

Practice Habits:

Over the years I have gradually come to the conclusion that a music teacher's number one objective should be to teach the student *how* to practice. For many years teachers have been telling their students they must practice to get better, but few ever show them an efficient way to accomplish that. It's like shoving a child into a pool for the first time and telling them to swim without any prior instruction. Obviously, it will not yield very good results.

First, it would do us some good if we defined exactly what practicing is. Webster's Dictionary defines practice as: "1. to perform or work at repeatedly so as to become proficient; 2. to train by repeated exercises." It should be noted that the operative word in the definition is repeat. When you practice, you play an exercise repeatedly. Too many times students simply play through an exercise once or twice and say that they have practiced it. That is ***playing through, not practicing!*** True practicing involves dissecting, analyzing, and fixing. These are necessary steps to acquiring technical fluency.

Dissecting - As you practice you will undoubtedly encounter passages that are difficult. So much so that you will not be able to play them accurately on the first try. After identifying such passages, you must break them down into smaller, more manageable parts, and practice them very slowly. Phrases should be reduced to measures and measures should be further reduced to single beats. As the sections become more accurate, start to combine the small parts until you have reconstructed the passage in its entirety. This process can be very slow and time consuming. You must be patient! Be very deliberate in practicing the fingerings and articulations and play with a metronome to ensure rhythmic accuracy even at slower tempos.

Analyzing - Once a problem passage has been located, you must decide what is causing the problem. Is it tonguing? Air flow? Flexibility? Fingers? Etc. Sometimes it is not obvious and sometimes it is a combination of several problems. Analyzation is the most important part of the practice process. If you analyze a problem incorrectly, then the solutions you devise will be ineffectual. Take time in analyzing and do not discount anything. Sometimes the most complex problems can be solved by the simplest means.

Fixing - After isolating and analyzing the problem, you must devise a method to fix it. As an example, the best method for fingering problems is **SLOW** practice with firm valve strokes. Also, problems can often be resolved by simply increasing air flow. Air is often the root of many playing problems on brass instruments.

The fixing stage of practice is the one that too many students gloss over. Do not accept "*close enough*." There are many levels of musical performance and improvement can always be made. When practicing try to think of six basic areas of musical competence:

1. **Rhythm**—this is the first area that should be addressed. The rhythm ***must be absolutely accurate***. When rhythmic problems are found, you must count them out and/or subdivide the beat. Within the rhythmic realm, I also include tempo. Tempos need to be consistent. Practicing with a metronome that will subdivide is one of the most important things you can do. Practice with it always and make it a part of your everyday equipment, just as indispensable as your mouthpiece.
2. **Pitches**—you must be able to hear the pitches before you can play them. Accuracy on brass instruments is a problem that even the best professionals must face. What many players do not know is that we can feel the notes too. As an experiment, place the horn up to your lips and think of playing a note, let's say third line B, and then make all the preparations to play it. Without sounding the pitch on the horn, try to feel the pitch on your embouchure and then sing it. You will find that you can sing the pitch very closely. This can greatly enhance your ability to hit pitches accurately. Hear it *and* feel it.
3. **Articulations**—composers write music with specific articulations indicated. It is your job as a performer to accurately reproduce what the composer has set down on the printed page. You do not have license to change those articulations to your liking! It is extremely important that you practice with the correct articulations from the very start, otherwise, you will become accustomed to hearing the wrong ones therefore making the right ones sound wrong.
4. **Dynamics**—again, composers write dynamic markings in the music for a reason. Do not disregard them. Dynamics add variation to a musical performance and can make or break it. Crescendos and decrescendos should be GRADUAL, not ABRUPT. Constantly strive for a wide range of dynamics in your playing. Make your louds louder and your softs softer, keeping a good tone always.

5. Phrasing—can be compared to punctuation in grammar. When commas and periods are incorrectly placed, the flow and meaning of written words can be altered or even destroyed. Phrases are like sentences. Without proper punctuation, they can sound meaningless. Often, composers will supply phrase markings, but just as often they will not, and it becomes your job as a performer, to phrase properly so that the composer's meaning is fully realized. Be flexible in your approach to phrasing. It is often wise to practice a passage in a variety of ways. This can greatly enhance your outlook on music and keep compositions from becoming stale after many years.
6. Intonation—most often we think of intonation in regard to group playing rather than solo playing, but this is only half the game. You must be conscious of good intonation always, regardless of the performance medium. Proper knowledge of your particular horn is required to facilitate good intonation. There is no such thing as an “in tune” horn. Even after you have tuned to a specific pitch, the horn is out of tune. Spend some time in front of a chromatic tuner and play through the pitches on the horn. This will reveal the notes that are inherently out of tune and give you some clues on how to fix them. If you know the general tendencies of the horn, you are better prepared to compensate for faulty pitches. Become fluent in using the third, and, if available, first valve slides. Know the notes they affect and keep them in good working order.

These are the six basic areas to consciously try to develop throughout your practice sessions. As each of these areas improves, the general musicianship of the player also will improve. They should not be considered as separate areas, but rather as interrelated concepts.

To get the most out of your practice sessions you should try to do a little preplanning. Before you sit down to practice, outline a few goals for the session. Try to make them realistic. If the goals are too ambitious, you will become discouraged if they are not attained, and if they are too easy, you will not get the maximum benefit from the session. You must keep these goals in mind as you practice. Practice sessions that have a point of focus are usually very efficient. Try to make time allotments also. Attempting to play upper register studies at the end of a 30 minute practice session will not yield very good results. Instead, save easier studies for the end of the session and place the most taxing ones at the beginning when you are both physically and mentally fresh. When the session is over, take a couple of minutes to analyze what you have done. Always find some positive things about the session, and try to isolate some areas for further study. Be honest in your evaluations.

I believe it is equally important to set aside time for just playing the horn. This is not practice, but rather playing for the sheer enjoyment of it. All work and no play make Jack a dull boy, and a dull musician. Play through songs, solos, old etudes, or anything else that does not require concentrated thought or evaluation. Do not stop, even if there are mistakes.

If you practice in this manner, you will see results almost immediately. As I have said before, practice must be on a regular basis. Random practicing is not acceptable and it will not yield an improvement in your playing. Set aside a specific time of the day and designate it as your time to practice. Stick to it. Ultimately, be honest with yourself. Ask yourself if you want to improve, and if the answer is yes, then realize that there are no shortcuts. Playing a musical instrument is very difficult and it requires just as much work as any other school subject. If you want to improve, I have given you many of the tools required to do so. It is up to you to apply them.

Practice Disciplines

In this unpredictable world of changing everything (computers, synthesizers, software, hardware, MIDI, you name it) I have observed one stable datum: those who know *how* to practice progress the fastest. But what is practice? Is it just sitting down at your instrument and playing? The answer is that although it varies to a certain extent with your goals and interests, in general practice should consist of working on your weak points. How many of you practice long hours and never seem to get over those humps? Well, you're not practicing—you're probably just playing the things you already know, not confronting the real problem areas. This is why some people need teachers and some don't. Those who don't simply have an inherent ability to perceive their own weak points, confront them, and work on them until they're conquered.

I would go so far as to say that what we call talent is simply our way of saying, "That guy did it. Boy, did he do it! Wow! He's talented!" Well, yes, he did do it—but usually through a lot of hard work. This is true even with the cats who say they never studied. Maybe never formally with a teacher, but they did study by listening to records, going to live gigs, reading books, and spending hours at their instruments. I don't believe we just do something incredible without some kind of practice in the basics—if people think they are going to become the next Adolph Herseth, Miles Davis, or Maynard Ferguson overnight, they're in for a big letdown. And thinking this can really lead people astray, for it's very easy then, when they do fail, for them to introvert and invalidate or give up on themselves and their creations. No, it actually takes real conviction. Real practice. Real confrontation. Then, when you have attained your goal, it does not seem easy—that is, to *you*—because you did it.

So realize that you must ignore any worries you have about time and how long it's going to take. You have to be willing for it to take as long as necessary. Worrying about time uses up both mental and physical energy and might lead you to start practicing glibly or doing other things that can hang you up (like compromising with your musical goals). To the degree that your attention is on time, money, success, ego, or anything other than developing your ability, it's *off* confronting and practicing. On the other hand, if you put all your attention and energy into achieving your goals, it may actually speed up the process for you.

As far as the audience is concerned, an incredible song or performance is just perceived as incredible—who cares if it took five years to create? Nobody says, "Well, hey, that can't be incredible, it took too long to create." All they care about is how good the final result is. The business world, on the other hand, is totally concerned with marketing, PR, money, sales, and the "hurry up and be great" attitude. Don't let that send you down the wrong path. It usually does take a while to create good effects—but when you do, they're timeless.

All of this talk is useless, however, unless we can do something with it to improve our ability to practice effectively. I have developed a standard procedure for practicing for those who feel they're weak in this area. But first there are a few terms I use that I'd like to define:

Pre-practice: the period right before actually practicing, where you set the goals for the session.

Practice: The actual "doing" where you try to achieve a certain ability through repetition, evaluation, attention to detail, reevaluation, comparison to the ideal scene—in general, a time to "think".

Post-practice: The time for comparison of what you have just done in the practice session with what you intended to do, so as to determine what the next session's content should be.

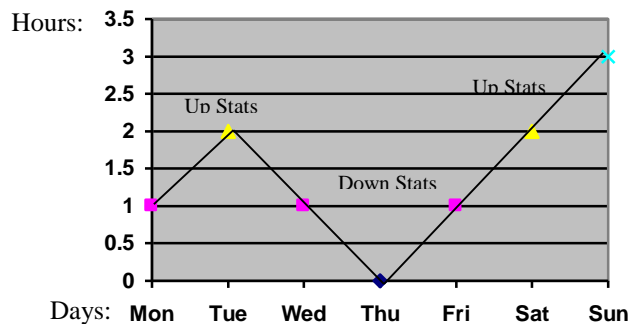
Playing: Simply playing. It is using whatever technical expertise you have to express yourself to the audience. If there is any kind of "thinking" going on, then to that degree you are not playing.

Objective self-criticism: Becoming self-sufficient at being your own critic. This ability allows the student to eventually cut the ties to his or her teacher and free himself or herself as an artist.

After making sure you understand these definitions, you should read and carry out the following steps for organizing practice sessions:

1. Form an honest conviction toward achieving your goal or goals.
2. Decide to set aside a minimum amount of time each day for practice. Start low and gradually increase the amount of time per day.

- Each day, graph your “honestly done practice hours” in order to keep an accurate record. This is important because you’ll want to know—or should want to know—if your statistics are rising, staying consistent, or falling. If they’re falling, you’ll need to reorganize your time. (See illustration of graph below.)



- Create your day the night before. This simply means to plan a time schedule of your whole day and include, of course, your practice time.

The above four steps allow you to organize and create time so you can get on with the business of practicing. What follows is a standard procedure for practicing itself.

Practice Procedure

- If possible, leave your problems outside the practice room. If that is not possible, then it’s probably better that you handle whatever your attention is on before you practice; otherwise, the practice session might be very unproductive—in other words, you might not really get anything from it, but just be going through the motions.
- Shift your attention to the goals you have created for the session, and when you feel ready to start, then say out loud or to yourself:
- “START!” I have found that most students never *really* start the practice session. Simply sitting down and playing around the horn is not practicing. Therefore, giving yourself a mental or verbal start makes the session a little more real and important.
- Organize your allotted time by practicing the most difficult things first, when you’re fresh, and the easiest things last. Also make sure you cover everything you planned—especially if you have a limited amount of time. If you don’t cover everything, mark your place and begin there at your next practice session.
- Be aware of your emotions, for they can get in the way. Boredom, anger, depression, grief, etc. can take the “attack” out of the session. If you become aware of negative emotions, get up and take a five-minute break and then resume. Enthusiasm is the emotion necessary for successful practice sessions. If you take your time and practice things gradually—that is, progress gradually—you won’t stir up these negative emotions.
- When you’ve either completed your targets or your allotted time, end the practice part of the session and give yourself a “well done” (mentally or out loud). But there’s still one more very important step...
- Now play! Play anything! It may or may not be related to your lesson, but just play. Always play after you practice because that’s what you’re there for—remember? Now, playing has no “thinking” associated with it—no evaluation or consideration of how you’re doing. That part of the session is over. Just imagine you’re playing for an audience and simply play! Don’t stop, even if there are mistakes. Playing is the real thing and a professional performance means you’re in control. If you ever get a chance to ask a great artist what’s going on while they’re performing, you’ll find they usually can’t explain it. That’s because there’s nothing going on. If the artist is prepared—meaning they’ve done their homework—then the only thing going on is “playing.” So play on, maestro!

If applied honestly, this practice procedure will pave the way for the student to advance rapidly and realize his or her potential in a relatively short time. It is not true that it *has* to take eight or 10 hours per day and 20 years to become a real professional. With good guidance and diligent, organized practice, you can become quite adept in a relatively short time. Practice makes perfect—or better put, *correct* practice makes perfect.