

Foundations for Good Practice Habits

Dr. Christina Guenther

Texas has contest seasons throughout the academic year—marching contest, region/all-state etudes, and solo and ensemble. With balancing school life and other extra-curricular activities, high-school musicians can find it challenging to navigate balancing practice time into their busy lives. Here are some ideas to help make learning music easier.

Slow practice

The number one thing I find myself telling students is to practice slowly. “The less time I have to learn something, the slower I practice,” I tell them. The reason for this is multi-fold: 1) if you practice something too fast and in a hurry and learn it wrong, then you have to unlearn it and learn it right—this takes more time than if you had just learned it slowly and correctly in the first place; 2) deliberate, conscientious practice will allow you to notice technical patterns and other musical details that you might miss in going too fast from the onset; 3) detailed, slow work really helps the finger-brain connection and allows your fingers to memorize exactly what they need to.

Technique

A strong foundation in fundamentals is key. The stronger one’s technique and pattern-recognition, the better one can sight-read, the faster one can learn music. I can’t ever stress enough how important it is for young musicians to learn their scales and scale-related patterns. In my college

studio, my students play a large variety of scales and chords in all twelve keys: pentatonic, whole tone, major, minor, octatonic, chromatic, and upper note scales as well as augmented triads, a triad routine, fully diminished seventh chords, and a seventh chord routine. I teach every one of these by relating them initially to the major scale because that is the scale with which almost all these young musicians are comfortable once they have completed high school. Knowing all these patterns makes it much easier for them to learn pieces. For high schoolers, learning and memorizing their major scales (in all twelve keys) is critical. Some students balk at learning scales, but their mindset can be adjusted to have a different perspective: scales are constant. With all the music students have to learn (much of which they don’t get to choose, some of which they may not like), scales are always the same. To make it less monotonous, the rhythmic patterns and range can be changed, but the seven pitches in each major scale will always remain the same. Students can find comfort and stability in this constancy. It will also help to be able to play any technical exercises steadily with and without a metronome.

Tone

Another foundational factor is tone. Sound is what makes each instrument special and unique. Without the sound of an instrument, technique is irrelevant. Ideally, every student would have a private teacher right from the beginning. But for a number of factors—resources, finances, geography—this is not reality. Band directors alone, however, can do a lot for all their students regardless of what the director’s primary instrument is. Long tones are one of the best sound exercises all band instrumentalists can do. There are unlimited long tone studies: whole notes by scale or arpeggios or chromatically; octaves or other interval leaps; harmonics. The ideas for exercises—and students can make up their own, too—are limitless. With tone, of course, also comes awareness for proper breathing and breath control, and learning to effectively support the air from the core. Breathing is a very natural phenomenon that seems to become harder as we get older and hold more tension. Students should aim to take a full, deep breath, releasing any tension, and be aware of where their bodies expand. When breathing for

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playing, musicians should strive for this same relaxed feeling, eliminating any pre-conceived ideas about “how to breathe” for their specific instrument; just breathe naturally. My favorite exercise for teaching support is to have students hold a sit-up position half-way up and then play their instrument. This shows them which muscles are used in supporting the air; then they need to use those muscles in the same way when they playing sitting or standing.

Articulation

A final fundamental key for band instrumentalists is articulation. This is going to vary from instrument to instrument. Tongue placement in the mouth (or “voicing”) for flute and saxophone, for example, are very opposite. It would be most helpful to find a specialist on each instrument (or an article or other resource written by a specialist) to learn in detail what needs to happen inside the mouth for each woodwind and brass instrument. The primary goal in articulation will be a clean start to each articulated note. Additionally, for fast selections, the ability to multiple-tongue (especially for flute and brass players) is really important. The pattern I use for double-tonguing is: TK-TK (or DG-DG), and for triple-tonguing: TKT-KTK (or DGD-GDG). I have heard students say they can’t double tongue and thirty seconds later, after telling them how, they can do it at least at a basic level. Then it is up to them to train their tongue muscle in the same way they would their fingers to develop a fast and steady double (or triple) tongue.

With strong fundamentals in technique, tone, and articulation, and a good mindset of slow, deliberate practice, young musicians will have the foundation they need to learn the challenging music they play efficiently, effectively, and with a good attitude. If they embrace these keys, they will surely find learning pieces—and subsequently performing them—that much more enjoyable!

Happy practicing!

Dr. Christina Guenther is Professor of Flute at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas where she has taught since 2005. In demand as a clinician and performer, she has performed domestically as well as abroad in Australia, Germany, Bolivia, and Costa Rica. She is the flutist for the Stone Fort Wind Quintet—the faculty quintet at SFA. An enthusiastic proponent of new music, Guenther has commissioned and premiered many new works for flute by American composers. She holds degrees from the Florida State University and Rutgers—the State University of New Jersey.