

Practice
Play Better in Less Time
or
12 Steps to Effective Practice

Conditioning!

Being an instrumentalist requires a set of physical skills and strengths that only occur as a result of daily effort. **THERE ARE NO SHORTCUTS.** At least half of your practice routine should be devoted to the basics, plus daily practice in the extreme low and high register, melodic playing, as well as sight-reading practice, plus improvisation and ear-training. If you are not willing to devote time each day to furthering development in the areas of tone quality, seamless air, flexibility, dynamic range, high and low register, and technique, then you have not earned the right to complain when your instrument (mysteriously) does not produce the sounds you had anticipated.

Set Goals!

What do you plan to achieve on the horn this year, this month, this week, this day, this hour, this fifteen minutes? Have you structured your practice routine to achieve these goals? Do you keep a written record, however informal, of your goals and your progress towards them? If you have planned the work, are you working the plan? (Are you doing what you said you would do in terms of daily effort?) If you do not have specific goals in mind when you practice, how do you know if you got anything done? Effective practice requires much more than just sitting in a room tooting the horn. If you are not consciously improving your sound/pitch/range technique/musicianship every single minute, why are you there? Simply playing the instrument does not mean you are getting any better. In fact, many players **GET WORSE** every time they practice, in that they reinforce habits that produce unsuccessful results. Do your daily habits **ASSURE** that you get better each day? If not, why not?

Practice more!

A great musician once said that it is not enough to practice two hours a day, or four, or eight, or twelve. You must practice every chance you get. Be eager to sit down and go to work. Enjoy playing drills or music or etudes that you know will make you a better player. A serious high school player should be practicing at least an hour a day, six days a week. A college student should be double that (two hours), and a person with hopes of being a professional player should be practicing a minimum of four hours a day, and probably six or eight hours a day. That means six to eight hours a day in a room by yourself, in addition to time in band or orchestra, brass quintet, jazz band, tuba ensemble, etc.

Accuracy is Everything!

How much time have we all wasted over the years re-learning notes and rhythms that we allowed to become habit, when we could have (should have) learned in right the first time? USE A METRONOME TO ASSURE STEADY PULSE AND CORRECT RHYTHMS! Slow difficult passages down so that every single note and rhythm are correct. Otherwise, you are practicing mistakes. Practice does not make perfect, practice makes permanent! Therefore, PERFECT PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT. Although this method will seem tedious at first, it is much faster, much more productive in the end. Once a passage is learned correctly, albeit very slowly, the brain can then process that passage accurately in the future, even if the tempo is drastically increased.

Follow the Directions.

Do you understand all of the written directions, be they in Latin, Italian, French, Russian, German, English or Swahili? What can the verbal directions tell you about the style, tempo, dynamic, or emotional content of the passage in question? Are you following the instructions?

How does this particular section of music fit into the whole?

Is it self-contained, or part of a large composition? If self-contained, what elements of this style, this composer, this musical period, etc., should you be incorporating into your interpretation? If part of a large work, how does this movement or passage relate to the sounds that precede or follow it? Does your excerpt occur in another portion of the whole, and if so, should your excerpt sound the same or different? Are you playing by yourself, or with others, and if so, what others? How should you adjust your dynamic level based on the other instruments playing with you?

Sing!

You must be able to hear the pitches in your head before you play them. Otherwise, how can you evaluate the sounds coming out of your horn? Practice singing your part with a piano to gain confidence in your ear. Also, sing each phrase in the most artistically pleasing way possible. Establish your vocal model in your mind, and then strive to duplicate that model with your instrument. In other words, don't settle for what the horn gives you. Imagine the most perfect sound in the universe and imagine that perfect sound on exactly the pitches you are singing. After that, develop the physical skills to make your concept a reality.

Buzz!

See explanation for “sing.” Your horn merely amplifies your buzz. Arguably, if you can’t buzz it, you can’t play it. Your horn will not fix wrong notes, bad sound, poor air flow, or faulty intonation. In fact, the instrument will magnify these flaws. Spend time each day buzzing with a fixed-pitch reference, like a piano or pitch pipe. The improvements in accuracy, tone quality, and range will be well worth the time. For brass players, this is a good time to remind yourself to use minimal mouthpiece pressure. Too much pressure literally crushes the blood out of your lips, leading first to fatigue and eventually to the death of the cells in question and possibly permanent damage.

Blow!

Move some air! Without a flow of air, we cannot live – neither can our music. The relaxed, plentiful flow of air is the most basic thing we do; yet it is often the first thing to go away. If you are struggling with virtually any aspect of your performance, the first thing to check is AIR.

Record yourself.

Many times, we know what we want to sound like, and could correct a great many of our own musical flaws. Record your performance, wait anywhere from a few minutes to a few hours, and then listen to the performance as if it were merely a recording. Human nature will often defend in our own performance flaws we would quickly point out in the performance of another. Making a recording provides a realistic glimpse of our own skills, and creates the opportunity for “self-taught lessons,” which help increase our own individual responsibility for the sounds that come out of your instrument.

Take lessons.

Even the very best musicians go to other musicians for constructive criticism. Even the finest athletes take the advice of the coaches they trust. Seek out qualified input on your playing. Also, the earlier you take lessons the better. A WORD OF WARNING: A bad teacher can be worse than no teacher at all, by teaching or reinforcing bad habits under the guise of competent instruction. Audition and/or interview your prospective instructor. Who did they study with? Where have they played professionally? Do they have a music degree? Who else is studying with them now, and are those students successful? Of course, such questions should be posed with an appropriate degree of respect and deference, lest the prospective student be told, “Sorry...my studio is full right now. Don’t call me. I’ll call you when something opens up.”

Don’t put it off any more.

Get serious and get started. Work hard and strive to be the best musician you can be.