



CELLO

The Art of Practicing: A Guide to Making Music from the Heart

by Madeline Bruser; published by Bell Tower, 1997

Book Review by David Holmes

As a player and teacher, I look for various sources of inspiration and knowledge. Since I bought Madeline Bruser's book, *The Art of Practicing*, a number of years ago, I have found it to be a very compassionate and erudite read that delves deeply into every facet of practicing a musical instrument. It has never failed to move me. Although Ms. Bruser is a pianist, most of the content of her book applies to all musical instruments and singers. A number of prominent musicians have endorsed her book (Peter Serkin, Richard Stoltzman, and others) and the short forward to *The Art of Practicing* is by Yehudi Menuhin.

Ms. Bruser dedicates her book to her teacher, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, a Tibetan Buddhist who founded the first accredited Buddhist university in the U. S. (Naropa University, in Boulder, Colorado). She also dedicates her book "to musicians and others who long to express themselves from the heart." Having studied Ms. Bruser's book, I feel it is aimed mostly at the professional musician, the serious amateur, and the dedicated student. Much of the wisdom in her book, however, transcends musical practice and can pertain to life in general. Her musical goal in writing this book was, "to free ourselves from physical and emotional tension as we practice so that we can unleash our innate musical talent." (pg. 2)

In her introduction, Ms. Bruser sets forth a concise and convincing description of the psychological and physical aspects of practicing a musical instrument. Response to practice, she notes, can vary from feeling like punishment to feeling like an overflow of joy as our minds or our bodies prove to be either a block to or a conduit for musical expression. In other words, we all feel the gamut of responses to practice at different times.

For Ms. Bruser, the turning point in her own practice came when she became immersed in mindfulness and meditation, which she says revolutionized her approach

to the piano. Meditation practice quieted her mind and helped her become present in the moment:

I found myself taking half-minute breaks on the bench while practicing, no longer in a hurry to accomplish anything...Subtleties I'd never noticed before—about the movements of my hands and the harmonies of the music—became striking and engaging...The five inefficient hours a day I used to put in at the piano were whittled down into three focused, productive hours. In short, I accomplished more with less effort, and with much more pleasure. (pg. 3)

Chapter 1 (*Meeting Yourself*) is a short affirmation to the passion-driven musician, who places intense value on musical expression, but who sometimes is overwhelmed by their own limitations or by how they compare themselves to others. Chapter 2 (*Struggle and Freedom*) is a testament to how frustrating practice can become: "I have often thought how strange it is that I can be sitting at the piano in my own living room, completely alone and free to do anything I want, and yet fall into some habitual and unsatisfying way of working." (pg. 10)

Chapters 3-12 (pgs. 29-209) are Ms. Bruser's 10 steps to practice, though they are not meant to be presented in a progressive order. The 10 chapters are titled: *Stretching*, *Settling in*, *Tuning into Your Heart*, *Basic Mechanics*, *The Spark of Inquisitiveness*, *Three Styles of Struggle*, *Simplicity*, *Pure Perception*, *Spontaneous Insight*, and *The Dancing Body*. One nifty aspect of this book's layout is that each chapter ends with a list of interesting questions that other musicians have asked her at times, followed by her extended answers.

Chapter 3 (*Stretching*) is about getting the body ready to practice, and has thirteen yoga-like stretches, with photos demonstrating them. "Stretching takes out the kinks

and lets the body breathe." (pg. 30) Ms. Bruser often has her students do a couple of minutes of stretches at the start of a lesson to loosen up and to focus their mind. I have done these stretches on a number of occasions and find them very helpful and relaxing.

Chapter 4 (*Settling in: settle down in your environment*) is on how to garner a calm and alert readiness to practice, and has these subheadings: *being present*, *posture*, *breathing*, *environment*, and *setting the stage*. Ms. Bruser points out the "inner stillness" that great artists like Jacqueline du Pré, Yehudi Menuhin, and Artur Rubinstein had when they performed. We can begin to cultivate this quality by being aware of our breath, which can have "immediate and profound beneficial effects." (pg. 46) Here is how Ms. Bruser suggests we start:

Upright posture is important for this breathing exercise because it allows the lungs to function easily...After assuming this posture, place your attention on your breath as you exhale. Just notice it. You don't need to pay any particular attention as the breath comes in, just as it goes out... Do this for at least two minutes... Breathing out is very relaxing. Usually we don't let ourselves exhale enough during the day... If you don't give in to any tendencies to control your breathing, it will start to relax and regulate itself. (pgs. 46-47)

I am a firm believer in the importance of breath awareness, even after eating garlic.

Chapter 5 (*Tuning into Your Heart*) is a reflection on how marvelous it is that musicians can express themselves on their instruments, a gift that gets taken for granted or even turned into drudgery at times: "Ugh, I have to practice." (pg. 56) Some attitudes and thoughts are not conducive for heartfelt music making. Bruser tells the story of a student who—since

she was emotionally vulnerable because of a relationship breakup—gave a beautiful, heartfelt performance. Bruser ponders the Chinese musician who, during the Cultural Revolution, was imprisoned for fourteen months for playing “western” music. This thought reawakens her desire to practice. She doesn’t mean to be morbid, but awareness of the fragility and shortness of life can also provide a beacon of inspiration: “When you reflect on the impermanence of life, you feel the heart area of your chest open up—it feels warm.” (pg. 57)

Chapter 6 (*Basic Mechanics: using your body in a comfortable and natural way*) is the longest chapter in the book (over 70 pages), and gets into the paramount issue of how instrumentalists train their bodies to play most efficiently. There is a wealth of helpful information on body alignment and release of tension while practicing. She supplements this chapter with pictures of a trumpeter, guitarist, flutist, violist, and pianist, all demonstrating incorrect and correct posture tendencies. The pictures made me aware that good posture is the same for all instruments. On the connection between body use and musical expression, Bruser notes:

Musicians often confuse being emotionally intense with being physically tense. Intense expressiveness and power come not from over tightening the physiological mechanism that produces the sound but from freeing that mechanism to work smoothly and efficiently. (pg. 136)

Chapter 7 (*The Spark of Inquisitiveness: follow your curiosity as you practice*) is a discussion of how to maintain a lively focus in one’s daily practice, or that dance between structure in practice and freedom to explore your practice intuitions. She finds a rigid practice routine to be unpleasant (I do, too), but accepts that one must be very intentional at times (e.g., when a concert

is approaching and there is limited time to learn a piece). In general, though, she relies on her inner voice to take her where she goes in daily practice, which means she may vary how and what she practices from day to day. The key, as in many things, is balance.

Chapter 8 (*Three Styles of Struggle: recognize three styles of struggle*) lists the struggles as follows: overstated passion, avoidance, and aggression. Overstated passion refers to the player who is so over the top with their emotional displays at an instrument that they destroy any chance of “natural” musicianship occurring. Avoidance is the tendency of a player to play the notes but that is about all; (this might be called inexpressive and dull). Aggression is an overstated, almost violent approach to music making.

Chapter 9 (*Simplicity: drop your attitudes and be simple*) is a gentle approach to letting go of any baggage or attitudes that might interfere with spontaneous musical expression. Bruser points out that feelings of futility and uncertainty in our music making are something to accept as normal and to embrace, and that if we do, the next step could be greater connection to the music. She also feels that being open and vulnerable in our day-to-day life can enhance our musicianship:

In music as in life, we don’t want to feel the embarrassment of being ordinary, foolish people. We want to soar to the heights making music and pretend we don’t have clay feet weighing us down. Ironically, when we drop our guard and are just ourselves, we reveal a deep humanness, and the music we make is uplifting. (pg. 163)

Chapter 10 (*Pure Perception: apply three listening techniques*). First, Bruser suggests to “sing the notes and lines” (pg. 167), which is perhaps the quickest way for us to get to the heart of how we want to phrase. Secondly,

she suggests placing one’s attention on the vibrations themselves as they move from our instruments through our body, which connects us to the music in a more visceral way. (pg. 170) The third listening technique in this chapter is to “place your attention on each sound as it resonates in the space around you.” (pg. 173)

Chapter 11: (*Spontaneous Insight: organize notes into groups, phrases, and textures*). This chapter is the second longest in the book and starts by covering what Bruser describes as speech, body, and natural rhythms. This is followed by the organizational principles in music, including pulse and beat.

Chapter 12: (*The Dancing Body: place your attention on the sensations of touch and movement*). Bruser suggests not looking at the mechanics of the body while playing, but to instead focus on the feel and sensation of one’s playing.

The last chapter is *Playing by Heart*, followed by a recommended reading list and a list of resources for musicians.

I have only touched the surface of this book. I recommend Madeline Bruser’s book, *The Art of Practicing: A Guide to Making Music from the Heart*, to all.

David Holmes is currently a faculty member at the Augsburg College Suzuki Program and has been a guest clinician at Suzuki institutes in 9 states. In 2006, he presented a lecture on group class instruction at the SAA national conference. David was an adjunct faculty member at St. Cloud State University for two years, where he taught cello and performed with the St. Cloud State University Piano Trio. An active performer and free lance cellist in the Twin Cities, David is cellist in the Northern Lights String Quartet, is an artist member of Thursday Musical, and has been principal cellist of the Minnetonka and Bloomington Symphonies as well as a member of the Minnesota Opera Orchestra. ‡