

The Truth About Practice and Performance

By Andy Harnsberger

All musicians know they need to practice to hone their craft. There is no magic pill to make you a better player. There are no shortcuts. You simply need to put in the time; however, there are things you can do to make the most of your time and help you progress faster.

First, we have to define *practicing*. To practice is defined as “to work at repeatedly so as to become proficient” (Webster’s Dictionary). It further implies the attainment of a skill through much repetition. It is our job as educators to explain how to practice, and to present students with several techniques to accomplish the task at hand. The purpose of this article is to outline a variety of practice suggestions and provide “the truth” about practice and performance.

PRACTICE SUGGESTIONS

Establish a DAILY routine. Your daily routine should incorporate exercises that will help you warm up and allow you to focus on technique and sound quality. Your daily routine will help keep your hands in shape and be the most beneficial ingredient in your life as a percussionist. If you have 30 minutes to practice, your time will be much better spent working through your daily routine for 20–25 minutes than cramming notes for your next lesson.

Set short- and long-term goals. Your long-term goals will help keep you on track. Knowing what you want to accomplish in each practice session (short-term) can also help you achieve your long-term goals quicker. Pre-plan and organize your practice sessions using a practice log to map out your daily and weekly goals—and, of course, to evaluate your progress along the way.

Slower is faster. Learn your material correctly the first time so you don’t have to unlearn it to relearn it. Many times, practice sessions are spent “performing”—playing pieces over and over again, up to tempo—instead of “practicing.” This type of practicing forces you to rely solely on muscle memory, engrains mistakes, and reinforces bad habits. By practicing at painfully slow tempos, you can instead reinforce good habits. This is an excellent tool for gaining an overall knowledge of the piece and for improving your memorization skills. It forces you to concentrate on each note, as well as to focus on technical problems, body positioning, sound quality, and musical gestures. It also keeps you

from relying strictly on your muscle memory. Replace your bad habits with good ones and maximize your time.

Go from the general, to the specific, back to the general. When learning a new piece, the first thing I do is read the entire piece. I go as slowly as I need to go to gain an overall knowledge of the form and the trouble spots. Then I can break the piece down into small sections and prioritize my practice sessions. At the end, I return to working through the entire piece.

Some things need more practice than others. When prioritizing your practice time, a good method is “color-coding” your piece. **Red** sections are spots you can’t play yet, and you will need to practice those every day to work up to performance. **Yellow** sections are spots that aren’t quite as difficult, and **Green** sections are the ones you can already play without too much trouble. The goal is to turn the red sections to yellow, then turn all the yellow to green.

When correcting a problem, start at its core. Analyze the problem. Is it technical or musical? Once you know exactly what the problem is, it can be corrected, and corrected quickly. So much can be corrected in just five minutes a day. Use five minutes at the end of your warm-up session to isolate problem areas and/or specific techniques and address them. For example: you can play 300 flams in five minutes at quarter = 60.

THE TRUTH

1. When you’re not motivated, you have to be disciplined.

- Practice is not an afterthought; it is a daily disciplined routine.
- Nothing takes the place of daily practice, which is both intensive and comprehensive.
- Being successful takes deliberate practice, patience, and persistence.

2. Technique is the key.

- A deadly combination: playing unmusically with bad technique.
- Have enough technique so you can think about the music and not about your technique.
- Weak hands = weak performance. Strengthen the weakness. Break it down so you can rebuild it.
- When you can play what’s written, then you can take liberties.

3. When you play, have something to say.

- Practice as if you have no limits. Perform as if this were true.
- When you play, *play*. Have a good time and enjoy yourself.
- There’s more to music than just the notes on the page. Learn about history, theory, art, and culture. The more you know, the better you will play.
- The less interesting a piece, the more imaginative and convincing you must play it.
- Neither justify nor tear down your performance.
- “Dullness is the cardinal sin of performance.”—Franz Liszt

4. Conceive. Believe. Achieve.

- Your reality as a player is constructed one practice session at a time.
- Pre-plan and visualize your success. Decide what you want to achieve and set up the conditions to bring that into reality.
- When you believe in something, believe in it all the way.
- “Just do it.” Put your focus on the piece and the outcome you want.
- There are few limits except those we impose on ourselves.
- Always do the best you can if not the best you are capable of. Some days are better than others. All you can do is your best, always.
- “Never, never, never give up.”—Winston Churchill

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