



Practice Smarter, Not Longer

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Tips for Getting Started

Willpower is a limited resource, so don't rely on it to practice, make practicing a treat
Create your practice schedule and daily goals the day before, so you're ready to go
Make sure goals are small and achievable so practice is rewarding
Have your instrument somewhere you'll see it, and somewhere you want to spend time
When you finish, leave something undone for the next day, so you're eager to get back to it!

Know WHY you're practicing: every session needs general and specific goal(s)

To get better at playing your instrument

To get better at performing your instrument (not the same thing)

To have fun!

Specifics: problem spot identification, hard spot improvement, tempo increase, chain-linking, mood creation, technique drilling, memory work, first time retrieval practice

Unproductive versus Productive Practice

Unproductive: mindless, wastes times, hurts confidence

Productive: goal directed, problem solving, stop analyze what went wrong and how to fix it

Video your practicing frequently, and evaluate how you use your time!

Smart Practicing: What, Why, How? Problem Solving (from the Bulletproof Musician)

1. Define the problem
2. Analyze the problem
3. Identify potential solutions
4. Test potential solutions
5. Implement the best of the solutions
6. Monitor implementations, how are the results? Do they need refinement?

Three Questions to Constantly Ask: Imagine, Listen, Reflect

1. How do you want it to sound?
2. Is it sounding how you want it to?
3. What strategies can you apply to make it sound like you imagine?

Reflexive Control: performing a sequence of actions without conscious awareness of the process guiding the actions. This allows free conscious attention to devote to expressive ideas.

Practicing Shouldn't Feel Too Easy: if one always sounds good, growth may be sacrificed

Desirable Difficulties are educational difficulties which make learning slightly more difficult, but as a result, more effective. Students may feel frustrated, but progress will stick and better results will be seen over time. Examples include spacing, interleaved practice, and the testing effect (retrieval).

Interleaved (Random) Practice: random rearrangement of elements in a practice session to promote enduring, flexible learning. Opposite of "blocked" practice in which one concept or physical movement is repeated continually. Interleaved practice uses spacing, makes the brain work harder since each repetition is the "first time" because partial forgetting has taken place, and results in better recall.

Productive Struggle: it creates myelin, which reinforces new synapses (connections) between neurons. It is the pavement of the brain pathways, increasing the speed of an un-myelinated brain signal up to 100 times.

Four Ways to Increase Myelination: Retrieval practice (flash cards, practice tests, etc.), Interleaving, Spacing (distributing practice evenly over daily sessions), and Mindfulness (post-practice reflection, silent pauses to think).

Prioritizing While Practicing: try **iterative practice** (cycle through a piece multiple times, with each cycle a focus on a different element). The first cycle, take care of obvious problems, the second finer details, then picky elements, and finally tiny details. This helps avoid losing track of time and prioritizing small details over major ones. **Identify your MITs (Most Important Tasks)** by recording yourself and listening back.

Accelerate the Learning Process with Focus:

Practice at your peak energy time, when you're most productive

Schedule errands, work, chores, homework, etc. at other times of the day (when possible)

Cultivate your attention span and develop **attentional endurance**

Train the voice in your head to focus without distraction

Deliberate practice will occupy your inner voice with problem solving

Every time a distracting thought arrives, acknowledge it as distracting, banish it, and refocus on practice.

The importance of sleep: practice a hard passage right before bed, review it just after waking.

Why Doesn't Practice Stick? **Structured Practice Versus Unstructured Practice** (have a plan!)

Free practice: go to the instrument and wing it!

Structured practice: activities such as analyzing score, silent practice, visualization, audition, tapping the rhythm, identifying difficult measures and drilling them, interleaved practice, slow practice, metronome, writing in the music

Keep a practice log/schedule. Make sure it is detailed! **Include Weekly and Daily plans**

Create the general weekly plan at the start of the week (right after the lesson)

Plan the next day's practicing after finishing that day's practice

1. Identify your priorities
2. Assess your time resources
3. Establish short and long term goals
4. Design a strategy to achieve them

Keeping a Practice Log/schedule is critical and needs to be done in detail!

Identify **specific problems** and write **potential strategies**

Use 5-10 minutes at end of practice to plan the next day

Use a journal, notebook, or google document, or create a printable template

Make sure each item to practice includes a **specific and achievable goal!**

Be a Smart Practice Manager, skills needed:

1. Estimate accurately how much time is needed to achieve a short, daily goal
2. Organize available daily practice to cover pieces, sight-reading, technique, etc.
3. Create a daily plan that leads to achievement of long-term performance goals

Maximize Efficiency by Limiting Practice Time

Parkinson's Law: work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion. If you have limited time, what would you work on, what would you prioritize? How would the focus change? Start your practice with a detailed plan, a determination to be productive every minute, and see how much you can achieve. Be productive, but **not frantic or stressed.**

Try a **practice sprint.** Set a timer!

Identify your MIT - **Most Important Tasks!**

Identify the most important issues to address. While many items may feel urgent, don't work on details at the expense of bigger problems you don't realize are there until the performance.

How? Record a run through at the beginning of your practice session, just after warming up.

Listen then: Identify the MIT, and stay focused on them!

Technique of Observation: to solve a problem, you must notice it exists! Try focusing on just one element a week.

Elements to observe: **Rhythm:** Evenness, flow, pacing, direction, pulse, articulation, tempo, inflection of rhythmic subdivision, metric stress, energy, character

Tone: voicing, clarity, focus, support, core, consistency, depth, character, intensity, timbre, articulation, breathing quality, vocal quality, color, intonation, style, resonance, richness, range, poignancy, edge, warmth, brassiness

Expression (objective): structure, phrasing, tension and release, timing, character, pacing, dynamics, expression indications, tempo, articulation, architecture, form, style

Expression (subjective): projection, imagination, color/tone, mood, emotional tension, character, personality, sincerity

Set an Achievable Goal: Often musicians try to do too much at once, which creates a sense of urgency and inadequacy, but achievable goals eliminate frustration and aid focus

1. Pick a passage to improve, and set an **achievable** goal (this helps the passage be retained)
2. Create a strategy to achieve that goal - achievable in a **short time, without physical strain**

3. If you cannot improve the passage, CHANGE expectations. Pick a more achievable goal, go onto another passage, etc.
4. When you achieve your goal the first time, say aloud "Good job!"

Success of a small goal should be celebrated, not just mastery of the final performance.

Mastering each step almost guarantees success, and there is rarely any failure. Stage fright can be exasperated by unacknowledged memories of inconsistency when practicing. This technique can help alleviate performance anxiety!

Simplify the Problem: There are numerous ways to simplify a problem to establish achievable goals without strain. In the end, you will save time as confident reflexive behavior is built and will quickly lead to the final product!

Depending on your instrument try to... Change tempo, remove the rhythm, play pitches without rhythm, remove pitches, play only rhythm. Design a better fingering. Decrease quantity of material you're working on at one time. Simplify the phrasing. Sing the phrase, then play it, trying to imitate the phrasing and emotional nuance of the voice. Finger the instrument without making sound, using the same rhythm and notes as written. Play without ornaments until rhythm is established. Sing one voice and play the other. Play with one hand alone. Play without pedal. Play only the pedal and bass line. Conduct with one hand and play with the other. Play a harmonic reduction in rhythm - blocking. Play outer voices (soprano and bass). Play octaves as only outer voices.

Practice without errors: it's not how many correct repetitions that are right, but how many are wrong! Consider the study where pianists were most successful not by having the most correct repetitions, but by avoiding repeating the most errors. Try working backwards, learn last measure first, then second to last, etc. That way you're always proceeding to something well-learned and secure, rather than the passage getting shakier as you progress.

Stabilizing a New Success: A new skill needs to be reinforced frequently at the beginning, this makes the body's confidence grow proportionally as you are rewarded with success. The goal is to develop reflexive control.

Short Term Memory versus Long Term Memory: there is a limit to how much can be stored in short term memory (about 7 things). Short term memory is what engages in the first 24 hours. Long term memory takes over when the same memory effort is repeated for 4-5 days. If learning isn't reinforced, the next day it will feel like it "didn't stick." If 9 times were made and failed, but success on the 10th, that is only a 10% success rate.

Isolation-Integration Strategy/Chain-linking: Ensures improvements made to separate pieces of a phrase are integrated seamlessly into the whole phrase. Seamless means there are no **external nor internal hesitations**. An external hesitation will be heard by an audience. An internal hesitation is a thought like "uh-oh! Here comes the spot again" and while it may not be apparent in your sound, it is an inherent instability which could become an external hesitation when you perform.

Put on the brakes: often musicians "play through" problems to solve them, but continued repetition reinforces a problem, it doesn't solve it. If you repeat a detail or phrase three times and are unsuccessful, stop, simplify, or try something else!

Effective Practice Requires Many Pauses for Reflection: Aim for 20-30% thoughtful silence. Reflection is central to effective practice, and is a way of deepening learning.

Growth Mindset and the importance of Internal Self-Talk: The way we talk to ourself (internal talk) when we're stuck could be a reason why some people respond worse to failure, and others bounce back.

Mastery-oriented students: focused on finding a solution (task-diagnostic), and less concerned about the cause of their failure than on a remedy for the failure. With continued failure, mastery-oriented students have positive internal voice prognosis statements or say "I'm close now." They treat information about their failure as information leading to the problem's solution.

What to do about this in regards to practicing?

Monitor your emotions in the face of frustration or a lack of progress.

Try to reduce non-relevant thoughts when practicing.

Let negative thoughts pass quickly.

Engage your internal self-talk with solution-focused thoughts.

Stay extremely task-focused rather than self-focused, even if things aren't improving as quickly as you'd like.

Remember the brain never stops learning and physically changing!

Remember to listen to your Internal Supporter, and laugh off your Internal Gremlin.

Practice Versus Performance:

Practicing: listening critically, brainstorming, no audience, you can restart, stop, work on spots

Performing: Presence of audience (which can be distracting), pre-arranged time, only one try, no restarts

Your "best run" is likely accomplished after warming up and practicing, this becomes your expectation.

Balanced Practice=Conceptual Work, Mechanical Work, Performance Work - all three are essential, but most people focus 95% on mechanical work.

What is Performance Practicing? Running a piece successfully start to finish on the first try, training the mind and "pressure-proofing" skills- cultivating skills of confidence, focus and resilience.

Strategy of the First Try for Performing with Consistent Control: Practicing is very different from performing!

When you think a work is ready, test its readiness 6-7 days in a row with the following steps.

1. Set up recorder in advance, if concert clothes make you feel different, wear them.
2. Set an alarm to go off 3 minutes before "performance time." Until then, practice anything **except** your piece.
3. When alarm sounds, walk into the "wings" (a corner of your room), imagine how the piece will sound and feel, walk out, bow, start recorder, and perform. **Do not stop** until performance is over!
4. When you finish, write down your impression of the success, and note spots which need work. Listen to recording as an audience member, and compare impressions.

After a week or so, evaluate your performance expectations. If 1 or more of your last 4 tries were not acceptable, your probability of a performance that will please you is diminished. If the last 4 performances were acceptable, it is realistic to expect an average performance in the range of the quality of your last four tries.

Practicing: A Possible Plan

1. Get ready, (a ritual), stretch, light exercise, eliminate distractions from environment
2. Get in the mood, start with something you enjoy, or your warmup routine (sightreading!)
3. Dive into your plan (planned in detail yesterday)
4. Take frequent breaks. Don't do one thing longer than 20 minutes. Keep breaks short (set a timer, 5 minutes!). Get up from the piano, stretch, and move around briefly.
5. Use a variety of practice strategies to keep interest and focus.
6. Practice something you like last so your last memory is positive.
7. Leave something unfinished that will inspire you to return tomorrow.
8. Take time to reflect on your short term goal achievement, record in your practice log. Write detailed goals and make a plan for tomorrow. Leave 5-10 minutes for this ending portion.

What counts as practicing?

Listening to recordings, watching videos

Making a practice plan

Reading books about music, doing research

Mental imagery, meditation, mindfulness

Recording oneself, listening to the recording

Stretching, warming up

Make the Small Change: *Bite sized commitments might seem small. But over time, they're very powerful, because they empower us to change, without being overwhelming. Our culture values the big, the intense, the dramatic, the transformation. But the truth is, tiny changes are one of the best ways to get big changes. In a world where motivation is hard to come by, and we're all being crushed by the demands of daily life and the distressing state of the world, I think it's time to start meeting ourselves where we're at. Make the small change. Do the small thing. Do it again the next day. And know that you're planting the seeds of a mighty tree.*

Petra Fischer

14 Practice Traps (Johnston)

1. **Chopping Wood with a Spoon:** Applying inappropriate practice techniques to the problem at hand.
2. **Shiny Object Polishers:** Spend all of the practice time on things you already play well.
3. **Sheep Counters:** Practice simply by playing targeted sections over and over and over and over again, with the hope that sheer repetition will eventually lead to improvement.
4. **Speed Demons:** Practice too fast, too often. They make the migration to full speed play-throughs long before they know the piece well enough to do so, and in so doing, fail to lay the technical foundations necessary for controlled and musical at-tempo performances in the future.
5. **Gluttons:** Those who try to digest too much at once when they practice.

6. **Drifters:** May well be prepared to do plenty of practice, but they work without any clue as to what they are trying to achieve. They will wander aimlessly from piece to piece, blissfully uninterested in how their efforts are contributing to the bigger picture.
7. **Skimmers:** Will practice a section until they experience their very first taste of success with it, and then will prematurely declare it solved and move on to something new.
8. **Clock-Watchers:** Only practice for one reason: To pass the required time so that they can stay out of trouble. Their attention is constantly directed at how far through the practice session they are, rather than what the practice session actually consists of. They will practice with their fingers while their mind is elsewhere. They can arrive at the end of a practice session with no recall as to what problems were addressed or solved.
9. **Autopilots:** Just practice with their fingers, their mind is elsewhere. They will arrive at the end of a practice session with no recall as to what problems were addressed or solved.
10. **Pattern Practicers:** Create formulas for practice that they stick to rigidly regardless of what their task for the week actually is.
11. **Always from the Top:** Always practice from the very beginning of each piece, without addressing special attention to where in the piece the difficulties may lie.
12. **Bad Bricklayers:** Choose to divide their piece in the same sections every time. They never practice the transition from one section to the next, resulting in a performance that sounds disjointed and blocky at best, and riddled with section-end-gaps at worst.
13. **Ignoring the Map:** May practice quite hard but do so without referring to the score, or to any notes that may have been made by the instructor.
14. **Red Light Runners:** May practice quite hard but seem oblivious to any errors they may make, or difficulties they may encounter.

Resources:

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