



Harp

How do You Get to Carnegie Hall?

by JoAnn Turovsky

So how does that old story go... a young person is walking down a street in New York carrying a violin case. He stops an older gentleman and asks, "Excuse me sir, how do you get to Carnegie Hall?" The old man replies, "Practice, my child, practice."

Love it or hate it, practice is our best friend.

The world seems to be made up of two kinds of people: those who love to practice and those who struggle with it. As a teacher, you probably fall into the former category. But you must realize that you will have students who are not so fortunate!

One of the most important things that you can teach your students is how to practice. Not only will they be happier, more confident and more accomplished harpists, but they will learn lessons that will help them in other aspects of their lives.

Young people are very busy these days. Most are involved in many activities in addition to music lessons and are under a great deal of pressure to excel in school. Practicing can be relegated to last on a long list of things to do. But this is not only a problem for students. Do any of us really have enough time to practice?

The key is to make the best use of our practice time. Everyone is different, but here are some suggestions for efficient, organized, focused and smart practice.

A daily practice appointment can be very helpful. For some, several short periods work best. Some people do well by getting up early in the morning. Others might like to schedule a time in between homework. If possible, a consistent time is ideal. It is most important to make the appointment and then keep it. Consistency is vital because, as we have all probably learned the hard way, cramming does not work!

Achievement is the objective; the amount of time spent is irrelevant. Some students learn more quickly than others, but all need to set and meet realistic goals.

Have your students begin each practice session with a predetermined list of very specific objectives. Sometimes practice can seem overwhelming, but if one sticks to modest goals it is possible to feel a sense of accomplishment. Build on these positive feelings. For young students, the teacher determines the agenda, both daily and weekly. College students are taught to set their own goals, first by term and then weekly and daily.

I have seen several books with pre-printed practice schedules. This is fine, but it is also pretty easy these days to sit down at the computer and devise something simple, comfortable and maybe even creative!

I encourage parents of younger students to participate in the practice session. There will come a time when the student no longer wants the parent there, but until then, there are many advantages to parental supervision. A child can feel isolated and lonely while practicing. Having the undivided attention of a parent can make it seem more special and fun. The parent can also reinforce good practice habits.

Lessons are a good time to teach the practice "how-to's." Never assume that students know how to practice. If you haven't taught them, how would they know? Many students arrive at college without having learned this basic skill, but college is not too late! Use the lesson time to go over the most basic principles of repetition, cross rhythms, starting in the middle of passages, isolated specific problems and any other techniques you may have found to be successful either in your own work or in working with others. No one technique or practice trick will work for everyone, so a variety of skills is useful. It is not a waste of lesson time to work out a tricky passage with the student, demonstrating the many ways of approaching a difficult problem.

The preset order for practice might include the following:

I. Warm-ups: This can be comprised

of slow and easy repetition. Warm-ups are different from etudes or studies and serve a distinct function. To me, they are like stretching before running. No athlete would think of going at full tilt without warming up first. We are similar. We also warm up our ears. We are ready to move on when our ears hear a sound that they like. And finally, warm-ups can be like a mantra. When I hear my warm-up routine, it reels my mind in from distant places and focuses my attention to my practice. Those familiar, slow, easy repetitions say to my mind, "OK. I am practicing now."

II. New material: this is normally the time of freshest attention during practice. If you are memorizing or woodshedding a new passage, this may be the best time to approach these challenges. Very careful first readings are important because brain imprinting occurs immediately and first impressions are hard to erase. The goal is for correct notes, rhythm, fingering and dynamics. Everything done incorrectly the first time has to be *unlearned* before it can be *relearned*.

III. Review: This is the time during practice to review previously learned material. Although there are many useful techniques for confident and successful memorization, sometimes there is no substitute for repetition. The material has to be "in our fingers" as well as in our brains. Before an important performance, I set a goal of a certain number of repetitions a day. When it comes time for the performance, it gives me confidence to know that I have played this piece so many times.

IV. Repertoire: Now might be a good time to review repertoire or pieces already learned and mastered. Unfortunately, we do not retain these pieces without practicing them consistently. And what can be more enjoyable than playing music that we know well? I encourage my students to form a "repertoire book." As soon as a piece is polished, it goes into the book. Watch the book grow with your sense of accomplishment. Practicing

repertoire then becomes a simple matter of going through the book.

V. Sight Reading: This is a useful skill that is often ignored but is greatly enhanced by consistent practice. Pick a simple piece and scan it for key and time changes. Identify the traps, then set the metronome and force yourself to maintain the tempo without stopping. If necessary, regroup at the first beat of the next bar.

Realistically, most of the students that we teach will not become professional harpists. But the time they spend

practicing and studying music will not only enrich them through exposure to the arts, but will teach them discipline, focus and concentration: skills that will help them in all aspects of their lives.

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