

TEN EFFECTIVE PRACTICE TIPS

by Denise Gainey

In today's world, we are all busy trying to fit too many things into too few hours each day. For musicians, the issue is finding the time we need daily to progress on our instruments, and without a doubt, focused and productive time in the practice room is much more important than the number of hours spent just playing through music. Here are ten tips to build an effective practice regimen.

1) Equipment matters! It helps to own a professional quality instrument and mouthpiece, a metronome and tuner (there are several great smartphone apps), a dictionary of musical terms, a folder to organize your music, a notebook devoted solely to your instrument, and a method of recording yourself.

2) Set aside definite and regular times for practicing, and don't let anything interfere with those times. Along with that, go into your lessons with a plan of what you want to get accomplished, including both short-term and long-term goals.

3) Work particularly on improving your fundamental skills. True progress won't be made until the fundamentals are addressed and improved.

4) If you sound good the entire time you are practicing, you are not really practicing! Focus your attention on areas that challenge you instead of always starting at the beginning of a piece of music. My favorite three rules of successful practice: **isolate the problem** (for example, it may be one interval causing a passage not to work); **slow it down**...way down; **repeat the passage thoughtfully** in varied ways, using different rhythms and articulations.

5) Always try to transfer knowledge and skills learned from one piece to the next, and look for opportunities to apply new fingerings, tone considerations, improved intonation, etc.

6) Practice half of your time while sitting, and half while standing. We practice what we perform, and we perform what we've practiced, so it is important to become comfortable playing seated for ensemble playing and standing for solo playing. Notice how your breathing and posture feels in both situations.

7) Use a mirror! My mom used to say, "You never know how you look until you get your picture took." A silly way of reminding us that we may not realize bad habits developing and perpetuating in the areas of embouchure, hand and body position until we see ourselves play.

8) If you are a reed player, make time daily to work on breaking in new reeds and adjusting others. We are only as good as our weakest reed.

9) If you don't understand a concept, don't wait until your next lesson to ask your teacher – ask *now* instead of waiting a week and losing those hours that you could have used to improve.

And finally...

10) As my mentor Kalmen Opperman used to say, "Practice and hope, but never *hope* more than you practice." Wishful thinking alone won't work – get in the practice room daily using these tips, and watch for great things to come!

INCREASE YOUR PERCUSSION AWARENESS WHEN YOU TEACH

by James Campbell

The world of percussion crosses all musical boundaries, and percussion students have the widest possible vocabulary of instruments and musical genres to master – more than any other instrumentalist. I often tell my students that *someone invents a new percussion instrument, implement, or technique every day*. As a music teacher, who might not be a percussion specialist, how do you keep up?

When you give a percussionist instruction, think of their quality of sound - FIRST.

Think back to when you were a beginning music student studying your own primary instrument. When was your first memory of a teacher or a classmate talking about your sound? How many lessons after you started learning your instrument did it take for your teacher to comment on the SOUND you produced? For a percussionist, it is often years after they start playing that anyone even mentions the quality of sound they produce.

One of the challenges of percussion pedagogy is that instruction is often focused on external factors. With each music concept, students may hear comments like:

- Rhythm – "Hit now."
- Tempo – "You're behind."
- Dynamics – "Play softer."
- Timbre – "Use the red mallet."

Teachers need to give students more AWARENESS INSTRUCTIONS to help them develop their internal awareness of sound production. As a teacher, address the percussionist with comments like these:

- "Are there other instrumentalists that you share this rhythm with?"
- "Is your passage here part of the melody or accompaniment?"
- "Is there a mallet that would help blend with the woodwinds?"
- "How does your grip change when you play a roll?"

The diversity of percussion experiences offered through performing in music ensembles helps the percussion student grow and mature by providing them a variety of opportunities for musical growth in both internal awareness and creative problem solving. With awareness instruction from the teacher, it becomes the responsibility of a percussionist to figure out WHAT sound to make and then HOW to do it consistently.

SINGLE REED MYTHS

by Neal Postma

Myths about reeds have been floating around public schools and universities for decades and continue to linger. This blog will focus on dispelling those myths and providing information to help you better understand reeds in general.

Growing up as a saxophonist, I was told so many things about single reeds that turned out to be flat-out wrong.

- **The strength of the reed is determined by the thickness.** By far the most common myth! Yes, thicker cane would make a reed more resistant, but that is not how reeds are cut. All reeds of the same cut/design have the same thickness; in fact, all specifications on the reed are exactly the same. We do not know the strength of the reed until the reed is finished. Reed cane is an organic substance, so there are some variables we cannot control completely. Different cane will have different density of the pores – if the pores are closer together, the reed will be more resistant and thus a higher strength. So when the reed is finished, we strap it down, measure how resistant the tip is, and that tells us the strength!

- **Reed warping in when the tip gets wavy.** While a wavy tip is not good for the reed, that is not warping. Reed warping is when the reed table actually becomes concave (this is very slight and not easy to see). The outside of the reed dries out faster than the inside, and this makes the reed bend inwards. The main problem here is that the reed will no longer seal to the mouthpiece, and this leads to a whole array of problems including squeaking, losing response, airy sound and so on.

- **The harder the reed, the better you are at your instrument.** In short, no. When students first start playing, I encourage them to try a 2 or 2.5 strength (sax and clarinet). As they progress, they should go up in reed strength somewhat. High school students on sax should aim for 3-3.5, and clarinetists should aim for 3-4. More important is the relationship between the tip size on the mouthpiece and the strength of the reed – if you have a more open tipped mouthpiece, you will need a softer reed and vice versa. Jazz saxophonists tend to play softer reeds because their tip openings are larger than classical players. European clarinetists tend to play more open mouthpieces than Americans, and thus softer reeds. This plays a very important part when shopping for a new mouthpiece. You might try a new mouthpiece with your current reed and not like it, but really you might need to change your reed strength to match it!

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