

How to practice – methods and procedures

Introduction

Practice is really important for progression in all areas of music and your music capability. This is true for any instrument, including voice, but in this article the focus is obviously going to be on Clarinet and Saxophone or wind instruments.

To improve in all elements of music, reading; playing; technique and sound quality, practice has to become embedded in your daily routines. Allocating time each day is probably the best way to get started, making it a regular diary entry. Practice also needs to be enjoyable, if you're not having fun then it becomes a chore rather than a delight. In this article, some known methods, routines and procedures will be set out to help the students that are learning their respective instruments. Although this is aimed at beginners essentially, others may find this helpful.

Analysis – Why are you practicing?

The main reason for practicing is to reach a specific goal, improve your capability, to become a better musician and to feel good about yourself and your successes. Playing a piece of music really well, with or without an audience, provides that feeling of pride, achievement and success. It's probably similar to a sports person winning an award, an artist producing a master piece or a writer publishing a bestselling novel.

If you want to be really good at what you do, there is no other way but to practice. As a beginner or improver, what elements are you trying to improve? Although the list is probably infinite, here are a few initial ideas: -

- Musicality – being able to play a piece of music with feeling and attack as intended by the composer, observing the musical markings and making it a pleasure to listen to.
- Technical Ability – improving on your technique making smooth transitions between notes, be able to play difficult passages, playing in time, playing at pace where necessary.
- Sound Quality – playing with a nice tonal sound that is full and round. If the people around you are enjoying you're playing and the sound that you make, then you are probably doing something right.
- Readability – to improve in your knowledge, speed and understanding of the music on the page. Being able to read it faster, learning techniques to do that, recognising more of the symbols and what to do with them and improving you're overall musical knowledge.
- Cross Curricular Connections – music is very closely connected to all the Arts, Maths and History, to name just a few. Having an understanding of the period of music that you are playing, why it might have been written and the kind of Art that may have been created at the time, has a positive effect on the way that piece of music may be

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approached. Music is all about timing and mathematics, counting, sub-divisions and fractions are really prevalent in everything that you learn to play.

Practice Methods, Routines and Procedures.

The first thing to do is to set aside the time for practice, make it official, you are going to practice at this time every day. Obviously things happen and schedules might have to be altered, but the key is to keep a practice session in place for each day then you are more likely to achieve it.



Work out what elements you want to or need to practice right now and create a plan.



If you break down, similar to the ideas above, all the elements of things you need to practice you can then create a plan based on those element. Why would you do this?

It is simple, by changing what elements you work on each day you can change the associated music that you play. This helps to keep your practice sessions fresh and interesting, not only for you but for those around you that are listening.

Here are some example of how this might work: -

- What is good for me to do every practice session?
 - Playing long notes because this helps you to listen to your sound quality and perhaps make some adjustments. It helps to expand the lungs which in turn and over time will allow you to play longer passages of music in one breath. This improves the listening experience by the audience, think about the way we speak. Do we break up sentences in such a way that nothing makes sense anymore?
 - Playing scales as part of your warm up, but selecting a different list of scales each day. If you play a smaller number of scales, but more frequently, when you play them they are more likely to embed themselves into your long term memory. To keep them more interesting, you could play them with different rhythms, i.e. jazz style, Latin style, in 2s or triplets.

These could be part of your daily routines and remember most music is created with some scale like patterns within the piece of music. Your reading capability will improve by recognising those scale like patterns and your fingers then automatically play the notes.

- Practicing for technique.

- This is based on breaking down your music into smaller chunks and those chunks that are more difficult can be used to help build and improve your technique. You might for example, pick out around 6 small chunks that are causing you problems every time you get to them and play them again and again. You might try playing a chunk until you can play it 5 times without one mistake, then turn around with no music and immediately play it again. If you are successful in playing without the music in front of you, move onto the next chunk. If not, start again, 5 times without a mistake then turn around.



Note: - you are not trying to commit to memory the music. That is not the idea. The idea is to embed the finger movement into your long term muscle memory, so that when you see that passage of music your fingers automatically move correctly. For this type of practice, you are only selecting the music that has sections that cause errors when you play the entire piece.

- Practicing for a good sound quality.

- Select some slow music, perhaps that you can play a little more easily, so that you can listen to the sound that you are making. Does that sound have all the qualities that you want? Is it a full and round sound or is a bit thin and squeaky? For these practice sessions only play slow music, listen very carefully to the sound that you are producing and if necessary look to make some adjustments. (Check with your teacher before changing things too much)



Playing slow music is not only good for working on your sound, but it will improve your lung capacity and enable you to play through longer passages as you progress in your studies.

Physical aspect of practice.

Where you practice can make a huge difference in the sound that is heard or perceived. Find a space that has good acoustics. For wind players, you might find that the bathroom has great acoustics (no pun intended) and makes you sound ten times better.

As a wind player, you should always stand when you practice (obviously if there are medical reasons why you can't stand then ignore this). This is so that your lungs have a chance to work properly. If you are sat down you are restricting the air flow and may not be able to channel enough air through the instrument to make the right sound.

Always face out into the room that you are in so that the sound fills the room. So many people play to the nearest wall, this doesn't allow you to hear the sound that you are making properly. Pretend the room is full of a large audience and play to the audience. Never only half-play an instrument (huffing out the notes quietly). Look to make that big, round sound all the time so that your audience, fictitious as they may be, will hear it loud and clear.

Summary

Here are a few bullet point to remind you of how to practice.

- Look at why you are practicing and what you are trying to achieve.
- Put into place a plan for practicing and a schedule of what you are going to do each day. Make sure you're surroundings are helping you rather than hindering you in making a good sound.
- Give yourself a wide variety of music and styles to practice, keep things interesting.
- Find a space to practice with great acoustics.

Finally, make sure that at the end of each practice you allow time to play those pieces of music that you enjoy. Let's face it, learning music should be fun.