

# Principles of Successful Practising

Jenny Macmillan



The subject of practice is a fascinating one as little progress can be made without good practice habits. This article suggests principles of good practice and gives ideas for teaching how to practise and for structuring practice sessions.

Central to developing musical skill on an instrument and gaining the joy of playing well, is efficient and effective practice. Practice is essential in order to develop technical and musical skills; to learn and memorise music and to prepare for performance. There are two key issues regarding practice – one is quantity and the other is quality. Unless the student practises regularly for a reasonable length of time, progress will be poor. But even if the student does put in the hours, progress is unlikely to be good unless the practice is focused.

Teachers can encourage parents to create a good learning environment by:

- providing a quiet room in which their child can practise
- making sure there is a clear time to practise each day
- with younger children, reading through the notes from the lesson and perhaps even sitting with their child, at least for the first practice after a lesson
- ensuring plenty of music is heard in the home.

## Principles of good practice

It is important to differentiate between practising an instrument and playing it. Playing an instrument means playing through a piece or improvising for instant enjoyment or emotional satisfaction. This, together with most ensemble work, may be classified as incidental practice. And what a world of joy opens up to those able to engage in this sort of music-making! But musicians need to practise deliberately in order to improve. Deliberate practice is purposeful work which develops the skills that form the link between the musical intention and its execution. Deliberate practice implies working on a short section, listening carefully to the tone quality, intonation, rhythm, articulation, phrasing, dynamics and so



on, and being aware of the physical movements involved. If practising is thorough, skills are developed so that what was difficult becomes easy. Students need to be clear what they are to practise, how they are to practise it, and why they are to practise it.

Learning an instrument is really about learning to understand and master principles. The principles of good performance remain similar whatever the level; so do the principles

of good practice. Good practising involves identifying problems, devising strategies to overcome the difficulties, and repeating short sections while listening carefully for musical sounds. These elements develop in subtlety as students mature, but essentially remain the same from age three to adult, from learning folk songs to performing concertos.

Learning to practise effectively is a skill in itself. There are boring, tedious, ineffective

## Lesson time

ways of practising, and there are challenging, varied and efficient ways of practising. Often it is not easy for the student to devise effective practice strategies to overcome technical and musical problems. The effectiveness of our teaching depends a great deal on how convincingly we can communicate useful practice strategies.

In this diagram I've tried to show that good practice leads to progress, progress leads to personal satisfaction and appreciation from others: this motivates students, and so they practise more:



The ultimate aim of the music teacher is to enable students to become independent. Instilling good practice habits is an excellent start.

### Teaching how to practise

I estimate that the ratio of practice time to lesson time is, on average, about 5:1, so a fair proportion of each lesson should, ideally, be devoted to the matter of practice. This time might consist of a demonstration of practice techniques, verbal discussion about how to approach practice, and role reversal whereby the student becomes teacher and explains how a specific piece or exercise might be approached. The way students practise is influenced more by what teachers do in the lesson; for instance, by demonstrating a technique or getting a student to try a particular approach, than by what they say. A Chinese proverb says:

**Tell me and I'll forget,  
Show me and I may remember,  
Involve me and I'll understand.**  
*Confucius*

Some teachers may ask their students, after hearing a piece in lesson, "Tell me what you thought was good about your performance" which immediately encourages students to

think positively before discussing areas for improvement. Others may ask "How do you practise that?" which is the question students ought constantly to be asking themselves during their practice sessions.

It is important that the student understands the reason for practising a certain passage in a certain way – it is more motivating to practise towards a known goal. It is very helpful if the student can leave the lesson knowing that there is one main point to be worked on during the week. This may be posture; it may be an improvement in tone; it may be the performance of slurs or staccato notes; or it may be a musical issue such as how to shape phrases. Whatever the point, students need to understand that it should be applied, wherever possible, to every piece or scale or exercise currently being studied. The point should be emphasised through repetition of the task in the lesson.

Teachers need to ensure their students see the connection between practice and progress. Good practice needs to be rewarded, encouraged, discussed and never taken for granted.

### Varied practice

The notion of varied practice is an interesting and productive one. Doris da Costa believes that students will get more out of their practice if they are allowed to choose some interesting ways to practise from a list supplied by their teacher, rather than just routine repetitions. In her experiment, students were allowed to choose to practise either on a conventional scheme of breaking down their music into short phrases and performing a required number of repetitions of each, or else choosing five novel ways of approaching the music. The fifth choice was always to play the section from memory; for the other four the selection might include:

- playing the whole phrase piano
- playing the whole phrase forte
- playing a crescendo through each phrase
- playing a diminuendo through each phrase
- playing the phrase legato
- playing the phrase staccato
- changing the mood of the phrase
- playing the phrase as a question
- playing the rhythm of the phrase on one note only.

At the end of the experiment, those who

had opted for the varied practice reported that they had enjoyed their practice more, were able to play more fluently, learned their music faster, improved their technique and were better at memorising.

### Developing listening skills

A pre-requisite for efficient practice is an honest and objective ear. Without good listening skills, practice can be fruitless. It is easy to hear what you hope to hear, rather than what you actually play. A useful test is to record your playing and listen to the recording critically. If the recording is different from what you imagine, more careful listening needs to be done during practice. It is interesting to experiment with different qualities of sound, exaggerated dynamic levels and various ways of shaping phrases, to produce different moods and character in the piece.

Practising away from an instrument – practising in your head, mental practice – helps develop inner hearing. In your imagination, with no technical problems to confront, you can create and hear the most musical performance possible, which can then influence your performance when at an instrument.

Listening skills are also developed by playing or singing in ensembles, when your own instrument or voice must blend with the others. Listening to fine performances of wonderful music awakens sensitivity to the subtleties of beautiful sound.

### Structuring practice sessions

Frequency of practice needs to be discussed with students, and with parents of young children. Skills developed regularly over a long period of time are retained better than skills developed within a short time period. Regular short practice sessions are generally more effective than fewer longer ones, the ideal length varying with the age and skill of the musician. Frequent, short practices are best for short, simple tasks and for younger pupils, but longer practice sessions are required for more complex tasks. But when practising for long sessions, it is important to take periodic breaks.

If possible, it is good to do the bulk of the serious practice in the morning when one is fresh. One regime would be to start with technique (warm-ups, scales, arpeggios, exercises and/or studies), followed by sight reading, and continue with detailed work on

the newest piece (working on short sections, slowly, and so on) and/or a piece being polished for a forthcoming performance. End with playing through (or working on) some recently learned pieces. A good and satisfying practice session involves working diligently on some pieces, and then playing one or more well-known pieces, thus offering variety and ending with an enjoyable play-through.

Students who structure their practice well improve the accuracy and musicality of their performances more than those who practise with no specific structure. A few minutes at the end of one practice, planning (and even writing down) what to do at the next practice, will result in a much more focused practice session the next day. Post-it notes can be invaluable for this purpose – to note down which section of the piece to start on the next day and which elements to work on, such as technically awkward bars, articulation, rhythm, dynamics, speed, character, fluency or memory.

One important element of practice is to divide the music into logical and manageable chunks for practice, then build it up again into a piece for performance. Strategies need to be devised for practising the difficulties in each short section. The question is: how best to do this? As teachers, we obviously assist our students, but with limited lesson time we can't make every possible suggestion. We need to help our students work it out for themselves.

#### Recommendations

A few suggestions:

- Each week you could ask students to find one new way of practising which you've not previously mentioned or which they've not done before (or not for a long while)
- Likewise, each week you could focus on one new practice point in your teaching
- Write down how you practise – what is effective, what could be improved
- Note down how you recommend students to

practise and consider what you could add to guide them further.

Learning to play an instrument well requires an ability to question, to be curious, to be intrigued, to look outside the musical and technical issues at the broader view. Teachers and students need to question themselves on how they are working, challenge themselves to find more varied and interesting ways of practising and so make more progress in their ability to play skilfully and expressively.

Jenny Macmillan's new book, *Successful Practising: A handbook for pupils, parents and music teachers*, is available from shops @ £15 and from her website @ £15 including p+p within the UK (£18 outside the UK). Find out more and read sample pages on: [www.jennymacmillan.co.uk](http://www.jennymacmillan.co.uk).

1. da Costa, D. (1999) An investigation into instrumental pupils' attitudes to varied, structured practice. *British Journal of Music Education*, 16/1: 65-77.



## The Royal Society of Musicians of Great Britain

FOUNDED 1738  
INCORPORATED BY ROYAL CHARTERS 1790 & 1987

Registered Charity Number 208879

The Royal Society of Musicians was founded by Handel and others to support professional musicians and their families when in distress because of illness, accident or old age. Its charitable work has continued, responding to increasing need and acting swiftly in cases of emergency.

*If you know a musician needing help*  
please let us know at once.

*If you wish to help us*  
please send a donation or arrange for a deed of covenant or legacy.

For details please contact: The Secretary  
The Royal Society of Musicians of Great Britain  
10 Stratford Place, London W1C 1BA  
Telephone: 020 - 7629 6137