

# An Objective Method for Proper Practice

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How do you practice? This is a question that should be relatively easy to answer. As teachers, we all have ideas on proper practice, but do our students? After asking twenty-five students what they are supposed to do when they practice, I was surprised at the lack of clarity, understanding and confidence in their responses. Many mentioned something about repetition and slowing down, but none had a clearly defined strategy for mastering problems in their music. It was apparent that these students had either never been taught how to practice, or had more than likely, had the process alluded to or described to them without continuing reinforcement and monitoring by their teacher or band director.

The method presented in this article is intended to provide students with a clear and effective practice strategy. Nothing written here is necessarily new. However, the discipline and objective evaluation process might be useful in helping teachers and students refine and clarify their own thoughts on proper practice. At the very least, this article should serve as a reminder that proper practicing skills need to be taught explicitly and monitored continually over the long term.

## The Metronome

To practice efficiently, it is very important that students use a metronome. Unfortunately most students use a metronome incorrectly and end up turning it off in frustration. It is common for students to isolate a passage, set a metronome to a tempo that they think they "should" be able to handle and unsuccessfully try several times to play the passage correctly. This process can be very discouraging because students set tempos that they think they should be able to play instead of a tempo that they actually can play.

To remedy this problem, the metronome needs to be used differently. Instead of the student conforming to the metronome, the metronome should conform to the student. In other words, the metronome needs to be used as an indicator of whether or not a student can play a passage at a given tempo, with "yes" or "no" being the only responses in the evaluation process. If the answer is no, the metronome setting must be lowered. A yes response indicates that the student has established a *foundation* tempo. The foundation tempo is defined as the tempo at which the student can play the passage with 100% confidence in terms of musicality, tone production, rhythm and technical control. In the process of finding this tempo, students are restricted

to a "yes" or "no" response and eliminate subjective responses such as "I should be able to play it at that tempo", "If I go slower I will never get it up to speed," "everyone else can play it at that tempo" or "that was a dumb mistake, I can normally play it fine." When students justify mistakes with statements like these, the practicing process breaks down. With a simple "yes" or "no" response, there is no self-judgement or self-criticism. Instead, practicing becomes a simple, objective and a highly efficient process.

## What Are You Practicing?

The primary reason for slowing the tempo down when practicing is to be able to monitor the correct execution of the music. To most students, this means getting the right notes. However, most technical difficulties are not confined to fingers and rhythm, but usually include problems in tone production and phrasing. How many times have we asked our students to exaggerate dynamics in a passage and find that they start missing more notes in the process? Or, a student works hard to learn notes, but they encounter problems in response and tone quality in their finished product. If one practices the notes without monitoring tone and dynamics, one is reinforcing poor tone and improper phrasing with each repetition. To fix these problems, tone and phrasing should become the primary focus once the foundation tempo is established. The correct notes and rhythm will already occur by definition of the foundation tempo. As the tempo increases, the notes and rhythm should progress without too much difficulty. However, tone and phrasing can be quickly forgotten as students revert to their old habits.

## Step by Step Practice Method

1. Begin by reading through the piece being studied in its entirety (or large section) without stopping and starting, as during a performance. This run through is a true test of how well one knows a piece. Furthermore, it helps develop the skill of playing through mistakes and recovering quickly.
2. Identify the areas that contain mistakes and/or feel uncomfortable.
3. Isolate a passage and set a metronome to a speed slightly slower than the tempo selected for the run-through. Play the passage. If a mistake occurs, reduce the metronome setting by five points. If a mistake occurs again, reduce the tempo by another five points. It is important that one always play with proper dynamics, articulation, phrasing and expression at all tempos during the evaluation process. Continue in this fashion until the passage can be played perfectly with 100% confidence and conviction. This is the foundation tempo.

Finding this foundation tempo is crucial. If one is uncertain if the tempo has been found, lower the metronome another five points. There is no advantage to selecting the faster tempo and in many cases it will diminish the results. It is common for the foundation tempo to be approximately half of the original tempo, or ten to twenty points slower than what a student would consider a slow practice tempo.

4. Once the foundation tempo has been established, play the passage five times without any mistakes. If this is difficult to do, lower the metronome five more points. Make sure the passage is played with good phrasing and tone production.

5. Increase the metronome by five points. Play three to five times. Most of the time, a student will play the passage cleanly and have no problems.

6. Continue increasing the metronome speed by five points until the technical breaking point is reached.

In most instances, students will be able to get back to the performance tempo or very close to it. The quality of phrasing, rhythm and technical control of the passage will show significant improvement, far greater than practicing improperly at faster tempos. This process takes about three to five minutes and results in a higher quality performance than is normally achieved in a week of improper practicing.

7. The next step is to put the passage back into the context of the piece. Start a few measures before the passage and play through it. If problems occur, go back to step 3.

It is very common for problems to re-occur when the isolated passage is incorporated back into the rest of the piece. However, taking a slightly slower tempo and repeating the extended passage a few times will usually fix the problems.

8. After completing this process for a given passage, leave it alone.

One's concentration can only withstand a certain amount of repetition before things start to get worse. This is why it is important that your best and most disciplined work occurs when you first begin working on a passage.

9. During your next practice session, problems that were worked out in the previous session may occur again. When this happens, repeat the method.

Most of the time, problems in music can not be solved in one practice session. That is why one can not simply spend a lot of time the night before a performance or lesson and expect that everything one worked on will still be there the next day. Many times it takes 3, 4, 5 or more sessions before problems are fully mastered and become ingrained. However, if one loses patience and abandons a sound and disciplined practice strategy, the problems will take weeks if not months to fix and will most likely yield inferior results.

### Some General Practicing Tips

- \*Try to take a small break every 30 minutes or so.

- \*Set the metronome to an eighth note or triplet pulse whenever possible. For example, if the tempo is 84 to the quarter note, practice with the metronome on 168 but feel the pulse with your foot or body at 84. This will significantly improve the rhythm of notes between beats.

- \*Avoid simply reading through a piece a couple of times with starts and stops. This may increase familiarity with a piece, but will not really improve the quality of performance.

- \*Try to spread your practice sessions over as many days as possible with each session being a similar length of time. 30 minutes a day over six days is much better than two 1 1/2 hour sessions.

- \*If you are pressed for time, isolate one or two small passages and practice them using the method presented. This is more effective than reading through all of your music without practicing.

- \*Try not to schedule practice sessions for times of the day when you are exhausted, hungry or sleepy. Practicing takes a lot of energy and you will be much more productive if you are energetic and rested.

Does this process work? One week, I tried it with 18 students, ages ranging from 6th grade to college senior. In each student's lesson a difficult passage was selected. Each student went through the method as they would if they were practicing on their own. Sixteen out of the eighteen students were able to play the passage satisfactorily at performance tempo or very close to it. Furthermore, the quality of the passage was significantly higher than what I would have expected from them in a typical lesson. The process does work if students will use it.

As teachers, it is necessary to spend time discussing with students good practice habits and techniques. It is easy to assume that students know how to practice and that their problems stem from a lack of effort. This may be true in some cases but all students can benefit from a review of good practice habits on a regular basis. Students are very busy and the temptation to take shortcuts in practicing is hard to resist. To the typical student, efficient practicing appears to be tedious and require more time. Using the procedure presented in this article during a lesson, teachers can show that proper practice takes far less time and will significantly increase the quality of their music making. If we can reinforce these good practice habits over time, students may finally see the necessity and the rewards of practicing properly.

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