



# FROM THE ARCHIVES....

## Practice!

compiled by Mary Sorlie

There always is excitement this time of year as students and teachers head back into the classrooms and studios. With another year, comes new students and fresh ideas. How to help students with their practice time seems to be one of the biggest challenges (and opportunities) that we face as musicians and educators. Helping students learn how to practice efficiently and effectively is perhaps the most important skill we can help them develop.

We've all heard the joke, "How do you get to Carnegie Hall?" "Practice, practice, practice." Practice can be described as working at something repeatedly so as to become proficient. Is it really as simple as playing repetitions of the same thing? As we begin the new school year, here are several excerpts from the past that offer strategies, routines and ideas on helping our students with becoming effective practicers.

### *How do you Get to Carnegie Hall?*

by JoAnn Turovsky

*From Fall issue 1998*

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!

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." Watch the book grow with your sense of accomplishment.

**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.

### *Practice, Practice, Practice* by Janet Horvath

*From Winter issue 2002/2003*

One would think that when we practice at home on our own, injury risk is lower because we are in total control of what we do, what we play and how we play it! Unfortunately, we tend to get so involved that we lose track of time. We are so emo-

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tionally involved that we lose awareness of what we are doing. We push ourselves into endless repetition, we try to cram, we force ourselves to stay put and get through everything. At the work place, at least break times are prescribed! First, remember these:

- Warm Up.
- Take Breaks.
- Vary Your Repertoire.
- Increase Your Practice Load Gradually
- Reduce Your Practice Intensity
- Take time to study the music away from the instrument. This is extremely effective for memorization.
- Be vigilant about your posture and your stand placement. Time must sometimes be spent in compromising positions. Be conscious of repertoire where your wrists, arms or back are very flexed. Notice any awkward stretches you do playing chords or reaching keys. Control the length of time you spend on these passages. Release often, stretch frequently and use a mirror to monitor your posture.
- Playing fast should not be your ultimate goal. We sometimes sacrifice the phrase, breath, and fluid movement for speed. According to Lyonn Lieberman, "Effort is not what it takes to play fast. It takes supreme relaxation and attention to quality of sound." Always search for the least amount of effort.
- Stop frequently for a couple of mini-breaks or a quick stretch, a glass of water and a few deep breaths. Change your position often.
- Be mindful of how your body feels. If one day you just can't stick to your plan and you need a break, take it without guilt! You will be fresher and more relaxed during the next session and accomplish more.
- Avoid erratic fluctuations in your practice schedule. Doing a consistent hour a day is more productive and safer for your body than skipping days at a time and then launching into a marathon session!

### ***Practice Smart 30 Minutes a Day*** **by Ann Anderson**

*From Fall issue 2009*

As we prepare our classes for a new year of lessons, I would like to suggest you print out a 30-minute practice routine to give to your students to help them balance their time in an efficient and profitable practice

session.

### ***Tone Production***

- 2 min: Open Strings  
Bow on: Detaché, Staccato, Martelé  
Bow off: Spiccato, Ricochet, Sautillé
- 2 min: Vibrato (vary the width of oscillations and the speed)  
Narrow/Fast  
Narrow/Slow  
Wide/Slow  
Wide/Fast

### ***Intonation / Match Open Strings***

- 2 min: Scales. Change keys each week 1-4 sharps and 1-4 flats. (Eventually add several keys each week.) Apply various bowings to the scales as practiced on open strings.
- 2 min: Arpeggios matching the scale keys/drill the shifts.
- 2 min: Double stops with open strings. (Eventually change to octaves, thirds and sixths.)

### ***Technical Skills — 5 min***

- One etude a week

### ***Orchestral Literature — 5 min***

- Each day

### ***Solo Repertoire — 10 min***

- Short piece memorized each month. (Select a variety of slow and fast pieces to develop phrasing)
- Concerto: one each year
- Sonata: two each year with a pianist

### ***The Amazing List of Practice Techniques*** **by Dr. Molly Gebrian**

*From Spring issue 2021*

Good general practice habits:

- Create a practice routine. Try to always practice in the same place at the same time for the same length of time so it becomes part of your day.
- You should start every practice session with a clear goal or goals for what you want to accomplish and how you think you will go about accomplishing them.
- The worst possible way to practice is to play from the beginning, play until you make a mistake and then either fix the mistake and go on or start over. All this does is reinforce your mistakes. You need to locate where your trouble spots are, isolate them, and work on them using the suggestions in this list. Only once they have been perfected

in isolation can you go back and put them in context.

- Playing through your piece is a last step after weeks or months of work, only to be done when you are getting ready for a performance. If you're running through your piece everyday (and it's more than 2-3 weeks before your concert), you're not practicing well and are only reinforcing your mistakes.
- Always ask yourself, "Why am I playing this right now? What do I hope to accomplish?" If you're practicing, never just play. Always have a reason, especially if you are playing something again. Someone should be able to interrupt your practicing at any point and ask you these questions and you should have a good answer immediately. If you tend to practice mindlessly, set a timer to off every 10 minutes or so to remind yourself to ask this question.
- Keep a practice journal. Write down your goal for each practice session. Never practice without a goal!
- At the end of your practice session, write down how well you achieved your goal so you can monitor your progress. Write down what worked and what didn't in solving the problems you hear in your playing.
- Make sure you practice at least a little every day. It's much better to do 10 minutes every day than an hour once a week.
- Keep going until you have done the whole passage with no rests up to tempo.
- You can increase the number of rests in between chunks from what is written in the example, but keep the number of rests between chunks consistent for a given step of the process.
- Play last bar of the passage as clearly as possible. Back up one bar and play the last two bars as cleanly as possible. Continue.
- Use random/interleaved practice to allow your brain to practice performing.
- Use breaks strategically to allow your brain to do the necessarily reorganization it needs to in order to consolidate what you practiced in the last session.

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