

BOOK REVIEW: *PRACTICEOPEDIA*

An A-Z of everything students (and parents) need to know about ...Practicing

by Philip Johnston, PracticeSpot Press

reviewed by Faith Farr

Last spring author Philip Johnston contacted me via e-mail from Australia to ask if I would consider writing a review of his book *Practiceopedia* for *String Notes*. I like books, so I responded that I would look at it and consider it. Now that I have been using *Practiceopedia* in my studio for several months, I can highly recommend it to teachers, especially for intermediate students in middle school or high school who may spend time practicing, but don't have efficient practice techniques.

Practiceopedia is a big book – almost 400 pages long – but it is not a book that should be read from cover to cover. Last summer I loaned it to three 8th graders for a week each with the instruction to open it at random and read 2 or 3 pages every practice day, and to try out the practice tip if it seemed like a good one. In my questionnaire at the end of the week, all three students said they learned something useful. Only one wanted to buy the book, but all thought they might leaf through it while waiting for their lesson.

This fall I have set *Practiceopedia* in my waiting area, with a post-it marking a different chapter each week, and a sign encouraging students to read that chapter. Although I think I have always given students clear instructions on what to practice and how to practice, the book has given "Practicing" a new focus in my lessons. Just like there are Scales, Etudes, and Pieces in every lesson, now Practicing is a topic in its own right. Several students have taken the advice to heart and have become more productive in their practice.

Practiceopedia has short chapters (4-6 pages) and is written in an engaging, student-friendly style, with fun illustrations. It is an easy book to browse through. Each chapter has a memory-catching title – *Scouting*, *Bug Spotting*, *Detail Trawl*, *Pressure Testing*, – a playful description of the disaster awaiting if you don't do this, and clear instructions on how to practice to avoid this disaster. Once the students are familiar with the practice technique, simply recalling the title can put them on an efficient path.

Like an encyclopedia, the topics are arranged alphabetically, not by theme or purpose. That makes the chapters easy to find if you know what you are looking for. Johnston includes several indexes and copious cross-references that make it easy for you to

find related topics.

Practiceopedia is for practicing any instrument. You won't find instructions on bowing or vibrato, piano pedaling, or breathing. But you will find lots of advice that applies to all instruments – practice in sections, practice slowly, make sure the rhythms are correct, make sure the fingering is secure. It includes not only descriptions of how to practice, but also many chapters on how not to practice. You don't want to be a *Beginner* (always starting at the beginning of the piece) or a *Clock Watcher* (putting in your minutes, but mindlessly) or a *Shiny Object Polisher* (always skipping over the tough parts to revel in the parts you can really play well).

I was pleased that although I know many, many practice strategies, I learned a few new ones myself. *Breakthrough Diary* was the first that I assigned to all students last September – don't just practice the assignment; write in your lesson notebook when you actually achieve a breakthrough. Several of my students are now eagerly reporting breakthroughs every week – "I got the scale in tune." "Once I played through without mistakes from memory." "I figured out the first 2 lines of my new piece." And those students are moving faster, with more confidence and assurance than before.

Bug Spotting is my favorite new idea – just play the piece straight through, and put a little dot right by any place that was a little goofy. Play the piece again straight through, and put in your bug spots. And again. We know students love to play straight through. But oh-oh! Some measures are acquiring the measles because a spot gets put there every time you play through! Guess what – those are the places that need some focused attention.

Check out the website www.practiceopedia.com for a great overview of the content and the fun style of the book. *Practiceopedia* is available from Amazon and booksellers everywhere.

Faith Farr teaches cello at MacPhail Center for the Art and her home studio. Her newest books, American Fiddle Method for Cello and American Fiddle Method for Viola, co-authored with Brian Wicklund, are published by Mel Bay. In 1996, MNSOTA presented Faith with their Master Teacher Award. †