PRACTICE CLASS

This will be a two part session discussing practicing, consisting of:

1) General points for good practice habits

2) Specific skills for maximizing practice sessions

QUESTIONS

How many of you like to practice? Hate to practice? Feel you need more time to practice? Wish you could cover more repertoire? Think you use your time to full advantage? Have aches and pains? Feel you are at the same point of skill as the day before? Worse? Better?

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this session is to promote good practice habits. This is not geared necessarily to musicians who hate it or love it, because everyone can benefit from better utilization of time. Personally, I come from the "I hate to practice" school of musicians, and did everything to avoid it as a youngster. Fortunately I came from a family of musicians and my mother in particular realized I had some talent and took it upon herself to force me to practice. I used to do all sorts of things to avoid practicing, including knocking my soundpost over and turning the clock ahead, but once I realized that I could learn things quickly and watch TV or put a magazine up on my stand after memorizing a piece, I developed all kinds of technique to practice efficiently. Of course, when I finally admitted that I actually liked music, practicing became a part of my life, still a chore, but a necessary evil, if you will.

A. GENERAL PRACTICE POINTS

First and foremost, use your brain, concentrate, listen, and be objective. Really, we could stop talking right now if we all understood the importance of, and then the ability to use our brain to its fullest potential. Remember that there are no quick fixes, everything takes time and work.

Set specific goals for every session, whether getting through a certain piece without stopping or just playing one particular phrase in tune, or even one note! Feeling good about what you accomplished that day is very important. Challenge yourself, set your goals and standards high and don’t be easily satisfied.
Never repeat by rote. Never even repeat unless you have decided why you stopped and what you are going to do differently. Perhaps you won’t come to the right decision right away, it may be a process, but never repeat without thinking. We’ll get into this concept more when we get into specifics. Get a 3-way mirror and concentrate on posture and position. Tape yourself and listen as if you are another person. Imagine how critical you would be if it wasn’t you that you were listening to! Keep your basics steady - concentrate on basic technique, straight bow, good position, organized shifting, etc.

Above all, CONCENTRATE!! USE YOUR BRAIN!!! Not your emotions.

General Practice Process - take note of two points before even picking up your instrument:

1) Study part and score (especially chamber music but solo literature also). Look at what to listen for in chamber music, look at parts other than your own. Examine what the tempo will be and what sections may be potential problem spots.

2) Warm up your body with stretching exercises and get the blood circulating. Arm raises 10 out to side, 10 out front, 10 to counter the front, 10 hugs and counter hugs, circles (start out with just a few, maybe 30 - 40, work up to 100. Keep elbows slightly bent and wrists straight. Remember that even young people have physical problems. Listen to your body. Learn to tell the difference between positive and negative pain. Music is too important to us to take chances with our bodies. We are too reliant on them to take them for granted. Treat your body with the respect that an athlete would. A marathoner would never go out and run 26 miles without warming up, why would a violinist play through a Bach Fugue or a Paganini Caprice without warming up? If you can’t seem to find the time to warm up - although we may understand the importance of proper warming up and usually can prevent situations from coming up that keep you from proper warm-up, sometimes you simply don’t have the time. You wake up and fall out of bed to go to an early rehearsal and get there just in time to take out your instrument and play. This is no excuse to forget you have a brain and remember that you should have warmed up but didn’t. Use common sense - start easy in rehearsal, don’t make your muscles do the most strenuous movements right away, use less finger and bow pressure, start your vibrato easily and slowly, don’t flail, keep your body in control, watch that there are no extremes in angles anywhere in your arms, wrists, fingers and find some key thoughts that will keep you from playing all out until you are somewhat warmed up.

3) Tuning. Start your sessions by forcing yourself to tune intelligently. Good practice and listening habits begin with tuning. Don’t allow yourself to move your peg until you have decided which way to go. If you are flat, don’t turn your peg even flatter, move it in the right direction right away, and vice versa. Try to avoid the eeeeeeeuuuu, eeeaaaauuuu method which doesn’t require any brain power.

4) Proper warm-up. Everyone is different, so find a system that works for you. You might want to start with long tones and a slow, wide vibrato that will get things going in your left hand. Go easy with the bow, there will be plenty of chance to pump out lots of sound later. Gradually move to scales, arpeggios, etudes before getting to repertoire. Use common sense about what kind of variations you do on double stop scales. Just as in exercises, counter double stops with opposing double stops. In other words, don’t practice tenths, octaves and sixths on the same day, in a row. Counter any of these with the other hand position with the fingers in the opposite pattern, which would be fourths, thirds and seconds. USE YOUR BRAIN - when practicing intervals that put a strain on your hand, take frequent breaks, and remember that concentrating on the hand position of the higher note and stretching back is much more healthy and
actually much easier than stretching up. In addition, you are utilizing the strength that weight gives you by concentrating it on the part of your hand that is weakest, the 3 & 4. The counter move is what all physical therapists would tell you to do in your exercises.

5) Pace yourself. Now you are ready for repertoire and for the more specific points of good practice habits. Pace yourself - you are still not ready to play FF and the most difficult passages at full tilt. Play clinically for a while before putting your utmost passion into it.

6) Warm down and relax. Stretch again, letting your body relax. Breathe deeply and allow things to cool down gradually. Think about how your session went during this time and plan what you will do next time and resolve to do it. Then do something else, don't just immerse yourself in music 24 hours a day. Broaden your horizons or just have some plain old fun. There is nothing worse than a boring musician!!

B. SPECIFICS OF GOOD PRACTICE HABITS

1) Utilize your time. Not having enough time to practice is no excuse. If you use your brain and concentrate, you can get something done in 10 minutes. You don't need to have 4 hours in a row to accomplish something. You just need motivation, desire and the ability to use your brain. Be smart about warm-up in these shorter sessions. Don't allow yourself to play up to tempo or louder than a MP or MF.

2) Organize your session. Figure out what you need to do in this session and stick by your plan. At the end of your session, analyze how it went and make notes to yourself if necessary.

You may want to start with yesterday's problem spots, seeing if what systems or key thoughts you learned yesterday are working. But be reasonable - use common sense. This is not an endorsement to build a hang-up about a specific place to the point of a psychological block! Better to get away from a spot if it persists in being bad or gets worse. Sometimes a break will do a lot more good.

3) Slow practice. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to know that slow practice is the way to go. But it does take some brain power to get the most out of slow practice. Shifting: Don't allow yourself to shift slowly during slow practice. The kind of shifts that you do not want to hear, the purely transportational shifts will not benefit from slowing them down to the point of actually hearing them when you don't want to. Stay on the old note, hide the shift by releasing the left hand and bow pressure, and get to the next note efficiently, not with a schmear. Mentally, imagine yourself walking and simply falling into a hole, and make your fingers do the same. Building up speed: Be smart - if you can't play it slowly, you certainly can't play it fast. Don't allow yourself to play if fast, all that will do is promote bad habits. Keep it slow for as long as necessary and gradually work up the speed. Use your ticker and move it slowly up in speed

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4) Reverse passages. Make yourself play things backwards - it's a great way to really get something solid. For instance, the octaves in the opening of the Mendelssohn Concerto. They are written only going up, but if you practice them both ways, you will stand a chance of really getting to know your fingerboard well if you do them coming down as well.

5) Practicing Intonation. Of course, the first step which may seem very obvious, is to listen, and listen objectively and critically. We can assume if you are this far along in your schooling, that your ears are basically better than most peoples', and that you can hear the difference between good and bad intonation. But how many of us hear that it is out of tune, and how many can actually say in which direction it was out? That's the difference. How can you fix something if you don't know whether it was sharp or flat? How can you then return to the same phrase and have a chance of playing it in tune if you don't know whether to aim higher or lower?

First of all, challenge yourself. Do not be satisfied with poor intonation in your practice sessions, because in a concert, you are likely to lose some of the solidity in the heat of the moment. Okay, we have the desire, now what to do? Get your pencil out - mark up your music, there is nothing wrong with it during the learning process, whether it is a solo or chamber piece. Get your own symbols going - I use H=high, L=low, but use whatever you want. Have a key mark for a note you don't want to accent, a mark for a string crossing, whatever it takes. Listen and stop. Isolate the phrase, break it down into sections, take out the dynamics and expression. Play it as neutrally and clinically as possible. Concentrate on only intonation. Which note is out? Land on that note, DON'T MOVE!!! Hold it until you have decided which direction it needs to go. Land on it again, same mistake? If so, mark it and resolve never to make the same mistake again. Be upset with yourself if you do, but do not be upset if you go too far in the other direction. It's a process, and you may not have made the right choice and you may have to rework the passage. The main thing is to listen.

6) Key thoughts. Have a key thought for every phrase. A plan, whatever it takes to make that phrase happen. It could be technical or musical. Come back to that thought each time you play the phrase, so that your mind knows where to go and doesn't wander when you get to a performance. There are enough distractions in a concert without the lack of mind discipline to complicate things.

7) Stages of preparation. Have a plan starting backwards from a performance. Make a schedule for yourself and stick with it. Start early enough to make sure you can play through things a few weeks before so you can schedule a break and step back from the program or piece if necessary. When playing through, simulate the situation that would make you the most nervous and force yourself to play through without stopping. Sometimes, just some time to reflect on music without playing it is as useful as practicing it 8 hours a day because your outlook and attitude will be fresh and your perspective much improved. Go to a ball game or a museum or just veg out and relax.

8) Pace yourself. When coming back from a break of a few days or weeks, use your common sense. Don't dive into 4 hours of Paganini or Popper or whatever. Work yourself up to where you were gradually. Remember to respect your body as much as an athlete does. Don't ever take it for granted. Look around at all your colleagues that are hurt - it can happen to you too. Be sensible. When practicing, don't play until it hurts. Listen to your body. Plus, if you are using your brain while practicing, you won't be able to go more than about 45 minutes without stopping anyway, you should be at least mentally tired by then if not physically. Stop, put your instrument down, stretch, and go look out the window.
9) **Avoid mindless repetition.** The worst thing you can do is to repeat something without deciding *what you are going to do differently* the next time. Mindless repetition has only negative results, and none positive. Not only it is a waste of time (which none of us has), but can cause physical problems and is not a way to retain what you have learned before.

10) **Think ahead.** It's too late to think about what you are playing at the time, and it is certainly much to late to think about what went wrong earlier. That moment in time, whether it went well or badly, will never come back, and all you can do is pile more mistakes on top of it if you dwell on it. Constantly look ahead and think about the key thought you have for the phrase coming up.

11) **Art of practicing rhythms.** Everyone here knows the benefits of practicing rhythms, but few of us use our brain while doing it. Don't just practice every rhythm you can devise for a passage by rote. Listen to the one that is *most uneven*, or most difficult and concentrate on that one alone. the one that is hardest to execute will do the most good in the end. This is also another way to say, practice your weaknesses, not your strengths. This is NOT a way to say that just because a difficult phrase went well, that is any reason to assume that it will the next time. If you *don't know what you did to make it work, it may never happen again*. You must have a key thought for every phrase, if not every note, you play. Force yourself do play things well 3 times in a row, and remember that's the only way to get things solid enough for performance. No one listening to you in a concert is going to care if you played it well once 3 weeks ago. Closing remarks on the danger of too much talent=lack of analytical approach.

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