

Good Practice Habits

by Dr. Clifford Leaman, University of South Carolina

PRACTICE DAILY:

There is no substitute for regular practice. An hour seven days a week is far better than 4 hours twice a week. (even though it adds up to less time: 7 hours versus 8 hours)

PRACTICE CORRECTLY:

More can be learned in 15 minutes of good practice than in 1 hour of faulty practice. Poor practice habits can actually harm your playing rather than helping it. PRACTICE MAKES PERMANENT!! Whatever you do in your practice playing will become a part of your concert playing, so establishing proper habits is a must. If you have ever learned a passage incorrectly and had to go back and fix it, you know what I mean. See section on practice habits below.

Use the Metronome: The metronome should always be used with scales. It should be used in every piece of music at least some of the time. Any passage which needs drilled to improve either rhythmic or pitch accuracy should be done with the metronome. The reason for this is that the metronome can keep steady pulse in passages which you might tend to rush or hold back. In this way the metronome can be used to build better technique.

Practice Difficult Passages in Rhythms: The act of changing the rhythm of sixteenth-note passages, or other technically difficult passages, into one of a host of available rhythms which forces some of the notes to be played quickly while others are slower will improve overall finger speed and evenness. Remember that relaxation is **ALWAYS** the key to improving technically difficult passages. "I also recommend working on rapid passages in very short segments — playing each quickly and then stopping. Eventually the segments should be joined together. In this way the fingers learn to react quickly, but the mind need only assimilate a little at a time. Ivan Galamian had a systematic list of rhythms — dotted patterns or displaced accents — that could be applied to any passage. . . It's amazing how helpful it is to practice ten or twelve of these rhythms." *John Dalley, violinist, The Guarneri Quartet*

Practice a variety of things every day: Variety adds interest and allows you to get away from a problem which may not be able to be solved in one day. Work on tone-building exercises, scales, etudes, and melodies every day.

Practice Slowly: There is no substitute for slow, regulated practice. It is essential to practice slowly if you ever intend to play rapidly. The metronome is your best friend to keep you from playing a passage too quickly. "It's often not understood that practicing slowly is a mental exercise; it allows the brain to assimilate what has to be done when the passage is eventually played up to tempo. The learning process must be slow enough for comprehension to be complete and clear. A common occurrence is that a student may practice slowly but not break the problems down and understand them. Thus, after hours of work he still finds himself unable to cope with the passage when he plays it faster. . . It's pointless to do something over and over again if you're repeating the same mistake; all you're doing is practicing the mistake and ingraining it. Practicing is virtually an art in itself — the art of achieving economy of time and means." *David Soyer, cellist, The Guarneri Quartet*

WORK ON YOUR TONE EVERY DAY:

Play overtones every day to improve your abilities in the following areas: (a) Playing low notes softly, (b) Playing in tune, (c) Playing with better tone quality, (d) Formulating correct embouchure, (e) Playing in the altissimo range, (f) Playing large intervallic skips smoothly. Any other exercise which includes many long, slurred notes can be utilized to improve intonation, vibrato, and consistency of timbre. Playing on the mouthpiece and reed alone without the saxophone attached can improve tone immeasurably as well. To produce a concert pitch "B-flat" or B-natural" with the mouthpiece alone seems to work the best for me. This device can be coupled with articulation exercises as well, and will help any player who needs to improve his/her breathing apparatus.

PRACTICE WITH A GOAL IN MIND:

Always have a plan for your practice sessions. Know what you want to improve and how you're going to go about it. In order to have tangible success, which is absolutely necessary for anyone hoping to enjoy practicing, you must have short-term, mid-term, and long-range goals. My short-term goals always include some kind of scale playing, because it is easy to measure improvement with the metronome when practicing scales. Mid-range goals may include the learning of a piece of music, preparing a performance, or overall musical progress. Long-range goals are much more difficult to set and achieve, but are helpful, nonetheless, if set high enough and checked occasionally. These goals may include such issues as winning a competition, or getting into a particular university, etc.

LISTEN TO PROFESSIONAL SAXOPHONISTS:

Listening to such saxophonists as Donald Sinta, Jean Marie Londeix, Fred Hemke, Marcel Mule, Ted Hegvik, James Forger, John Sampen and others will help you to better understand what a saxophone sounds like in the hands of a master.

LISTEN TO GOOD MUSIC AND GREAT ARTISTS:

Listening to any great artist can be helpful to a growing musician. Much can be learned about musicianship by listening to others perform, either the same pieces you may be working on, music related by stylistic considerations. Even stylistically unrelated passages can be of great value. Do not restrict your listening habits to performers of the saxophone. My musical instincts have grown immeasurably through experiencing musical performances by great singers, as well as those of wind, keyboard, and string players. There is no substitute for going to live performances! As good as contemporary recording fidelity has become, there is still no substitute for the electricity of a live performance.

Dr. Clifford Leaman, Associate Professor of Saxophone at The University of South Carolina, received the Bachelor of Science degree in music education from Lebanon Valley College, and Masters and Doctoral degrees in performance from The University of Michigan. He is also chair of the Music Division of South Carolina Governors School for the Arts and Humanities Summer Honors program. He has served on the faculties of Furman University, Eastern Michigan University, and The University of Michigan prior to his appointment at the University of South Carolina. Dr. Leaman is in great demand as a soloist and clinician and has toured extensively throughout the United States and Canada.