

Practice With Purpose

Development of any skill requires purposeful repetition. We call it practice. The road to improvement meanders through the villages of “frustration,” “boredom,” “disappointment,” and even “euphoria.” But the estimated time of arrival can be moved up if the driver will “Practice with a Purpose!” The following words of wisdom are the product of nearly 40 years of experience and were delivered to a group of music majors at Ouachita Baptist University a few years ago. May they speed you on your way as you move forward in your pursuit of musical excellence.

Purposeful Practice

1. See yourself as you want to be--dream! “Without vision the people perish.”

2. Organize your dream into a plan. Dreamers who never “plan” are stuck in a constant stage of inactivity--forever!
 - A. Analyze your playing into categories and critique each category.
 - sound**--do I have a characteristic sound on my instrument? Does my sound change appropriately with the musical styles I have to perform? Who can I listen to as a model? How can I make this happen?

 - technique**--am I able to play up to and beyond the speed necessary to perform appropriate literature on my instrument? How can I make this happen?

 - articulation**--am I able to consistently articulate the rhythms and figures necessary to perform the way I want on my instrument? How can I make this happen?

range--can I consistently play below and above the demands of my literature requirements? How can I make this happen?

endurance--am I able to play at a 100% level throughout a performance? When I get tired do I bounce back after a few seconds rest? How can I make this happen?

reading--am I able to sight read at an acceptable level--performance level? How can I make this happen?

improvisation/playing by ear--can I play what I hear? Can I embellish melodies, improvise accompaniments, improvise solos? Who can I listen to (watch) as a model? How can I make this happen?

musicality--am I finding the musical “nuggets” in the music and delivering them to the “outside world?” Do I know what makes this work (all works) a piece of music and not just organized sound? How can I make this happen?

others--the longer you live. . . . the more of these “others” show up in your musical life.

Decide where to start and design a complete and balanced practice routine. Take the amount of time you are willing to spend and give each category an appropriate amount of minutes and energy. Prioritize these. Be smart! For instance, do not begin with an endurance exercise! Decide what kind of exercises are appropriate for each category--this involves research and a good teacher!

Some things that will speed up your improvement

1. Get into a routine. To the best of your ability practice at the same time, in the same place, the same “right” way. You are trying to build in consistency and “rightness.” When you touch your instrument your body should say, “Ah, yes. An old friend. Lets have a great time making music.” And not say, “Good Grief, more abuse. Don’t make me go through this again! You know I can’t do this!” A routine is the fastest way to get consistent on anything.

2. Listen to excellent professional recordings of your instrument and other instruments. You are what you HEAR and watch. When you hear something you enjoy, your mind goes to work to get it for you. Your brain catalogs it for future use. Music in--music out. Garbage in--garbage out.

3. Get a good teacher. Congratulations, you already have several. Do what they tell you--they know what they are talking about. Trust them. Go find other sources of information through books, periodicals, trade magazines, videos, web sites and other online sources, other students and other teachers. Find a professional and write or call and set up a lesson. Do this once a year. Pick the brain of everyone in the business.

4. Go to LIVE performances and WATCH as well as listen. You are what you SEE! Seeing can change your whole perspective--can motivate, power up dreams, pull you through when you really need a tug.

5. Attend master classes and workshops given by professionals. Get schedules from sources and plan to go to these. How far would you travel to achieve your dream? Many such resources are available via podcasts & even video conferences.

6. Get with other students and discuss everything about musical experiences. Share victories and defeats, valid and bogus information, good and evil. Take advantage of others experiences and let them share in yours. Why go through this alone?

7. Understand how practice works in general and how it specifically applies to you.

The Practice Curve--cold, hard facts about improvement!

Improvement will not occur at the rate it did when you were a beginner and certainly NOT at the rate you want it to occur.

Improvement is proportional to the **efficiency** of your practice--not the amount. Do not confuse amount of time spent with **efficiency**.

Improvement is applied faith. You may work a long time and not SEE (hear) the results--a learning plateau.

Improvement is proportional to the level at which you play. The closer you are to reaching your potential, the more efficient (smarter) your practicing must be in order to achieve improvement. Climbing uphill.

Efficiency in Practice

1. Know what you need--what to practice & how to go about it.

2. Know yourself--maintenance for the items you do well and a kick in the pants for things that you still need in your playing.
3. Know when to stop. Going past this point takes you backwards, not forward.
4. Break up your routine. When you are sick of the plateau you're on, change one or more of the following: time; place; order; amount; anything else to jog your brain. (remember, your routine is your best friend-- but sometimes even best friends need a break from each other--in order to remain best friends.)
5. Just stop--for a day or two and let your hard work catch up with where your mind already is. After all, there are no uncharacteristic sounds, passages that are too difficult, or unplayable high notes in your mind. Those only exist in reality!
6. Take a couple of sessions and play only the things that you play really well (in other words, you'll sound like the trumpet players around here!)
7. Always return to fundamentals. They are what "brung ya!" Why does Albert Pujols hit off of a tee before, during AND AFTER games? Why does Albert Pujols consult his batting coach. Why does he even **HAVE** a batting coach?

General nuggets gleaned from years of trying to get better

1. Evaluate your practice. Ask yourself, "How is my practicing and how can I do it better?"
2. Evaluate your improvement over longer time periods. Semesters are good--two semesters are better! Set goals in August, review them in January and evaluate your progress in May.
3. Look for the joy in the work itself, not ONLY in the result. NEVER take for granted what we do--what you have the privilege of doing--making music.
4. Realize that musical performance is a life-long endeavor and so is practice and improvement. You can play better--always. The desire for improvement means you are still alive and in the game.
5. You are not alone and certainly not the only one who's ever gone through this experience. Others need your input and encouragement and you need theirs. Share!

Best wishes for a safe and eventful journey as you move forward toward your musical goals.