

Effective Practicing: Getting the Most Out of the Time You Spend

We study music with teachers to benefit from their experience and from their objectivity. They are separate from us and can listen and watch what we do and give us feedback that we can't seem to give ourselves. We practice in front of mirrors and yet often miss very obvious and easily corrected physical mistakes in our playing. Or we believe we listen carefully in our practice sessions and yet find we miss hearing intonation, articulation, stylistic problems that once these are pointed out to us, we correct immediately. Your job should be to make your teacher obsolete, in that you work to be able to listen and see your playing as objectively as another person can.

When we practice, we are enforcing habits, physical, mental, and aural; these habits of playing and hearing and thinking may be good or bad. It is a musician's job to examine carefully her/his practice habits to get the most out of each practice session.

Many people spend hours in the practice room and are not satisfied with the results of their work. Examining how you are actually spending your time in the practice room can help you improve the results. Consider the following questions:

1. Do you know which parts of your day are the best times for practicing? When are you most clear-headed? When do you concentrate best? Everybody is different — we each have peak times for concentrating, for creativity, and other times when we're better off doing mundane activities and chores.
2. In your practice time, do you use a tape recorder? Do you play back what you've recorded and listen objectively?
3. Do you keep a practice session log of what you work on and for how long? Are you spending a balanced amount of time on warm-up, etudes, solo repertoire, sight-reading, ensemble repertoire, etc.?
4. Do you keep a notebook and write notes after lessons? Have you taped any lessons? Have you videotaped any lessons? This can be very helpful not just for remembering what your teacher suggested, but in helping you reinforce what went well and any new techniques or changes in your playing.
5. Would you practice any differently if your teacher were in the room with you or eavesdropping outside the door?
6. How do you warm up? Do you use a good warm-up routine to insure you are not hurting your body by tackling the most difficult passages cold?
7. Do you regularly practice sight-reading?
8. How do you work on technical problems?

9. How many hours do you generally spend practicing?
10. How long do you practice in one stretch? Do you take breaks? Do you know how long you really sustain concentration? (Everybody is different on this.)
11. What time of day and under what circumstances do you do your best practicing?
12. How do you approach a new piece?
13. Do you in any way analyze pieces you are working on? Does this help you in any technical or interpretive ways?
14. Once you've isolated a particular difficulty in a piece, what do you do to solve the problem?
15. How do you work on interpretation issues? For instance, do you listen and compare various recordings, or sing through a piece and play the accompaniment?
16. What kind of planning do you do in your practicing and lessons to prepare for a performance?
17. What specific practice techniques or tools do you use? Any of the following?
Metronome
Tuner
Tape recorder
Slow practice
Varying the rhythms or articulation of the passage
Visualization: Imagine playing a passage exactly the way you want it
(Doing it in your mind first)
18. Do you have a specific goal in mind when practicing any given passage? For instance, do you practice a given passage, listening carefully first just to intonation? or just to tone quality? or articulation?
19. Are you doing senseless repetitions without goals?
20. Do you leave a practice session with a clear sense of what you've accomplished?
21. Do you know there are four ways we learn or take in information? In your lessons and in your practice room, make use of all four methods, using a combination of methods is far more effective than relying on just one.
Intellectually: through explanations, written and verbal
Auditory: we hear someone demonstrate a phrase, we listen to recordings
Visual: we watch the demonstration of a new technique

Kinesthetic: we try out the new technique, our body “learns” how it feels, we memorize the motions

22. Think back to a practice session in which you were happily creative and were satisfied with the result. Think of two more times like this. Now, do you notice any patterns to these sessions.

Time of day

Place you were practicing

How long you spent in the session

How you solved particular problem(s) in the session

What were you specifically working at: intonation, rhythm, tone production, etc.

Specific practice technique that worked: slow practice, rhythmic variation, etc.