

Correct Practice Makes Hard Things Easy!

Why is it so hard to improve on your instrument, even though you know you've practiced?

The old well intentioned adage "practice makes perfect" is rather misleading!

Unfortunately, improper practice often leads to poor results, not perfect playing.

Why? -- *Many of us simply don't know how to practice productively.*

The following overview of the fundamentals of practicing will provide you with useful ways you can create your own productive practice sessions.

Practice Time

When is your "prime time"? If you feel freshest in the morning, early morning practice may be for you. If you feel your energy peak in the afternoon or at night, practice then. Do you tire easily when you practice? Divide your practice time into two segments instead of having one long practice session. Whatever time you do choose, be consistent and try to practice at the same time five or six days a week.

Location

When you practice, find a quiet room where you won't be disturbed. Turn off the TV, put away your CD player, and turn on the answering machine.

Music Accessories

Before timing every nanosecond of your practice time, gather together all of the practice materials you'll need. Music, a pencil to note difficult passages and fingerings, and a music stand are basic necessities. If you do practice sitting down (some teachers prefer that you stand while practicing), make sure you use a chair that isn't too soft, or it will be difficult to use proper playing position.

Physical Needs

Before you even begin to practice, drink some water, have some fruit or a healthy snack to rev up your blood sugar level, and change into something comfortable. If you prepare yourself physically before you start to practice, you'll find you can concentrate easily, and you won't be quite so tempted to interrupt your practicing for kitchen or bathroom breaks. Playing a musical instrument is not a passive experience. You need physical strength and energy to practice with proper playing position. If you practice while you're tired, you may run the risk of slipping into poor playing habits.

Length of Practice Session

How long you practice every day is irrelevant. How much you accomplish when you practice is what counts. It's great to follow a scheduled practice time, but if your daily practice ritual consists of playing straight through pieces over and over while you daydream, you might be better off not practicing at all. It's easy to reinforce mistakes when you don't concentrate while playing or when you practice without purpose or focus. Strive for quality practice, not quantity mediocre results.

Productive Practice Sessions

Structured practice sessions are the key to productive practicing. The following suggestions will help you progress, instead of regress, when you practice.

Warm-up. Each practice session should begin by limbering up and strengthening your fingers through scales, exercises, arpeggios, or trills.

Practice with Purpose. Have one or more focused goals each time you practice. At the beginning of practice sessions, ask yourself, "What do I want to accomplish today? Do I want to polish a piece? Slowly learn part of a new piece, play with heightened musicality, or fix some problem spots?" As you practice, your focus may change as you continue to analyze your playing with questions such as: "Am I playing in tune? Is the rhythm correct? What parts of the piece need work?"

Problem-solving. One of the most effective ways to make a piece sound better is to pinpoint the difficult passages in the piece and then work on one small section at a time. Don't reinforce mistakes by repeating them. Identify what the problem is, then determine how you will fix it. Play the notes of a problem spot very slowly, one note at a time, until you are playing with the proper rhythm, fingering, and notes. Once it sounds correct, play that small section over and over, gradually picking up speed until that segment of music is up to tempo. It's always simpler to begin at a slow tempo and increase your speed rather than go back and correct new errors.

Problem spot tips. At times, it may be useful to record yourself (tape or video) to pinpoint problem spots. If you're having difficulty with a fast passage, playing a small section first very slowly, and then experimenting with rhythmic variations, often helps. For example, if the small section you've identified as a problem spot contains four measures of sixteenth notes, instead of playing them all at the same tempo, try: long-short-long-short-long-short-long etc. Then, reverse the sequence and play the passage: short-long-short-long-short-long-short etc. Another practice technique for fast passages is to quickly repeat each note two, three or four times (e.g. d-d-d-d-a-a-a-a-c-c-c-c almost as if you were playing a bowed tremolo on the same note).

Musicality. Are you expressing yourself through your music, or are you mechanically repeating notes from a printed page? Musicality, the ability to interpret a piece with feeling, is what distinguishes the performance of a fine musician from that of an automated, boring performer. Need ideas? First, try following printed directions such as dynamics, style of playing, and the tempo or speed at which the music should be played. You can gain additional interpretive insight by listening to recordings of the same piece played by different performers and by researching the history of the composer or the era in which the music was composed. Then, experiment! Try different phrasing or explore variations in tone production, style, and intensity. Memorizing a piece also may assist you in achieving freedom of expression. Once you know a piece so well that you are "free" from the music, you may find it easier to interpret music on your own.

Fun time. At the end of each practice session, it's always fun to sit back, relax, and enjoy playing straight through the piece. The progress made during "problem spot" practicing can be reinforced, and you'll feel a sense of accomplishment hearing changes you've made in the full context of the piece. So let the music-making begin!

You CAN make the adage "practice makes perfect" come true for you. With the guidance of teacher, all it takes is a little hard work and a lot of concentration. You'll soon find just how rewarding productive practicing can be.