

Practice Considerations for the Musician

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Challenges and Issues

There is typically a significant void in the pedagogical world with regard to beneficial and relevant musical practice while adopting healthy strategies and preventative measures to avoid any number of physical or psychological afflictions as a result of inefficient and potentially harmful approaches to developing a career as a performing musician.

As a result of conducting various informal surveys, applied lessons, and masterclasses, I have personally witnessed the frustrations, anger, and even apathy among college-level students who suffer injuries or issues that are affected by ‘wrong’ practice, and vice versa. These issues range from the physical (e.g. tendonitis) to the psychological (depression, lack of confidence as performers), as well as musical (lack of perceived progress). Many are related to lack of knowledge or training in healthy practice, and some to ‘non-musical’ circumstances. For example, one vocal student suffered with chronic sinus infections that impeded her progress and development until she discovered (through the efforts of an informed private instructor) she had a severe food allergy that caused these infections.

Therefore, the challenge is to implement - on a broad pedagogical scale - musical training that is holistic in nature. Musical training that encompasses practice and development that is *directly pertinent* to the student, rather than a myopic approach to learning. A holistic musical training also encompasses physical, mental, and psychological considerations that are often impossible to distinguish from important musical concepts and training.

Musical Considerations

• Practice

Slow As You Go: Practice musical material with a metronome at tempos beyond the ‘comfort zone’; that is, much slower than you ever normally would. This allows your body to take in the dynamics, the articulation, the sound, the fingerings, and also teaches patience - an important psychological skill for musicians.

Repetition & Isolation: As you develop an awareness of technical challenges, it is important to isolate these and repeat only these passages, thus making efficient use of practice time, and avoiding strenuous repetition of the entire piece. To that end...

‘Divide & Conquer’: Take a seemingly large musical task (learning chord voicings, scale fingerings, a new piece, etc.) and break it down into logical and manageable projects. Many students are surprised how little time it takes to learn something new when it is broken up into small pieces over a specific time period appropriate to the student.

Frequent Breaks: Students are discouraged from practicing with the instrument for more than 30-40 minutes continuously. At that point, it is important to stretch and

break before returning, or engaging in a new musical project that does not involve 'physical practice' with the instrument.

Theme & Variations: 'Real-time' musical performance situations vary greatly; it is important to practice being ready for a wide spectrum of challenges. A dynamic way to prepare is to take any musical exercise or piece and work it from every angle. Develop alternate fingerings, extreme dynamics and tempi, tonal variety, variation in articulation, different grooves and rhythmic approaches, etc. The goal is to approach from fundamentally different perspectives that will broaden and strengthen the technique of the musician.

Record regularly: It is important to document musical practice regularly by recording and videorecording works and etudes. Observing oneself will help inform potential physical issues or highlight any tension not obvious while playing. It will also help develop stage performance and awareness, as well as tone production. The musician can observe his/her work away from the instrument, and thus focus on *sound, clarity, emotion, and control*, rather than simply getting through a difficult technical passage.

Maintain a Practice/Performance Journal: It is also important to document challenges and breakthroughs regularly (weekly is fine) so that short-term and long-term growth can be observed in a palpable way. A performance journal can be used in tandem with a practice journal to inform the musician what to practice. Many musicians wonder what to work on when they have the time (or feel overwhelmed by too much to work on); a journal can tell them exactly what to work on *at that moment*. It is also an opportunity to reflect on gigs, business contacts for future use, observations of an aural/video recording, etc.

The Art of Listening: Many practicing musicians discount the importance of focused listening, let alone considering it be 'practice'. Yet, deep listening is essential to developing musical sensitivity and aesthetics. Obviously, 'safe' listening habits need to be developed, however, the musician can develop significantly away from the instrument by listening deeply and repeatedly from different perspectives.

Visualization: Developing the ability to 'see' a piece (or scale, arpeggio, etc.) from beginning to end completely in the mind while hearing it, feeling it on a tactile level throughout the body, and seeing oneself performing it (e.g. watching the fingers, the entire body onstage, etc.) is *paramount* to effortless practice and control. A lot of work can be done away from the instrument and this is powerful mental practice that often solves technical issues without even touching the instrument.

Practicing Away From the Instrument: There are many powerful activities that develop musicianship that do not involve physical practice. These include ear-training, transcribing, composing (even short etudes), theory, score study, gear tuning, etc.

Psychological & Mental Considerations

Visualization: Continuing with the practice of musical visualization, the musician can adopt this technique and visualize success on stage, which can help counter performance anxiety. It may help to do this quietly in solitude, or verbally with a trusted teacher. The importance of 'feeling' musical success in a performance cannot be overestimated. This technique may also be carried over to health and career if the musician

can keep an open mind. Some artists are surprised when they learn visualization exercises are common in the business world.

Learn to Embrace and Accept Healthy Competition: It is important to realize the music industry is incredibly competitive and learn to accept it and work with it. This can lead to the practice of surrender, with regard to circumstances beyond the artist's control.

Incorporating Meditation & Breathing Exercises: Singers and instrumentalists who breathe are aware of the importance of breath control and phrasing. However, all musicians can benefit from breath control within a practice session. This often helps to alleviate anxiety before a performance and prepares the body physically to get into a musical zone.

Keeping Things In Perspective: It is important to develop (with a teacher) the ability to self-assess in a realistic but healthy way. It is vital to separate musical development from career. Success in a career does not necessarily have a direct connection to musical ability and development. Again, it is important to identify (with the teacher and most importantly, with oneself) *specific* career goals, and the steps to achieve them, both tangible and conceptual.

Get Into a Routine (Regularity, but change it up!)

An Attitude of Gratitude: This is vital to sustaining a life-long career and interest in music. Virtually all musicians who maintain a life in music for decades feel a deep sense of gratitude as well as a desire to explore and reinvent. Though not always recognized in some cultures, music is an incredible gift. It also helps to have a sense of humor!

Physical Considerations

• Practice

Physical Self-Assessment and Awareness: This can be developed by observing oneself playing on a video, and also by practicing body awareness through a method such as Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais, etc. It is important for the musician to be aware of the entire body while playing, and be able to discern any physical discomfort that could lead to repetitive injuries.

Regular Stretching (before, during, after)

Environment: Lighting, proper stand placement, chair, etc.

Drinking Plenty of Water

Removing Physical Obstacles Directly Related to Instrument: Many musicians are not aware of the impact of an instrument that is not properly set up. For example, the action on a guitar may be too high because of a poor bridge, thus creating a situation of excessive tension. It is also important to experiment to find personal choices of musical accessories (picks, reeds, etc.) that hinder or promote tone as well as healthy posture. It is important to be 'conjoined' with the instrument as naturally as possible.

Correct Apparatus: These may be instrument specific: a good strap for guitarists, a harness for reed players (as opposed to neck straps), shoulder pads for violinists, etc. Often these are simply habits that are introduced (or not) early by teachers.

Physical “Cross-training” Specific to Musicians: In the same way certain athletes develop cross-training routines to complement their particular sport, musicians should have access to physical exercise regimens that will strengthen without potentially harming their physical technique. Popular regimens among musicians include yoga and tai chi.

Intensity Without Tension: As observed in musicians Pat Metheny and Lang Lang, intensity is a natural part of musical performance. However, there is a way musicians can develop fluidity at all levels of dynamic and difficulty. Pat Metheny plays his guitar so effortlessly, he mentions that it would easily fall out of his hands if someone were to come from behind and gently move it. This fluidity is developed in part by working on a holistic perspective of the body while playing, and also without the instrument. This starts by listing anything going on with the body (wrist cramp, legs, etc.) and how it may or may not be connected to playing (they are often intrinsically connected). The next step is physically playing on the instrument with effortless motion, gradually building dynamics, intensity, and tone, yet maintaining softness and fluidity.