

Best Practice Tips

1) Practice Space and Gear. Making an absolutely perfect practice space in one's home is difficult. All we can do is the best we can. Your home practice area should include:

- Mirror
- Metronome
- Tuner
- Chromatic Drone
- Amplified speakers or headphones
- Recorder!!!

2) The Practice Routine

Warm-up

- Pre-Playing Warm-up Stretches
- Relaxation/Air (Balance)
- Tone (Embouchure & Voicing/Articulation)
- Long Tones (Projection)
- Dexterity Exercises

Scales

- Chromatic
- Major & Minor plus Arpeggios
- Fully Diminished 7th Chords
- Others (Whole-tone, Octatonic (a.k.a. Diminished), related to a work, etc.)

Music

- Sight-reading/Transposition
- Etudes/Studies
- Solos
- Excerpts (Band, Orchestra, Chamber, etc.)
- Improvisation/Jazz

3) Practice for Improvement

- Define your ideal sound
- Record and play along with your ideal without judgment
- Listen back and compare the recording with your ideal
- Assess strengths and weaknesses
- Define goals for improvement
- Address issues (traditional woodshed with clearer goals) and start again

4) Slow Practice - Two misunderstandings

1. We are too concerned with the outcome, not the process. Meaning, we forget that *how* we get there is just as important as whether or not we do. The point of slow practice is not just to slow things down in order to play it perfectly. It's about fine-tuning the execution, and looking for additional ways to play it even better while we are playing slowly enough to monitor and think about the little details.

Are you cultivating the right habits, so that when the tempo increases, you are still playing it the right way? Or are there lots of inefficiencies, or bad habits that will lead to breakdowns when you increase the tempo?

2. We don't practice slowly enough. Since the whole point is to be able to think, monitor, and analyze our technique as we are playing, practicing at a moderate tempo defeats the purpose. It's too fast for us to observe, fully process, and tweak all the little details.

The idea is to utilize super slow practice so that we can pay attention to all the subtle nuances of our mechanics, increase our awareness of what is actually happening, and find ways to make things better.

So it might be more accurate to think of this as slow-motion practice or super-slow practice, rather than regular old slow practice, which tends to lead to mindless play-throughs of a passage at a moderately slow tempo.

5) Improving Your Technique

Get As Much Classical Repertoire Under Your Belt as Possible. Although there are exceptions to just about every rule, the odds of you coming across a great instrumentalist who hasn't spent a considerable amount of time studying classical music are slim to none. Use a variety of method books specific to your instrument (ask for recommendations from your director/private lesson teacher.)

6) Sight Reading

- **Read the notes in groups.** Find the starting pitch and look for scale steps, skips, and familiar patterns (such as triads, seventh chords, scales in thirds, etc.).
- **Think relative to the key.** Learn to hone in on specific notes that you are likely to see, such as the root, fifth, and seventh (the leading tone).
- **Practice reading small chunks at sight.** Put on the metronome, read a single measure in your mind without playing, then play the measure in time with your eyes closed. Repeat this process with larger chunks, always with the metronome, always in time.

Once you start to get a handle on grouping notes and seeing pitch patterns quickly, you will be on your way to being a better reader. But pitches are only part of the problem. If you can't execute rhythms accurately, you will quickly lose your place. Stopping and starting is a defining characteristic of poor sight reading! What to do? Here are some thoughts:

- **Visually break the measure into parts.** Most meters can be broken into halves. 4/4 is two chunks of two beats, so always identify beat three with your eyes - in cut time, this is "big beat two." 6/8 is two groups of three eighth notes, so look for the fourth eighth note, again like the second big beat. 9/8 has three big beats, and 12/8 has four.
- **Use the big beats as landmarks.** Try to notice if you are playing on the big beats, or if you are resting, or sustaining through with long notes or ties.
- **Tap the subdivisions!** Speak the rhythms while tapping steady subdivisions. I find it helpful to tap with two hands on my lap, always starting with the right hand, and always alternating hands. For example, when subdividing eighth notes, the downbeats will always be in the right hand, upbeats with the left. In compound time, I tap the big beats with the right hand (think RIGHT, left, left, RIGHT, left, left).

8) Practicing for an Audition

Always play musically.

- Use many different dynamics (printed in the music and other).
- Work to play appropriate musical style.
- Consider length of articulation (tonguing).
- Observe legato versus staccato.
- It is especially important to play with even rhythm and sound.
- Work to feel subdivision of beat (especially on the slow etude).
- Produce notes with same quality of sound whether playing loud/soft or high/low.

Preparation for auditions benefits all areas of playing.

- Thoughtful preparation produces positive results.
- Working toward goals enables growth in musical skills and confidence.
- Positive experiences are fun and rewarding for all.