



All Staters: An Individualized Approach to Their Success

**CLINICIAN:
Richard Lambrecht**

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Texas Bandmasters Association Convention
July 23, 2013
Clinic
All Staters: An Individualized Approach to Their Success

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Why do we want our students to participate and be successful in the all state auditions?
To improve the musicianship of your ensemble.
To provide opportunities for your students to perform in other groups.
To give students the opportunity to receive recognition.

Strategies:

Understand the process and procedures of the auditions.

Goal of the panel is to rank the students.

Region

Area

State

Develop fundamentals of musicianship.

Tone/Rhythm/Pitch/Style/Dynamics/Tempo

Listen to students often. Make a schedule. Make assignments. Chart their achievements. Have clinics, area retreat, make recordings, and use Smart Music, self evaluations, and evaluation of peers.

PRACTICE!

UTEP All-State French Horn Clinic

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Always play with your best sound.

Take a full deep lung filling breath every time you inhale.
Strive to produce a firm, steady, clear, resonant and characteristic sound on every note you play.

Practice slowly.

Slow enough to play all elements of the music correctly at the same time.
Always practice slowly before playing fast.
Remember that Tempo is the final element in preparation.
Mark your music.

Mark every breath you take.

Make your markings in the context of the music using symbols, abbreviations and short comments.
Mark all of the places that need reminders (accidentals, dynamics, etc.)
Write down on the music the tempo that you are going to play at.

Problem solving.

Isolate problems.
Create ways to solve problems.
When you have it right play it again.
Play on the mouthpiece.
Use a metronome.
Record yourself.
Use add on technique.
Start at different places.
Count all of the rhythms.
Play three times in a row perfectly without stopping before moving on or faster.

Be musical.

Play with a forward motion.
Hold notes out full value.
Play the dynamics.

Prepare the music in the etudes in this order.

1. Rhythm
2. Pitch
3. Style
4. Dynamics
5. Tempo

“The more you practice, the more fun it is”

TOP TEN PRACTICE TIPS

PRACTICE EVERY DAY

Help your long-term memory—Improve your learning curve

HAVE SPECIFIC GOALS

Know what you're going to do before you practice

BEGIN WITH THE BASICS

Go over technique first—Always have a warm-up plan

FOCUS ON THE TOUGH STUFF

Master the 80/20 rule—Overcome the fear factor

WRITE IT DOWN

Get the most from your practice log—See your goals and accomplishments

SLOW IT DOWN

Muscle Memory--Never make mistakes—Learn it right the first time

BREAK IT DOWN

Identify musical sections—Practice transitions—Avoid the SAD Syndrome

USE A METRONOME

Always work on improving your time—Don't stretch time for the Tough Stuff

PRACTICE AWAY FROM YOUR INSTRUMENT

Visualize yourself playing successfully—Hear the music in your mind

ACCENTUATE THE POSITIVE

Use positive language in the practice room—Focus on solutions, not problems

Notice What You Do Well

Do you recognize your accomplishments and feel good about them? Many musicians are guilty of focusing only on the problems in their playing.

It's important to know what aspects of your playing need improvement. All musicians—beginners and virtuosos alike—want to be better in the future than they are today.

But, make sure you notice the progress you have made.

Let yourself know that you're working hard, that you're getting better, and that you're glad you're going through the process of learning new music and more advanced techniques.

Don't become one of those musicians who play an amazing concert but leave the stage down on themselves. Thousands of notes played perfectly, yet they focus all their thoughts and energies on the three notes they missed.

That is not healthy.

A balanced approach is better. Congratulate yourself for what's going well and acknowledge what needs fixing. Remember that music, like life itself, always has room for improvement—but needs to be enjoyed today.

Here are three practice room techniques for achieving this balance:

1. When you're first learning something and are able to play it very slowly, don't immediately get frustrated and say, "I can't play this up to speed." Of course you can't! You just learned it! Praise yourself for learning all those notes.

2. When you record yourself, listen back and notice what you're doing right as well as what needs more work. List five things that went well before you focus on what can be better. This balance will silence your inner critic and make you more objective.

3. Use positive, direct language with yourself as you plan how to improve a specific area of the music you're learning. It's better to say, "I need to make sure those E flats are in tune" instead of "Oh, my intonation is terrible." Musicians aim for perfection. But, they need to realize that being perfect is not humanly possible.

Since there will always be room for improvement in your playing, be sure to notice everything you're already doing well. This will make your pursuit of perfection a happier journey.

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Practice Performing (Part 1)

Once you can play all the notes for an upcoming concert, the practice room needs to become a performance preparation room. During this phase, you go from learning to mastery.

Mastery means automatically playing your music from start to finish and feeling in control the entire time. One of the components of mastery is the ability to play without stopping—no matter what! Why is this level of mastery so important?

Because stopping is not an option during a concert!

Here are specific practice room techniques that will make you a performance master:

1. **Visualization A:** Hear the music in your head and feel yourself playing it—without your instrument. Any difficult issues during your visualization will probably be real issues on stage. Make sure you feel comfortable throughout this visualization!
2. **Visualization B:** Picture yourself playing on stage in front of your audience. Feel calm, cool, and collected. Know that you are in control!
3. **No Stopping:** Play through each section without any pauses whatsoever. This may mean initially playing more slowly than you want. So be it. You're working on mastery, not winning a race.
4. **Control Each Section:** Be able to play each section of your music—in any order. If your piece has six sections, try playing each section in random order or backwards from the last section to the first.
5. **Tighten the Transitions:** When each section is playable, make sure you can easily transition from one section to the next. Play the last few measures of one section into the first few measures of the next section.
6. **Put It All Together:** Play the sections in order. However, you don't have to start by playing the whole piece! Again, if your music has six sections; you can play sections 4, 5, and 6 or sections 2, 3, and 4. Try different combinations. Eventually, you'll easily be able to play sections 1 – 6 (which is the entire piece of music) flawlessly!

These techniques will prepare you for performance success.

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Practice Performing (Part 2)

Many musicians neglect the crucial transition from practicing to performing and are then surprised by their feelings when they walk on stage.

These feelings can lead to damaging thoughts of inadequacy during a concert.

Instead of feeling these pressures when you walk on stage, you must put the pressure on yourself at home.

Your goal is to make your practice session feel like a live show. The ultimate technique to create this feeling is to play a Performance Run-through.

Let's go through the step-by-step process:

1. Schedule Your "Performance": Don't just say, "I'll do it Tuesday." Tell yourself; "I'm performing Tuesday at 8:15pm."
2. Create an Audience: By recording or videotaping yourself you create a virtual audience. Some musician's invite family or friends for an actual audience.
3. Wear Your Concert Clothes: Make sure you can play comfortably!
4. Have a "Backstage": Begin by standing "in the wings." Then, enter your practice space, pick up your instrument, acknowledge the audience, and perform. When finished, acknowledge your audience again and return to your "backstage" room.
5. Do Not Stop: No matter what happens during your performance, keep playing!!!!

Some musicians take additional steps to put on the pressure:

-- Set up a webcam and broadcast your "performance" live on the Internet. Then, post it online—even if you were unhappy with it.

--If you have a live audience, invite them to critique you.

--Change the temperature or lighting. Many stages are too hot, cold, bright, or dark. Make your practice run-through uncomfortable so you're ready for anything!

You can do several of these performances in one day. The trick is to make each trial run in your practice space feel like a real performance.

If you'll do five in a row, be sure to leave the room in between each run-through. Start the entire process each time. It's important to walk "on stage" and begin playing just like you'll do at an actual performance.

Have fun with your run-throughs. Your goal is to feel confident and in control!

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Play Without Stopping

Many musicians have a habit of practicing in a way that will never lead to success in a performance.

Their practicing is full of uncontrolled stops and starts. Their playing is interrupted each time they make an error (or think they're about to make an error!!).

This process is called the "SAD Syndrome." SAD stands for **Stop And Do-it-again**.

While in the grips of the SAD Syndrome, players sometimes re-start by going back a few notes, and other times they just forge ahead. Either way, they are teaching their muscles to play mistakes.

Worse yet, during the pause in their playing, some musicians blurt out a quick "Oh" or "Sorry" or "*%^\$@#." These words pass their lips almost unconsciously.

Stopping and starting creates stress and a lack of confidence. It can even lead to memory lapses and stage fright.

If it happens to you, it's time to build new practice habits!

Here are a few suggestions to avoid the SAD Syndrome:

1. **Slow Down:** Play at a slow, controlled tempo. When playing slowly, you can anticipate and avoid a mistake before it even happens! This will allow you to keep playing successfully.
2. **Play a Shorter Section:** Play just a few bars at a time. When each section is perfect, you can put them together to form longer sections of music.
3. **Work on Transitions:** Make sure you can transition from the end of one section to the beginning of the next section. Too many musicians skip this step!
4. **Keep Counting:** Often, the SAD Syndrome occurs because a musician plays an incorrect pitch. Instead of stopping if you hit a wrong note, keep playing in time. Get to the next note, placing its rhythm correctly in your count.

If you've found yourself struggling with the SAD Syndrome, try these suggestions and make a big change in your practice techniques.

And remember: Your performances will be a mirror of your practicing. When you're on stage, you'll have to play without stopping. So, it makes sense to play without stopping while you're practicing.

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Put Your Practicing First

If your life is busy, you may find it challenging to "fit in" your practice sessions. Day after day, practicing can take a back seat

to other tasks: chores at home, homework, Facebook, etc.

Here's the solution: Practice first.

That's right. Do your practicing before any of your other activities.

When you do, something miraculous happens.

You still have time to finish everything else on your to-do list, AND you practiced! That's much better than skipping your music to do the more mundane things in life.

For some people, this means practicing first thing in the morning. Others might need to practice immediately after school—before conquering homework or eating dinner and definitely before any free-time activities.

This practice tip is one of the most powerful ones around. Don't underestimate its power! It helps procrastinators and helps people who never feel there's enough time for their music.

Amazingly, if you follow this advice, you'll still have time for your non-music responsibilities. It's as if finishing your practicing gives you more energy and allows you to get everything else done more efficiently!

Plus, there are psychological benefits: You will feel better about yourself, about your day, about your accomplishments, and about your commitment to something you believe in.

Your practicing deserves to be put ahead of other day-to-day tasks. Try practicing first—even if it feels uncomfortable.

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Sightread Every Day

Many musicians are worried that their sightreading skills are not strong enough. Yet, sightreading is seldom made a regular part of practicing.

It's important to spend a little time at each practice session reading something new. Don't worry about getting every note. The main goal is to go through the music at a steady tempo—without stopping.

The key to playing without stopping is constant counting. If you can't play the notes in one measure, just keep counting and jump back in at the next downbeat. Do not lose your place!

Even if sound stops coming out of your instrument, you are staying in time and following along visually. This counts as “not stopping” when you're sightreading, so keep your eyes on the page!

Being willing to count even when you're missing some notes may mean changing your usual concept of playing a piece “correctly.” Instead of focusing on playing the right pitches (even if you occasionally stretch time), you'll need to focus on correct rhythms (even if you occasionally play the wrong pitches).

Keeping this rhythmic integrity in your music will make your sightreading stronger over time. Eventually, you'll be able to play more and more of the notes.

Sightreading is an unusual process. Unlike reading language, in which your only task is to interpret the meaning of symbols (letters and words) on the printed page, sightreading music contains an extra element:

Your brain must interpret the symbols (notes) AND send messages to your muscles so they can play your instrument.

This is a complicated process. To keep your muscles in shape for sightreading, they need regular practice. Much like speaking a foreign language, sightreading is a “use it or lose it” skill.

So, keep some sightreading materials in your practice area and take a look at them every day.

And, remember: Never stop counting!

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Write In Your Music

Some musicians treat their sheet music like an ancient manuscript to be displayed in a museum. They keep it in perfect, pristine condition.

Sheet music is just a tool to help you learn faster. And, tools rarely stay in brand-new condition when used. Writing in your music is one of the best ways to use sheet music to help you progress as quickly as you can.

There are several items to write in your music:

1. **Tough Stuff:** You need to clearly define the small areas of difficult music that will need to be worked on. Use a very light pencil mark to circle these sections. Once you have mastered a section, erase your pencil marking.
2. **Technical Stuff:** Put in fingerings, breath marks, pedaling, shifts, positions, etc. These markings will constantly guide you as you play through your music.
3. **Phrasing:** Write down dynamics, emphasis marks, and any phrasing ideas you have.
4. **Questions:** When you practice, questions probably come up. Write them in the music so you can get them answered by your teacher, colleagues, or by doing your own research.
5. **Encouragement:** Seeing words of encouragement to yourself in your music can have a wonderful, dramatic effect when you play a piece.

All five of the above have one thing in common: They help your memory.

What you write today will jog your memory tomorrow!

With these markings in your music, your upcoming practice sessions will be much easier and much less frustrating than if you try to remember everything you did today.

So, keep a pencil on your music stand and use it frequently.

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Try Very Long Practice Sessions

While you can accomplish a great deal in a short amount of practice time, there are advantages to long practice sessions.

Aside from the obvious fact that you can cover more material in three hours than in fifteen minutes, there is a more intriguing reason to experience long practice sessions:

There seems to be a mental change that occurs after playing your instrument for about two hours. A kind of clarity, expressiveness, and creativity can well up—seemingly out of nowhere.

Some musicians describe this state as being “in the zone,” the same way athletes describe peak experiences. While in this zone you play in a heightened state of awareness and see new possibilities.

Insights about your technique and phrasing occur. You may notice connections between various items you’re practicing. You pay attention to your muscles in a special way; Fantastic ideas for a new composition, a solo, or a cadenza instantly and mysteriously enter your mind.

Whatever the reason for these experiences, they are definitely worth having and seldom occur during short practice sessions.

Playing for long periods of time every day may not be possible for you, but you should give yourself this experience every now and then.

And, if playing your instrument for three hours at a time seems too daunting, you can build up to it. For instance, if you’re currently putting in twenty minutes a day, shoot for thirty. If you’re practicing one hour per day, try an hour and a half.

To make big strides in your playing, you’ll need quality and quantity in your practicing. Long practice sessions give you both.

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Practice In Front of a Mirror

When we practice, we often feel that our technique is strong and we are playing efficiently. It would be interesting to know if someone watching us practice would come to the same conclusion.

You should have the means to see yourself practice. A simple way to have this external view is to practice in front of a mirror.

When you practice in front of a mirror, you can see if you are doing something physically that is getting in the way of creating the sound you desire.

Here are specifics to look for in the mirror:

- Posture: Sit or stand so that your spine is fully supported.
- Tension: Watch for raised shoulders, clenched jaw, a forceful grip, tight neck, or your arm(s) held in an unnatural position. Even raising your eyebrows can be evidence of tension building.
- Habits: If your teacher always brings up a specific habit that gets in the way of improving your technique, look for it in the mirror.
- Confidence: You want to look at ease and in control as you play. Be sure you look like a performer an audience would want to watch.

Be aware of these issues:

- Use a mirror big enough to see your whole body. You want to see the cause of all issues, especially tension and posture. For instance, if your torso is uncomfortably twisted, it may be the placement of one foot that is causing the problem. You would never see that foot in a small mirror.
- The very act of looking in the mirror may cause you to change your playing position. Don't watch yourself the entire time.
- Place the mirror where it is very easy to see yourself. The mirror is of no use if you must turn 90 degrees to see it!

It's easier to see a physical issue that affects your playing than it is to feel it. Having a mirror in your practice space lets you quickly see a problem and allows you to see yourself from the outside--just the way your teacher would.

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Create Your Own Exercises

You're already using slow practice to build your muscle memory. You're focused on the tough stuff in your music and are making progress. Yet, even with this level of practice intensity, you may feel something is missing.

At times like these, it's important to develop exercises based on the notes, keys, rhythms, and problem areas in your music. These exercises give you some relief from the song itself, and they support learning your repertoire.

If you're taking lessons, your teacher will often create these short drills for you. However, you're likely to encounter material between lessons that could benefit from your own creative approach to the notes. So, during your practice sessions, you'll need to develop the skill of making up these exercises yourself.

The first step is to accurately define what the problem is. Then, isolate this problem and create a short pattern that unlocks the difficulty.

To get you started with this process, here are some suggestions:

1. Play scales and arpeggios in the key of the piece you're learning.
2. If you are working on a difficult rhythm, incorporate this rhythm into your scales (including chromatic scales). For instance, run today's scales and arpeggios using the rhythm. First, play the rhythm on each pitch. Then, go up and down your scale using the rhythm.
3. Specific rhythms can also be played on random notes. This can free you from the confines of the melody and key while you internalize the rhythm.
4. If a run of eighth notes or sixteenth notes is causing difficulty, alter the rhythm to either (a) long, short, long, short or (b) short, long, short, long. This can be just enough of a change to pinpoint the exact notes that need your focus.
5. Play a bar or two both forward and backward. Playing notes in reverse order gives you a new perspective on moving comfortably from note to note.

Your exercises can be a big time-saver in your practicing. They can serve as your warm-ups, essentially creating a "two birds with one stone" situation. You'll be warming up AND learning your repertoire faster!

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Embrace Technology

Learning to play a musical instrument is typically an old-fashioned activity. We spend countless hours perfecting our craft. There is a master/apprentice system in private lessons, with most instruction being done just as it has been for generations. This system carries on traditions that have been proven over time.

Though many musicians continue to practice in a traditional way, wonderful technologies have been developed that substantially increase the speed at which people can learn to play instruments. These devices offer time-savings, increased physical comfort, and greater enjoyment for musicians.

Teachers, students, and performers alike should take advantage of these conveniences. Here are some of the innovative technologies available to musicians today:

- **Accompaniment Software:** Improves your knowledge of the music you're learning and makes practicing more fun.
- **Adjustable Playback Systems:** CD players and software are available that slow down a recording while keeping the pitch constant or play the recording in a new key while keeping the tempo constant.
- **Ergonomic Equipment:** There are chairs designed to help your posture and comfort, extremely lightweight cases that are easier to carry, and even changes in design to instruments themselves for increased playability.
- **Online Resources:** Videos, ear-training, music theory, online metronomes, downloadable sheet music, music history, online practice journals, recordings, and much more are all waiting for you online.
- **Digital Recorders and Camcorders:** You'll get instant visual and aural feedback that will help you improve your technique, phrasing, posture, and onstage demeanor.
- **Cell Phone Apps:** Metronomes, tuners, and more are now available in the palm of your hand.
- **Advanced Metronomes:** Metronomes and drum machines on the market today allow musicians to program specific beats, including mixed meters, accented downbeats, and endless loops to aid practicing.
- **Sound Isolation Systems:** Need to practice without disturbing people around you? Several gadgets are available, including devices that silence brass instruments. You can even get a prefabricated, soundproof practice room installed in your house, apartment, or school.

New musical technologies are being created and improved upon all the time. Some of these tools are time-consuming to learn. Others can be incorporated into your practicing immediately.

They all make playing music more enjoyable and allow musicians to advance faster than ever before. By incorporating available technology into a dedicated practice schedule, musicians get the best of the old and the new.

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Blow Off Steam

Unlike many activities that should not be attempted when you are upset (like driving a car or washing steak knives), playing a musical instrument can actually be enhanced by difficult emotions.

If you are upset, angry, or frustrated, try taking it out on your instrument. No, don't throw your instrument to the floor or send it sailing through the nearest window! Just pick it up and play it.

When you try this, two things tend to happen.

First, you may be able to release the negative emotions and start to feel better. You'll feel the anger or frustration subside as you play with reckless abandon. You might just find yourself feeling calm after a few minutes.

Second, you may gain unique insight into the music you're practicing. If you are angry, for instance, you will probably practice with more intensity, louder dynamics, and rougher tone than you usually use. The added intensity can be just what the music needs.

Expressing difficult emotions can lead to a supercharged practice session. So, the next time you're upset, channel it through your music!

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Don't Get Frustrated

It goes without saying that when you practice music, you are trying to play things

that you don't currently know how to play. Practicing music is about taking musical information that is currently unfamiliar and slowly working it into something familiar.

Unfortunately, tackling unfamiliar topics is frustrating for most people, and musicians are no exception.

What if musicians *expected* to feel frustrated sometimes? If frustration is expected, and then you won't let it get the best of you.

When you begin to feel the slightest bit of frustration, you can recognize what is happening and nip it in the bud.

You can say to yourself, "I'm outside of my comfort zone working on this new material. It's no big deal. That's what practicing is all about."

If you find that frustration is getting the best of you, then it may be time to move on to something new, or maybe some music that is already familiar and fun.

If switching songs doesn't do the trick, take a break. It's fine to walk away from the source of your frustration. When you feel calm again, return to the task and approach it with a fresh start.

We must always remember that mastering a musical instrument is a process that takes time and patience. Be realistic about how much you can get accomplished at any one practice session. And, cut yourself some slack!

As David G. Myers says in his book *The Pursuit of Happiness*, "Although we often overestimate how much we will accomplish in any given day, we generally underestimate how much we can accomplish in a year, given just a little progress every day." Musicians need to be reminded of this pearl of wisdom at each and every practice session.

Don't get frustrated. It's not worth it.

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Have Fun

Practicing music can be a lot of hard work. Mastering the technical demands of your instrument, learning challenging music, and having the discipline to practice every day require dedication and perseverance. However, if your practicing feels like drudgery, something is wrong. Playing your instrument should be fun.

One element of having fun is realizing that, out of all the activities you could take part in, you have chosen to play music.

Think about that for a minute.

Whether music is your hobby or your profession, you have countless other ways you could spend your time. Something has made you decide to play music. Make sure you're enjoying this time!

If you're not having fun in your practice room, here are a few suggestions:

--Start and end your practice session with something fun.

--Ignore the way you're "supposed" to play and try some unconventional techniques.

-- Leave your serious side behind and play your instrument without worrying about how you sound. Just play.

--Play some music you absolutely love --even if it's not on your official practice list.

Sure, there's a lot of serious work that needs to get accomplished in the practice room, but the overall feeling should be one of joy.

In the grand scheme of things, we should all feel lucky to play an instrument.

Make practicing music the fun part of your day.

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Practice Every Day

Most musicians intuitively understand that practicing every day is the best way to improve. And, we've heard the cute reminders such as, "You don't have to practice every day-- just on the days you eat."

But, there's more to it than cute sayings.

Practicing every day means you're probably putting in more time than if you practice only two or three times per week.

More time generally equals more progress. More progress also comes from learning your music in small increments. The human brain cannot absorb huge amounts of information at once. Sure, you can cram a lot of material into your brain (like the night before a final exam), but that information will quickly disappear.

Practicing every day helps with your long-term memory. For the brain to transfer information from short-term memory (think: a phone number you heard just once) into long-term memory (think: your own phone number), your brain must perceive this information as being important.

Basically, the brain will only think something is important if there is emotion or repetition attached to that information. Practicing every day gives you the repetition your memory needs.

Practicing every day gives you more time with your instrument, makes learning more efficient, and increases your ability to remember what you're playing. You can get more work done in less time by doing a little bit every day.

Short practice sessions every day are simply better than one long practice per week. Commit yourself to playing your instrument every day.

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Practice Today

Even though musicians know they'll benefit from daily practicing, very few people actually do it!

There are many reasons for this, including:

--People are busy with other things.

--It's hard to get a practice session started.

--Many musicians focus on "practicing" instead of "playing" their instrument, and "practicing" doesn't excite them.

There is also a subtle, psychological barrier that stops many people from practicing daily:

The thought of practicing every day for the rest of your life is a difficult concept to face. It's just too much to think about. It's like a long road fading into the distance --with no set destination!

The solution is to focus on practicing today only! Don't worry about tomorrow. Your only responsibility is to play your instrument TODAY.

That's all your responsibility ever is. Why? Well, without getting too philosophical about it, Today is the only time we ever have.

After all, Tomorrow doesn't really exist --it's just a concept in our minds. When Tomorrow actually arrives, it becomes Today!!

This doesn't mean we shouldn't make long-term plans and goals. This doesn't mean we shouldn't dream of a better future. But, it absolutely means that to carry out those goals and plans so that our dreams come true, we have to do something TODAY. So, you need to set a practice goal for today. Then, start playing your instrument. Meet today's goal TODAY!!

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Dismiss Negative Comments from Other People

No one ever achieved greatness without dismissing the glaring criticism of others. And, there will always be criticism.

Musicians must develop a thick skin about their playing and learn to focus on their own internal process of practicing and improving.

One unfortunate source of criticism comes from our family, friends, and roommates. These people often mean well. Unless they are musicians themselves, however, they often have little understanding of what makes a successful practice session.

To the untrained ear, hearing a musician work on a specific skill in no way resembles what music "should," sound like. Most people hear only finished performances of music in their lives, and they assume that the process of learning music must sound similar to a performance.

We can't blame non-musicians for their bewildering comments about our practicing. We can only shrug off their questions and comments.

If you must respond, tell your family members that you're doing exercises that will make you better and stronger when it comes time to perform. Let them know that the exercises you are doing are just as important as the exercises done by athletes to prepare for competition.

Don't let the words of other people get you down. Dismiss their comments, return to your practice room, and keep working!

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Know the Best Way to Use Your Metronome

Metronomes are great tools for helping musicians play evenly. And, you can use a metronome to help you achieve target goals for tempos or to discover sections that need more focused practicing.

Another crucial use of metronomes is to train your muscles to play without making mistakes. By setting the click at an excruciatingly slow speed, you can catch any potential mistake before it even happens and play accurately!

Many musicians need to be more creative with their metronomes. Using a metronome to do more than simply click quarter notes can keep your practicing fresh and help you learn faster than ever!

These metronome tricks will instantly improve your practicing:

--Modern metronomes can subdivide accurately for you, and it's great to hear eighth notes, sixteenth notes, or triplets when you need them. Be sure to use these settings on your metronome.

--You can also have your metronome click less frequently than quarter notes, forcing you to fill in the other beats mentally.

--For music in three, have the metronome click only the downbeat. You'll need to count and feel the other beats.

--For music in four, set the metronome to click on beats 1 and 3 or on beats 2 and 4. (If, for example the tempo is quarter note = 120, set the metronome at 60.) The metronome setting is exactly the same, but you'll have to change your mental count to hear clicks on 2 and 4! Start counting "one" during a silence, and the click will line up on 2 and 4.

--A wonderful metronome technique is the "Disappearing Click." If you're playing something in four with a lot of eighth notes, for example, start by setting the metronome to click 8th notes. Next, set a click of quarter notes. Then, give yourself a click only on beats 1 and 3. Finally, set the metronome to click only on the downbeat.

As you play through your music using this last technique, you should be counting and playing 8th notes the entire time--but your reference is slowly disappearing.

This way, you learn to control time better and do not always depend on the metronome!

Have fun using your metronome. Develop your own creative ways to use this valuable tool, and you'll change the way you think about your music.

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Create Three Types of Deadlines

It's one thing to say you're going to learn a new piece of music. It's entirely different to say you're going to learn this music in three weeks.

Having a deadline changes your behavior, alters your thinking, and focuses your practicing.

Without a deadline, you can fall victim to Parkinson's Law:

"Work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion."

Translation? It could take you FOREVER to master the music.

So, let's look at setting deadlines:

1st Type of Deadline The best type of deadline is a performance or audition.

The date is usually set by someone else, and you have to be ready by then.

And, with performances or auditions, you'll be motivated to do well. Some people fear making a fool of themselves in public. Others take pride in showing the world their accomplishments. Either way, playing publicly is an amazing motivation tool.

2nd Type of Deadline The next best type of deadline is playing for someone else.

It's great to have other people hold you accountable!

Here are a few suggestions:

- Have an informal performance for a small group of friends or family.
- Schedule a specific date on which you and another musician will play for each other and critique each other.
- Schedule a rehearsal so you'll have to be ready by that date.
- If you're taking lessons, set a date with your teacher when you will do a complete run through of the music you're learning.

3rd Type of Deadline One last type of deadline makes you accountable only to yourself and is the hardest deadline to meet. For this strategy, select a date when you will hold a mock performance.

For this performance you will record a run through in your practice space. No one else will be there, and you'll serve as your own audience when you listen to the recording.

Without deadlines, you might or might not learn any new material.

After all, there will be no consequences if you don't, and no rewards if you do.

What to Do With This Information I want you to do two things right away:

First, create a deadline for sometime in the next 4 days when you will play through something you're practicing, record the run through, and listen back to the recording.

Second, schedule another deadline - within the next 2 weeks - when you will play that same music for someone else and listen to their comments.

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Two Ways to Get "In the Zone"

Today's practice tip is about timers. You probably don't associate timers with helping you make big leaps in your musical abilities. But, read on...

Timers have gotten a bad reputation with musicians. We may have visions of parents putting a timer on top of a piano and telling their child to keep practicing until the timer goes off.

This technique is a sure way to take the joy out of playing music. However, timers can also be used in positive ways - and help your focus and concentration.

Give Yourself Time to Practice

One technique is to decide how long you want to practice and to set your timer when you start practicing. Unlike the parent scenario above, you are making your own decision to play your instrument. It's not being forced on you, and this is a crucial difference.

This technique does wonders for people who are very busy, easily distracted, or just have trouble getting motivated. You can promise yourself that you won't answer the phone, read a text message, or even look at a clock until the timer goes off. Your time - and your thoughts - will be filled only with music!

Get in the Zone Instantly

Even better than timing your practice session, you can use your timer to assist you in developing the high level of focus needed to have major breakthroughs in your playing.

Here's how this technique works:

Pick one item to work on. This could be a single scale or exercise, a very specific section you're learning, or something difficult you've been avoiding. The main thing is to choose just one item.

Then, set your timer for a very short time increment: 1 minute, 2 minutes, maybe 5 minutes. Your goal will be to work on that single item while the timer is running.

Don't worry about time. Don't think about your overall progress. Just focus all your energies on the task at hand. When the timer goes off, stop playing.

You can use this technique multiple times during a single practice session. Each time be sure to focus on a single item.

This use of a timer is actually profound. It has a paradoxical effect, allowing you to completely forget about how long something is taking you to practice. It will free you from the usual constraints of time and focus your brain on important details. And, it can get you in the "zone" faster than any other technique.

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Show Some Emotion

Having an emotional roadmap for a piece of music makes performing more satisfying and truly communicates the meaning of the music to an audience.

But many practicing musicians don't know how to easily convey emotions in their playing. This week's tip focuses on developing this skill.

Try this exercise:

Using only a single scale or arpeggio, play it so that it conveys as many emotions as you can think of. These emotions should run the gamut from the most positive to the most negative.

Here is an example:

Play a one octave major scale many times, each time infusing the scale with a different emotion. Here are some suggestions for positive emotions:
happiness, excitement, tenderness, freedom, love.

Next, try the same exercise with some negative emotions:
fear, grief, sadness, boredom, anger.

When musicians try this experiment, an amazing process unfolds. Often, people modify their playing techniques to accommodate the emotion. This change happens automatically.

This is much more natural than planning a specific physical technique to bring out a certain emotion. Going for the emotion first seems to unlock musicians' technical creativity.

For many musicians this process makes them play their instruments in the most interesting way they've ever played--all because they have an emotional goal with their music. Instead of worrying about the notes, they're actually communicating!

If we could play and practice like this all the time, we would get so much more out of being musicians. And, if you can successfully do this exercise with a major scale, imagine how gratifying it will be to use this concept with music you truly want to perform.

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