

DON'T WASTE YOUR TIME PRACTICING

by Ken Andresen

This chapter is excerpted from an article in
American Recorder Vol. XXXII, No. 4 (December 1991), pp. 7-10.

If you're like me, you don't have an unlimited amount of time to spend practicing. You need down-to-earth ideas for increasing your practicing efficiency—basic routines that lead to the ultimate improvement of your playing ability.

The use of basic routines ensures that your skills are developed systematically, with attention paid to all aspects of playing. Warm-ups are designed not only to get your mind and body working efficiently for that particular session, but also to develop automatic operations that will give you greater facility all the time.

Technically, the playing of music involves nothing other than going from one note to any other note. It is the ease and facility with which you do this that govern how well you sight-read and, ultimately, how musically you can play.

By developing automatic systems such as memorized scales and arpeggios, you begin reading notes in larger and larger groups, with your fingers automatically going through their routines. This is analogous to learning to read words rather than individual letters, and phrases rather than individual words. When these systems are in place, your mind is free to concentrate on the musical aspects of your playing, rather than worry about fingerings.

The next time you see Itzhak Perlman playing, notice his expression. Do you think he's worrying about where his fingers are going? He may have developed his technique beyond what you or I will ever achieve, *but we are working towards the same goal.*

Some basic thoughts: practice for perfection; do not practice mistakes; set realistic goals—then achieve them; keep a positive attitude—eliminate negative thoughts. The only limitations to what you can achieve are those you impose on yourself.

Warm-up Routines

1. Begin with basic skills for warming up—all of which should be played from memory: scales—including chromatics, scale patterns, chord arpeggios, and varied articulations. Combine scales with arpeggios. Move from one scale to another chromatically. Move through the circle of fifths from one scale to another, using dominant chords as a bridge.

2. Keep your fingers, tongue, and diaphragm working in a relaxed fashion by playing things that require little or no intellectualization.
3. Continue by expanding those skills. Learn new scales and arpeggios. Create scale pattern exercises (example: go up two notes of the scale, down one note, up two notes, down one note, etc.). Increase speed and accuracy of old patterns.
4. Move on to written exercises and/or repertoire.

Repertoire Practice Routines

There are many different ways to approach the practicing of repertoire. We will look at a few of them. When practicing, it is important to establish routines, but it is also important to vary those routines. Approaching problems from different aspects will help you stay fresh.

1. Practice an entire piece without stopping.

When playing a piece for the first time, it is a good idea to get the feel of the entire piece before dealing in detail with small parts. Later on, when you are becoming familiar with the piece, it is also important to have the experience of playing from beginning to end, as though you were actually performing. It requires a rather different mind-set and good concentration and does not happen automatically. To attempt a performance without having accomplished this beforehand is to invite disaster.

2. Practice an entire piece, stopping to repeat five or six times the spots where mistakes occur.

This is a combination of techniques designed to transfer newly learned skills and note combinations from short-term memory into long-term memory while still maintaining the continuity of the entire piece. It employs the principle of frequent reinforcement, which causes us to retain information and skills over ever-increasing periods of time.

3. Practice with a metronome.

The purpose of the metronome is to control your practice tempo and keep you from rushing. When practicing, most of us tend to continue to play at the same level of insecurity, which is achieved in part by constantly increasing the tempo. As a result, we continue to play the same mistakes faster and faster, getting very good at them in the process.

By using the metronome correctly, you will practice at a constant tempo, playing correctly and comfortably, and going faster only when you make a conscious decision to do so. Thus, the metronome becomes a valuable tool for organizing systematic improvement in your playing and for objectively gauging your progress.

At the end of a practice session, rather than just experiencing a vague sense of having spent time with a piece of music, you will know exactly where you started and how much you improved. The effect is similar to receiving a pat on the back or a gold star from the teacher. The sense of accomplishment that you feel is what will give you the satisfaction and the drive to want to continue your practicing.

Proper use of the metronome can do more for your playing ability than any other single practice technique!

The procedure is as follows:

(a) Find a tempo which is slow enough to enable you to play a passage technically correctly and in a relaxed manner—*no matter how slow that is!* (b) Increase the tempo one notch on the metronome, *but only if there are no mistakes. Do not practice your mistakes!* (c) Repeat the passage at the new tempo until the same degree of relaxation and perfection is achieved. (d) Continue this process until the desired tempo is reached.

You will find yourself backtracking in your practice from day to day, beginning from a point which, while beyond yesterday's start, is somewhat short of yesterday's finish. However, each day will bring with it small increments of measurable improvement

4. Practice without the metronome, but at a steady tempo.

The metronome should be a tool, not a crutch. By alternately playing with and without the metronome, your sense of absolute tempo will be heightened, and your ability to maintain a steady tempo will be enhanced.

5. Practice with rubato.

Actual musical performance should rarely, if ever, be woodenly metronomic. One of the disappointments of computer music is its unfailing accuracy, with human warmth and spontaneity being sacrificed on the altar of perfection. The use of rubato, or *intentional* small increases and decreases in tempo, gives life to your playing and helps to bring out the important moments in the music. Develop this skill and use it wisely.

6. Slur everything.

Allow your fingers to do your articulating and to be your metronome, while at the same time listening closely for noises between notes—transient tones caused by imperfect finger coordination. Since it is somewhat more difficult to lift a finger than to place it down, the lifting of a finger frequently lags behind the placing of the next finger, thus causing these transient tones. Slurring exposes these coordination problems, which are frequently covered by articulation. This practice technique should be used with and without the metronome, in repertoire and also during warm-ups.

7. Isolate problem spots.

(a) Locate the spots where mistakes are occurring. (b) Break the problem into its basic components: notes, rhythms, articulation, etc. (c) Say the rhythm using articulation syllables (ta-ta-ta, for instance). (d) Experiment with different articulations. (e) Try singing rhythmically on pitch. This practice will help to develop not only your vocal ability, but also your inner hearing and recorder intonation. (f) Start and stop at different spots within and outside of the problem, dealing with various fragments. (g) Rebuild these fragments in different ways, thus shedding new light on the problem. (h) Create your own exercise pieces from the thorniest spots. (i) With the aid of the metronome, bring these spots up to the tempo of the entire piece.

8. Memorize something.

Memorizing causes you to become so familiar with a piece of music that you can begin to play it without worrying about what finger will be moving next. Technically, your playing takes on an automatic nature. It is this automatic playing, analogous to our ease of speaking, that enables us to be most expressive.

9. Tape-record your playing.

You will discover all kinds of things about your playing that you never knew before. If you listen analytically, you will know what needs to be improved and what sounds good. You will find surprises both ways!

Conclusion

None of the foregoing should imply an exhaustive analysis of all that practicing can and should be. I'm sure that you can and will add to and modify my suggestions in many ways. *Good!* That means that you are thinking creatively about practice possibilities, and the ways in which they might enhance your own abilities and practice efficiency.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Blaker, Frances. "Opening Measures" column in *American Recorder*.

Topics related to practicing include: recommendations on how to practice (January 1996), exercises to improve thumb technique (March 1996), reducing the frequency of mistakes (May 1996), articulation (September 1996), practicing with a partner (November 1996), breathing (May 1997), blowing (November 1997), making efficient use of practice time (January 1999), intonation (May 1999), increasing speed and accuracy of fingering (May 2000), breathing and breath control (September 2000). Much of the material in Ms. Blaker's column comes from her method book, *The Recorder Player's Companion* (Albany, CA: PRB Publications, 1993).

Carduelis, Susan. "Use Your Head—Play from Your Heart." *American Recorder* Vol. XXXIII, No. 2 (June 1992), pp. 20-22.

Shows how practice techniques can be improved through knowledge of how the brain works. The lateral cerebellum controls repetitive motions and processes small patterns of motion more effectively than large ones. Therefore, difficult passages should be broken into small fragments, which can be isolated and worked out through repetition until they become automatic. Article also suggests that the mechanical aspects of playing, controlled by the left cerebral hemisphere, should be learned first, before the expressive aspects, controlled by the right hemisphere.

Dinn, Frieda. "The Art of Practicing." *Recorder and Music Magazine* 2, no. 11 (December 1968), pp. 355-357.

Topics discussed include posture, practicing, interpretation, keyboard accompanying, sight-reading.

Leber, Eric. "An Approach to Practicing." *American Recorder* Vol. III, no. 2 (May 1962), pp. 3-6; Vol. III, no. 3 (August 1962), pp. 6-8.

Topics covered: stance, breathing, tone, tonguing, dynamics, fingering, exercises, ear training, rhythm, "eye training," and "practice regime."

Prior, Susan. "Enjoy Your Practicing and Improve Your Playing." *American Recorder* Vol. XXVI, no. 3 (August 1985), pp. 113-15.

Covers breath control, playing by ear, sight-reading, intonation, scales and arpeggios, and difficult passages.

Prior, Susan. "Warming Up the Recorder." *American Recorder* Vol. XXV, no. 1 (February 1984), pp. 12-13.

Stresses the importance of mental preparation to good playing. Advocates devoting one quarter of a practice session to warming up. Suggests exercises for improving breathing, tone production, finger control, and tonguing.

Roth, Ruth C. "Ten or More Ways to Improve Your Playing without Touching the Recorder." *American Recorder* Vol. XII, no. 3 (August 1971), pp. 82-86.

Areas covered include posture, diaphragmatic and abdominal breathing, long breaths, rhythm, finger exercises, tonguing, ear training, listening to professional performances, reading, and using a tape recorder.

Wollitz, Kenneth. "Some Random Thoughts on Practicing." *American Recorder* Vol. XV, no. 3 (August 1974), pp. 81-85.

Emphasizes the importance of practicing every day, no matter how short the session. Topics touched on include tone control and gaining facility with high notes. Recommends effective use of the metronome and working out difficult passages through fragmentation and repetition. These topics are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2 of Wollitz's method book, *The Recorder Book* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982).