



# BASS

## Getting on the Practice Train

by Tom Pieper

The start of a new year begs for an assessment and acknowledgment of where you are as a musician, and where you hope to be in the future. Your internal identification, and other's external reinforcement, helps create this picture. With your lens cued to reality, you will have a greater chance of reaching your expectations, and growing into a productive collaborator in your ensemble. By developing goals, working authentically and reflecting regularly, integration will allow you to process your experiences. This integration will help you apply insights necessary to improve your level of performance.

### Practicing is always a difficult topic to quantify

- Do I need a certain time commitment?
- Is there a specific content to master to reach this goal?
- Will I reach a certain level of mastery or must I continue to grow?

A time commitment is easy to understand. You commit to practicing and are developing the habit of becoming a musician. For a beginner, it may be useful to start with a set amount of time for a period of days in the week. At the very least, committing to a time will help you learn to make space for practice in your schedule. Players soon understand time is not the most important element of practice. This is because when different people apply the same amount of time they have wildly different outcomes. Getting beyond "How long should I practice?" is a leap for parents and students. Students want the absolute minimum and parents want to know how long the battle will last. This may reflect parents' memory of how practice was viewed under the "practice makes perfect" adage. In truth, any time practicing will help, but intrinsic motivation and enjoyment from playing will yield more consistent results and create happier students.

When you think about practice, try to remember how you felt when you first heard your instrument, and where you hoped to be as a player. How do you reach ultimate satisfaction? You can prioritize what you want to learn, what you are curious about, and how this may benefit you and then implement your plan. A routine is important, but do not be afraid to change it up as you continue to grow and improve.

### What kind of practicer are you?

If you like to keep track of time spent and you feel satisfied, consider blocking out a rigorous schedule, checking off your accomplishments, and sticking with it.

Day	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Scales	5 min	20	10	0	5	Priority for the week 60	Day off
Etudes	15 min	10	0	10	15		
Solos	15 min	10	30	0	15		
Orchestra	15 min	0	20	0	15		
Improv	10 min	20	0	50	10		

If you like the way you sound or like how it feels when you play scales or improvise, let that be your metric. If you love playing with others, find as many varied opportunities to do just that. When you discover a passion for music and that your choice to practice helps you enjoy music more, you will find the time necessary. Talent, physical characteristics, aptitude, support, musical culture, habits, and interest all play a part. Take value from any activity that helps you connect with the history of music making, and your own passion for playing and you will improve. Music more than any other activity is not a linear progression, and everything you learn and do is integrated together.

Knowing your goals will help you understand why you are practicing, and reflecting on your playing can motivate and organize your efforts. Being deliberate in your practice and aware of your efforts is a great way to impact your performance both alone or with any ensemble. The ability of practicing with a specific focus and honing skills to ignore distractions may explain how some people reach similar goals faster than others. Focus your practice and you can do this too!

A side note: kids may need support from parents and many parents do not want to take on this role—it is critical and it is hard! Talent, physical mechanics, support, culture, and interest all play a part as you develop your musicianship. Practice must be your lifeblood. If you wonder if kids have passion? Ask them about games or everything else they spend time on. The passion also exits for learning and playing music but must be reinforced with success. It is hard to tell a kid if you practice for the next 35 years you will make a lot of progress, so start out small and build your practice through consistency. Anything is possible, so believe and live it to make it your reality.

### A day in the life of practice

I often return and review music I have played before. You will be surprised at your growth over time. New insights can come from being ready to play music from your repertoire. As a bass player, it is sometimes difficult to play for friends or family. Much of the bass music is not a melody. If you play the theme from *Jaws*, or *Money* on the bass, people will get it, but playing solos helps you enjoy music in a deeper way. Try to balance your practice to include solos for the bass, melodies, concert music, and solos for other instruments. Here are a couple of solos I believe are good to have under your fingers and are beautiful to play and listen to. One is a standard solo for the double bass, and the other is a song from the *American Songbook* featuring the bass playing the melody.

#### Solo #1

Verdi's solo from *Othello* is first on my list of things to practice today. This piece shows up frequently on audition lists for major orchestras, youth orchestras, and is a beautiful piece to have ready for auditions or to play when grandma or grandpa show up. I have outlined how I approach this piece for practice.

Verdi — Otello. Alexander Hanna bowings, 2013  
m.12, 15, 18 omit rests. Before [X] omit rests: play ♪♪♪♪

- First, I warm up playing scales in the piece i.e. E major, C flat Major, A flat melodic minor. I may try some detaché and some slurred bowing patterns. The key signature has 4 flats but note the accidentals when you first begin to learn the piece. (15 minutes)
- Next, I review the piece and stress rhythm and note accuracy (10 minutes)
- Then I may play each phrase individually, pausing between phrases to see where the phrase leads or cadences (15 minutes)
- On the notes with slurs, I may experiment to see if I can create better dynamics, articulations, or see how bowing changes can help bring a sense of direction to the phrase (20 minutes)
- I may check out YouTube videos to see who has performed this recently (45 minutes)
  - <https://youtu.be/K6Wgr8YOqws> Listen to his sound! Today I had a “lesson with” the principal bassist, Alexander Hanna, of the Chicago Symphony and tried the bowings he was playing. Working along with the video gives you another reference for the piece. This can help you experience a higher level of performance. When you see a master play, you are better able to come up with your own goals.
  - He performs this as a solo. The rests in measures 12,15 and 18 are omitted and move ahead to next measure. This is more satisfying to listen to than waiting through the rests, but note the original score if you are playing for a formal audition.
  - Triple down bows at the end!
- When I get tired, I may take a break, I may play the piece pizzicato, or I may create a list of specific areas to isolate and return to next time.
- At the end of this practice session, I had a greater understanding of the solo, and a better performance if I had to share with my dog/cat or grandma/grandpa audience.

### Solo #2

Next, I pulled up a recording of Eddie Gomez playing the melody of *You Must Believe in Spring*, written by Michel Legrand, and performed with Eliot Zigmund and Bill Evans. This is another excellent melodic piece to play on a bass. Note, this is all pizzicato and

Eddie plays the melody in the upper octave. I first learned this from the recording about 15 years ago and recycled the chart in one of many studio moves. When you return to something you have learned, it only takes a few times through for your fingers to remember. I practiced it on the electric bass for some variety. I notice that it works well on electric an octave lower. If you have a 24-fret electric bass, you could easily play it in the upper octave. This melody is a great example of lyricism and Eddie’s interpretation features a great amount of rhythmic invention.

- <https://youtu.be/FTIKzkdW9I> (1977 recording with Bill Evans, piano; Eddie Gomez, bass; and Eliot Zigmund, drums)
- <https://youtu.be/ZD4xTgf7V-g> (Jazz bass solo version. Always when you have a

transcription listen and see what you may agree with, or may need to change for accuracy)

Here is the practice routine for *You Must Believe in Spring*

- Listen to recording several times (10 minutes)
- Play along until a problem appears. (45 minutes)
  - Listen and play back till another problem presents
  - Repeat from beginning
  - Wait till thrown off again
  - Repeat from beginning
  - Isolate triplets—you may have to practice this slower but still with a metronome
  - Listen to whole recording and this time try to play along with the root progression to start to learn the harmonic movement
  - Listen to another recording of Bill Evans and Tony Bennett (learn the words for greater understanding of tune

too) <https://youtu.be/yRp-LliMGHI>

- Multiple times of listening and immersion into feel
- Hang it up and call it a night

These two solos may occupy your practice for a few days, one long day, or perhaps a week. Whenever you practice, the main point is to develop a routine and nurture your curiosity. Your practice will take on many different forms and change many times over. Practice what you need to learn, and what you want to learn and you will inspire others. Soon, your practice will help you enjoy many aspects of all the music you relate to.

*Tom Pieper performs in the Twin Cities and teaches at Central Middle School in Wayzata and MacPhail Center for Music in Minneapolis. You can hear his music with the Illicit Sextet on iTunes or see him live every week at Salem Lutheran Church in Minneapolis. Tom can be reached at [thomas.pieper@yoga@gmail.com](mailto:thomas.pieper@yoga@gmail.com). 📧*