

Practice Tips A to Z

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The following are some ideas I have found useful with my students and in my own practicing.

A. Always ARTC (Approach, Relaxation, Tone, Counting – “Artsy!”). Always pay close attention to the basics. Legendary UCLA basketball coach John Wooden said, “There is no replacement for sound fundamentals and strict discipline.”¹ “Approach” refers to the mental state when practicing. We need to keep our minds engaged when we practice - mindless practicing gets mindless results.

B. Breaks. Take short rest periods when practicing. Organize your practice into several short sessions (no more than a half hour) with breaks between the sessions. Legendary violin teacher Leopold Auer (whose famous students included Mischa Elman, Jascha Heifetz and Efrem Zimbalist, Sr.) said:

“In all practice-work, and this applies to the advanced student as well as the beginner, rest during practice hours should never be overlooked. My advice – based on the experience of years – is never to practice more than thirty or forty minutes in succession, and to rest and relax for at least ten or fifteen minutes before beginning work again.”²

Auer also reportedly taught that forty-five minutes, followed by a fifteen-minute break, was probably the maximum time possible for good concentration.³ Additionally, lengthy practice sessions without breaks can put strain on your body that can result in injury.

C. Counting-Aloud Technique. Rhythmic accuracy during practice is of supreme importance. A great procedure to improve even performance of rhythms is the “Counting-Aloud” technique found in Lesson 5 of Leon Russianoff’s Clarinet Method, Book I.⁴

D. Double Articulation. This is a useful technique for working up a tough technical passage. It consists of putting two articulations of equal duration on each note of a passage. Double articulation works best in a passage that has straight eights, sixteenths, etc. It is often helpful to use it in alternation with other procedures (such as Counting-Aloud – see above or Fingers Ahead – see below).

E. Enjoy your metronome, but don’t get addicted. The use of a metronome is an essential part of any practice session; however, it is important not to become overly dependent on it for maintaining a steady pulse. The small and inexpensive “credit card” type metronomes are great for students and other musicians who are “on the go.”

F. Fingers Ahead. This valuable technique was used by legendary clarinet teacher Daniel Bonade and is explained in his short, but useful book, The Clarinetist's Compendium.⁵

G. Go Slow at first (with ARTC), then Go Faster. Many are aware of the value of slow practice, but few seem to really go slow enough when working on music. It is important to go very, very slow when practicing and at the same time maintain good fundamentals (such as ARTC – see above). Neurologist Frank R. Wilson states:

“Slow practice is the key to rapid technical progress. The cerebellum is a non-judgmental part of the brain: it assumes that any repetitive activity in the muscular system is being repeated because the conscious mind is trying to make it automatic. The cerebellum will be just as efficient an automatizer of incorrect sequences of timing as of those that are correct. When practicing takes place at a pace too fast for accurate playing, there is very little chance for the material to be mastered, and reliable, confident performance simply will not occur. On the other hand, it is probably true that practice for speed is seldom necessary. The cerebellum can supply all the speed wanted if patterning is correct during practice.”⁶

H. Hands! “If you can't clap it, you can't play it.”

I. Intensity. Learn to stay focused while practicing. This means you can't practice while watching television! Also, make sure mental focus does not tense up the body while practicing – work for an ever-improving relaxed, natural, and efficient technique (by “technique” here I mean all that the body does when playing an instrument. In baseball, the word used is “mechanics.”) Remember to “Concentrate in your mind - Relax in your body.”⁷

J. Judge your playing soberly. By sober I mean maintaining an attitude of openness and honesty without becoming mentally or emotionally out of balance. Work hard to know what is “really going on” in your practicing.

K. Kinko's. Go to a Kinko's or other copy shop and make a study score of the piano part. Otherwise when you give your piano part to your accompanist, you won't have a copy of the piano part to study. Also, when you come back to a piece you've performed before, make a copy of the old markings on your part before you start erasing and adding new ones. I often buy a new original to start out fresh – this is a very good idea if you have a new teacher. But, keep the old copy/original for future reference. You might look back in a few years and discover you like the older ways (or teacher) better.

L. Look for patterns in the music. Most music we play is based on scales and chords – even more modern composers use scales such as octatonic and whole tone. When you recognize that a composer is using a certain scale or chord, feel free to mark it on your music. For example, classical/romantic composers will sometimes outline a fully diminished seventh chord to add some punch to the cadence at the end of a section of a work. (See end of the exposition of movement one to Mozart's *Concerto for Clarinet* and m. 176 and m. 178 of Weber's *Concertino for Clarinet*.) If you have been practicing fully diminished sevenths, such a passage is quite easy.

If you don't recognize the chord [or haven't been practicing them!], then the passage is much more difficult to learn.

M. Make MUSIC! Great fundamentals and fantastic technical skill are a means to an end: to free the performer to express art.

N. No distractions or interruptions while practicing. Get away from phones, pagers, computers, television, internet, cell phones, etc. as much as possible. Also, learn how to diplomatically "get rid of" people who just drop by your practice room to "chat."

O. Organize your practice. We live in world of routine. Developing and following a good practice routine that includes a warm-up, scales, sight-reading, etc. will greatly speed up your progress.⁸

P. Pay Attention to Pitch and Tuning. Check out the small and inexpensive tuners now out on the market.

Q. Quit if it hurts or you get overly upset. Don't quit permanently! Just take a break and come back in a few minutes or another day.

R. Recordings. Listen to CD's, tapes, etc. for insights, but not too much (don't copy!). (I dislike the giving to students of recordings of all-state music, solos, etc. and telling them to copy. Such copying is counterproductive to genuine artistry. Such short cuts will eventually take a toll on how well a student does at auditions, contests, etc.)

S. Sit and Stand during practice. I like to start out my practice sessions by standing so I can check my posture and breathing. How much I sit vs. stand in a given practice session is determined by the kind of performing I have coming up. If I'm going to be performing a concerto with an orchestra or wind ensemble, I practice standing more. Conversely, I practice more sitting if I'm preparing some chamber or large ensemble music.

T. Tape yourself and listen to it. Keep a small cassette recorder handy and record yourself periodically. It is also extremely valuable to video yourself. It is imperative that you are aware of how you actually sound (and look) to the outside world. (For example, some clarinetists have a sound that only another clarinet player could love!).⁹

U. Understand the words, symbols, etc. on the music. Always have a good music dictionary¹⁰ handy to look up words you don't know. You also need to pick up separate French, German, and Italian dictionaries since many composers (especially after 1900) have indications in their native language. (Go to a used bookstore and pick up a paperback language dictionary – you don't need the latest edition.) Composers expect performers to understand their indications and it is imperative we work to understand the meaning of their words, symbols, etc. as much as possible.

V. Variety. Spice up practicing by changing the routine. Try working on jazz.¹¹

W. Work on hard parts first.¹² Don't just go straight through a work over and over at performance tempo! Break the music into sections.

X. Examine the larger form. Notice what phrases, sections, etc. repeat. A little thoughtful analysis can pay big dividends. It can also aid in memorization.

Y. Yodel or SING the music. Singing is a valuable practice tool and need not be perfectly on pitch to be helpful. During a practice session, singing the music can be done when the embouchure or wrists, etc. need a rest. [Yodel your music only when alone!]

Z. Zero in on Rhythm (pattern & pulse). Think "Rhythm First, Notes Second." Always be working to improve your ability to execute rhythmic patterns with a steady pulse. This is one of the most valuable skills a musician can possess.

[**Note:** A concise version of these tips along with a practice routine is available at Dean's web site, www.michaeldean.ws/resources.]

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¹ John Wooden with Jack Tobin, They Call Me Coach (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1988), p. 168.
Also, see his comments on pp. 169-170.

² Leopold Auer, Violin Playing As I Teach It (New York: Dover Publications, 1980 [first published in 1921]), p. 17.
This book can also be downloaded as an Adobe Acrobat eBook at www.bn.com.

³ From <http://www.smsaonline.org/practice.asp>.

⁴ Leon Russianoff, Clarinet Method, Book I. (New York: Schirmer Books, 1982), pp. 54-73.

Unfortunately, out of print; however, it is available at many university libraries [use interlibrary loan].

⁵ Daniel Bonade, Clarinetist's Compendium (Kenosha, WI: Leblanc Publications, 1962) pp. 2-3 and 8-10.

⁶ Frank R. Wilson, "Mind, Muscle and Music," American Music Teacher Vol. 32 (1982) p. 14. Also quoted in Wilson's Mind Muscle and Music: Physiological Clues to Better Teaching (Walnut Creek, CA: Selmer, 1981), p. 14. Also see his book, Tone Deaf & All Thumbs? An Invitation to Music-Making (New York: Vintage Books, 1987 [originally published, in hardcover, by Viking Penguin, Inc., in 1986]) pp. 203-205.

⁷ Michael Dean, "Performance Anxiety Tips," interFACE [Utah Music Educators Association journal] Volume 44, No. 1 (fall 1998) p. 15.

⁸ The practice routine I use is available at my web site, www.michaeldean.ws/resources.

⁹ James Boyk, To Hear Ourselves as Others Hear Us: Tape Recording as a Tool in Music Practicing and Teaching (St. Louis: MMB Music, 1996).

¹⁰ I suggest Don Michael Randel's Harvard Concise Dictionary of Music (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1978). It is an excellent one-volume book with compact entries for terms, composers, etc.

¹¹ A good place to start is Jamey Aebersold's Vol. 54 "Maiden Voyage" Jazz Play-A-Long book and CD.

¹² This is one of Wynton Marsalis' practice rules on his excellent video on practicing, Marsalis on Music: Tackling the Monster (New York: Sony, 1995).