based on accepted conventions. It was appropriately crafted out of predictable materials. Music was both integral and essential; its messages were clear to people, probably the way television is today. Music could function in this way because it was localized within a relatively homogeneous and somewhat static community. Our "community" today, on the other hand, is a "worldwide web" - extremely diverse, and rapidly evolving. This diversity argues against the possibility of creating a profound music understood by all.

Dealing with the experience of a rapidly changing world - one that often seems bewildering - has led modern composers to search for a vocabulary to describe, for example, psychology's discovery of the unconscious, or the unconscionable acts of inhumanity that persist in our times. The recognition of the "globe as village," interconnected and interdependent, has also been a motivation for seeking universal languages that might transcend barriers of place and time (perhaps a reason for abstraction throughout the arts). Contemporary composers have often felt compelled to assert their own uniqueness, emphasizing self-expression and individual identity, as perhaps another response to the sense of oneself as a tiny part of a global village with ever-expanding populations.

Beauty and decoration are still motivating factors in the work of many composers. Awareness of history, too, is an inspiration: some composers react against both the immediate and distant past and others adopt and adapt it. Other composers choose subjects and styles because of social and political concerns they wish to address. Humor and irony play a motivating role, also, and we shall see that iconoclasm - the desire to invent, subvert, and even trivialize - greatly motivates artistic choices. Finally, we should note that the very factors that excite some - the simplicity of pop music, for example - offend others, creating an amazing diversity of expressions, all reflective of the culture that produced them.

# Practice Techniques for Pianists

Daniel Pesca

## I. Overall points to keep in mind . . .

The point of practice is not to make yourself feel better — it is to **get** better!

*Signs you might be practicing to make yourself feel better:*

- excessive running of the piece
- jumping around too much, or too fast a practice pace (“cramming”)
- playing always at tempo or faster than tempo
- “broken record” treatment of trouble spots

*Practicing to get better is:*

- patient: take the time to engrain the right habits, whether they are fingering, pedaling, voicing, rhythm, or any other parameter.
- logical and thoughtful: rather than just “going through the motions,” the mind is constantly engaged and present.
- pleasant and optimistic: if things take longer than you planned, you’re okay with it. What’s important is trusting a sound, structured process.

## Wynton Marsalis’s Tips for Practice

1. **Seek out instruction**: A good teacher will help you understand the purpose of practicing and can teach you ways to make practicing easier and more productive.
2. **Write out a schedule**: A schedule helps you organize your time. Be sure to allow time to review the fundamentals because they are the foundation of all the complicated things that come later.
3. **Set goals**: Like a schedule, goals help you organize your time and chart your progress. If a certain task turns out to be really difficult, relax your goals. Practice doesn’t have to be painful to achieve results.
4. **Concentrate**: You can do more in 10 minutes of focused practice than in an hour of sighing and moaning. This means no video games, no television, no radio, just sitting still and working. Concentrated effort takes practice too, especially for young people.
5. **Relax and practice slowly**: Take your time; don’t rush through things. Whenever you set out to learn something new – practicing scales, multiplication tables, verb tenses in Spanish – you need to start slowly and build up speed.
6. **Practice hard things longer**: Don’t be afraid of confronting your inadequacies; spend more time practicing what you can’t do. Successful practice means coming face to face with your shortcomings. Don’t be discouraged; you’ll get it eventually.
7. **Practice with expression**: Every day you walk around making yourself into “you,” so do everything with the proper attitude. Express your “style” through how you do what you do.
8. **Learn from your mistakes**: None of us is perfect, but don’t be too hard on yourself. If you drop a touchdown pass, or strike out to end the game, it’s not the end of the world. Pick yourself up, analyze what went wrong and keep going.

9. **Don't show off:** It's hard to resist showing off when you can do something well, but my father told me, "Son, those who play for applause, that's all they get." When you get caught up in doing the tricky stuff, you're just cheating yourself and your audience.
10. **Think for yourself:** Your success or failure at anything ultimately depends on your ability to solve problems, so don't become a robot. Thinking for yourself helps develop your powers of judgment.
11. **Be optimistic:** Optimism helps you get over your mistakes and go on to do better. It also gives you endurance because having a positive attitude makes you feel that something great is always about to happen.
12. **Look for connections:** If you develop the discipline it takes to become good at something, that discipline will help you in whatever else you do. The more you discover the relationships between things that at first seem different, the larger your world becomes. In other words, the woodshed can open up a whole world of possibilities.

**REMEMBER TO START YOUR PRACTICE SESSION WITH A WARM-UP PERIOD.**

This is an opportunity to focus solely on technique, apart from the musical and interpretive challenges in repertoire. Once you establish a good warm-up routine that gets you in the right physical and headspace, *stick with it*. Or, you can create a cycle of warm-up materials that you go through every few days during the warm-up routine.

## **II. Learning a piece**

- Divide the piece into bite-sized, phrasal units (generally 6-12 measures, often 8, sometimes shorter in slow or dense music like fugues, etc.)
  - Pencil these units in your score.
  - Make sure you include a dovetail—you should almost never stop right at a bar line. Go slightly beyond it so you practice the link. Always practice the phrase with its pick-up if it has one.
- Move through the units systematically. Exact procedure will vary from piece to piece, texture to texture. Here are some possibilities:
  - Generally, start at half tempo or slower.
  - Generally, start hands alone.
  - Break down into smaller units as necessary.
  - When you put it hands together, play slowly enough that you can pay close attention to how each hand is moving, *especially* when there are leaps.
  - ISOLATE CHALLENGES: if the rhythm is hard, practice only it (singing as you tap a steady pulse). If the harmonies are hard, play them out of time and get them in your fingers and ears. Find creative ways of isolating the parameters that cause you trouble.
- USE A METRONOME. Your objective during the learning process is to play every unit *absolutely* in time with total rhythmic accuracy.

- Virtually all musical styles allow for, or even require, some rhythmic and tempo flexibility (rubato in Romantic music, for example). But flexibility is meaningless and becomes pulseless if there is not an underlying sense of structure, which you build in when you learn.
- Consistency of fingering is paramount. Take time to **write in** fingerings. I often do this on **day one** with a new piece. If you practice a passage with a different fingering each time, you are wasting effort and confusing your muscles.
  - Remember that the fingering you see printed in sheet music is rarely put there by the composer himself. Therefore: you are at liberty to change it. Everyone's hand is different. The same goes for fingerings that your teacher gives you!
  - FINGERING is a whole separate topic, but a few overall principles:
    - Patterns are helpful (thumbs on beats, third fingers on beats, etc.) If and when you break a pattern, it should have a meaning and be systematic (for example: thumbs on the beats except when a black key is on the beats, etc.).
    - Avoid "fancy" fingerings. A fingering that is simple and dependable is far superior to a fingering that seems more "sophisticated" but is error-prone in practice.
      - Many editions will suggest "fancy" fingerings . . .
    - On the other hand: often the fingering that works best is counter-intuitive. Experiment! Be creative!
      - \* *A model of creative fingering is the Schnabel edition of the Beethoven Sonatas.*
- Make intelligent choices about pedaling early in your process. This does not mean you always practice with pedal, but how you choose to pedal will affect fingering choices, voicing choices, and much else that you are working out early on, so don't ignore it! Pedaling is not a sauce you pour on top of your performance—it should be baked into the process.
- Likewise, ornaments: make a plan for them early, so you have plenty of time to practice them in context.
- **Do not always go forward through the units.** Work equally often from the end.

*Q. When do I incorporate musical decisions / dynamics, etc., into my practice?*

A. Earlier than you think. Phrasing decisions and especially dynamics can impact many other parameters, such as choice of fingering and overall technical approach. As Marsalis writes: "Practice with Expression!"

### III. Drilling techniques

#### Magic tempos

- Start by dividing the full tempo by two (i.e., if full tempo is 120, start with 60).
- Divide the remaining space evenly into 4 other tempos (i.e., 72, 84, 96, 108).
- Practice at **all** these tempos **regularly**.



### **Building a passage forwards or backwards** (great for running passages)

- For instance, if a running passage lasts 4 bars of 4/4:
  - Play just the last beat and downbeat. Then, beats 3-4 of the last measure (plus downbeat). Continue building backwards beat by beat.
- **Backwards is even better than forwards.**

### **Other techniques for running passages**

- Practice rhythms, for instance:
  - duple patterns: long-short, short-long
  - triple patterns: long-short-short, short-long-short, short-short-long, etc.
- Practicing staccato is also great for running passages.
- Doubling values: play each tone twice in a row. The repeated motion engrains the notes in the fingers.

### **“Ghosting” (a.k.a. “Fake and play”)**

- Most often: only play one hand, but go through the motions of playing the other hand without actually depressing the keys.
- You can also do this with multiple voices in the same hand.

### **Reduction / simplification / “blocking”**

- Turn broken chord patterns, Alberti basses, etc. into block chords.
- This helps to learn the underlying harmonic progression without the challenge of coordination that accompaniment patterns often pose.
- This also helps organize passages technically, by engraining where and how harmonic shifts occur.

### **Systematic looping with a metronome**

- This works great for single measures or 1-2 beats that are very tricky.
- Build a set number of beats of rest into your loop.

### **Create your own studies that target particular challenges you face**

*\* For a great treasure trove of such practice techniques, look at Alfred Cortot's suggestions for practicing each Chopin Etude.*

#### **IV. Memorization**

- There are different kinds of memory: muscle memory, aural memory, visual memory, conceptual memory. A successful memorized performance relies on **all** of these to differing extents and in different passages.
- Use the same bite-sized phrasal units you use in your learning process for memorizing. (In other words, do not try to play the whole piece immediately from memory over and over to “see how far you can get.”)
- The most efficient way: play each chunk once or twice with score, then close the score and play. If you need to go back to the music, play a couple more times. Do not move on until you can play the unit from memory three times in a row without memory errors.
- Play from memory at many different tempos, and not just at full tempo. Use the “magic tempos” above. Playing slowly from memory forces you to rely on other types of memory besides muscle memory.

#### **V. As performance approaches . . .**

- Seek opportunities to run the piece not only for yourself in the practice room, but invite a few friends in to listen.
- Record yourself, listen back, and take notes.
- Don't stop using the drilling techniques above. Maintenance is key!