

# How to Practice

By Jon Minei



Practicing is an essential skill that every musician needs to take very seriously. Practicing skills need to be refined throughout the course of a musician's lifetime. In fact, it is far more valuable than raw natural talent.

Proper practice habits not only help you to become a better musician they will enhance your love of music and ensure life-long pursuit of music. You will begin to see what amazing things you are capable of once you have a basic idea about what is practicing.

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## What is practicing?

### True or False?

- 1) Practicing is repetition.
- 2) The more you practice, the better a musician you will be.

These two statements can be somewhat deceptive. There is a lot of truth in these two statements. However, it is far from the whole truth. Indeed, if this is all we know about practicing, we run the risk of doing more harm than good.

## Practicing is ...

**Practicing** is a process of mental and physical conditioning to turn something that is difficult to play, into something that is easy to play; something that is unmusical into something very musical; something that is uncomfortable into something that is comfortable.

### Three principles for effective practicing

The following three principles will help us to understand what incredible things we can accomplish through a more thorough understanding of practicing.

## The Basics

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### MINDFUL REPETITION

**“Practice makes permanent.  
Love makes perfect.”**

–Anon.

<p><b>Principle #1</b>— When we perform one behavior vs. another an <i>overwhelming majority of the time</i>, our habits, our thoughts and even our entire being will begin to gravitate towards this behavior.</p>
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Rather than thinking of practicing as heroically spending 20 hours a week being forced to play difficult music over and over again, think of it as *behavior modification*. We are eliminating our bad habits and putting good habits in their place. When we think of practicing in these terms it becomes a far more meaningful and noble way to spend your time, doesn't it?

Instead of passively hoping that mindless repetition of errors will eventually yield a perfect performance, we are systematically, consciously and deliberately transforming our behavior into something of our choosing to improve our playing. We are, in effect, willing ourselves to become better musicians.

This type of conditioning requires very careful examination of the process. There are five areas of our playing that we need to be aware of separately to determine how we should apply this technique. These

five areas can be arranged in hierarchical order of importance for when we are practicing. They are:

- 1) Mental calmness
- 2) Physical calmness
- 3) Tone
- 4) Rhythm
- 5) Tempo



The mistake that we often see is that students get their priorities backwards. Therefore, they errantly regard tempo as the most important thing when first learning a piece. They play through the music much faster than they are capable of playing it well. Thus, the difficulty of doing this causes them to compromise solid rhythm and good tone. This causes them to become physically tense and consequently thinking that they are poor musicians. Done this way, it is no wonder why so many kids go to music lessons without practicing (because practicing this way is MISERABLE!). They end up hating music and feeling worse about themselves than when they first began!

Once all of these other areas are addressed properly, raising the tempo of a piece of music is the easiest thing to do! Therefore, we should play at a tempo (very slowly at first) while being able to maintain mental and physical ease, producing beautiful tone and spacing the notes out at the precise rhythmic proportions. We are now reinforcing these things in our playing by playing in this way *an overwhelming majority of the time*. For every time we make an error, we play it again 10, 20 or 40 more times, slowly and correctly to reinforce solid playing. This is what we call *mindful repetition*.

Once we are better “conditioned” to play in this way, we gently raise the tempo but only to a point where we can still maintain our mental and physical composure and can easily produce good tone and apply proper rhythm. (Use a metronome!) Eventually, we will be able to play our piece at the proper tempo. Even more importantly, we are “practicing in” calmness and ease with the instrument.

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### Fostering the Love of Music

“If music be the food of love,  
play on.”

–William Shakespeare

**Principle #2**—Love of music takes practice too.

At Opus Music, we say that we are “Fostering the Love of Music.” This is not just a company tag line. It is very important to us that we allow the very natural love of music in each of our students to thrive first. We are very mindful that we are not purposefully doing things that might prevent us from having a life-long love affair with music.

**Here’s a common scenario:** *A student finds a teacher. The teacher takes it upon himself to point out areas in the student’s playing that needs to be addressed. So the teacher gives the student music that exposes weaknesses in his technique. To the exclusion of everything else, the student then plays this difficult music over and over again. Without proper coaching on how to practice, the student values tempo above all other aspects of his playing. Making mistakes over and over again, he spends the next six days practicing physically tense, playing bad rhythms and producing bad tone. With every mistake made, this student tells himself that he is doing poorly, that he hates this music and that his teacher is going to be mad at him for not being able to play this piece properly.*

By unknowingly applying the repetition principle, this student has in fact conditioned himself to be tense, to use bad musical habits and (most troubling) to have a poor self esteem. This student has effectively become better at being worse! He has spent an overwhelming majority of time being in a bad mental and physical

state for learning. A majority of his playing has been spent producing bad tone and using sloppy rhythm. His negative thoughts are increasingly becoming a part of his normal thinking throughout a majority of the week.

This psychologically damaging habitual outlook is not something to be taken lightly. Rather, we want to be filling the mind of the student with positive thoughts throughout the week in order to nurture a more positive and productive individual. **Most importantly, these positive thoughts and validations from parents and teacher MUST be based on real measurable progress yielding from real (not imagined) hard work and diligence.**

If we spend a majority of our practice time playing comfortably, musically and enjoyably, then it is reasonable to expect that the student's playing and attitude will by and large reflect all of these qualities. **Real accomplishment** coupled with validation and praise from both the teacher and the parents, is essential for developing a positive attitude towards music; helping us to love music more and more.

### Putting it all together

**“Do or do not. There is no try.”**

—Yoda

**Principle #3**—Have a plan. Have faith in the process.

Now that we have reduced generalizations about repetition into specific goals (conditioning for solid playing and reinforcing a positive attitude), let us examine how we should act on these goals so that we can consistently attain them. What the student needs to do is to have easily attainable tasks to complete on a daily basis that will inch the student towards mastery of an instrument. We need a plan!

One of the things we say to new students is that in the first two weeks to a month, it is more important to develop a relationship with the instrument itself rather than to be worried about the process or to begin measuring the amount of practicing that is taking place. Again, we're being careful not to associate practicing with drudgery, punishment or failure. If there is a simple task that the teacher has given, just spend 2-5

minutes a day completing this task at least 5 days a week. Rewarding the completion of each task and the ability to do it over a week's time shows that student what they are capable of doing. This builds self-esteem and a desire to pursue a sense of accomplishment.

Once we've established that they are capable of practicing in this way, we are on our way to developing a healthy relationship with the instrument. Now, we can start to focus on the process. The student should have a plan so that various areas that he/she wants to improve are all addressed every time practice time is set aside.

One way that we suggest you can do this is by breaking up your practice time into four quadrants. You can do this by thinking of **TONE**:



**T** is for Technique. You can begin your practice time by playing a battery of warm-up exercises (scales, arpeggios, long tones, etc ...) that you play all of the time. You play them so often that they are easy for you. You hardly ever make a mistake because you're so incredibly comfortable with these exercises.

**O** is for Old Repertoire. As often as possible, play music that you've learned a long time ago that is very simple. You enjoy playing these pieces because you know this music inside and out. Again, you hardly make mistakes playing these pieces because they are very familiar to you and you can play them solidly and with proper technique.

**N** is for New Repertoire. This is music that you are now learning. However, now that your mind is at ease and you are physically warmed up, you are much more receptive to developing new behaviors. It is imperative that this time is spent playing VERY slowly at first, careful that you do not pile on any negative thinking or bad habits.

**E** is for Enjoyment. Always reinforce that music is easy and enjoyable by playing music that you know and love. We want your thinking and your attitude about your musical abilities to be reasonably based on what you can do well and with an enormous sense of ease and enjoyment.



**When is it appropriate to reprimand a child who does not practice consistently?**

First, we need to establish that the student is capable of practicing consistently. Our teachers rely on the parents to oversee this process between lessons (particularly in the beginning stages). Reward each accomplishment to reinforce consistency and increase the practice time slowly over time.

Once it is firmly established that the student is capable of consistently practicing, it is reasonable to reprimand a student that suddenly stops doing so.

Otherwise, you may be punishing your child for not doing something that they don't know they are capable of doing. It is like asking your child to build you a rocket ship and punishing them when they show that they are incapable of it. We believe that managing reprimands this way, we are placing the focus on the behavior and not on the individual; on the consequences and not an inherent inability.

**CLOSING**

**“Champions aren’t made in the ring. They’re just recognized there.”**

—Anon.

If you follow these three principles, you will see results. For any musician to move forward and to improve on their skills there needs to be a basic understanding of how to practice. Just because you spend 20 hours a week on your instrument that does not necessarily mean that you are on the road to improvement.

Rather, if we perform one behavior an overwhelming majority of the time, our habits, thoughts and entire being will begin to gravitate towards this behavior. Therefore, if we fill our practicing time with ease, comfort and LOVE for music, we are ensuring that these things are ever increasing in our playing. By having faith in the process and having a plan of action, we can be assured that our practicing time is moving us toward a greater love of music and mastery of our instrument.

Indeed, these principles are not the last word on how to improve practicing skills. We should be continually refining the process to yield better and more consistent results; finding what works best for each individual. Furthermore, enjoying the time we spend playing music and practicing is a noble goal in itself. Beautiful music and an outstanding performance is simply the byproduct of a loving relationship with music and with our instrument. We are indeed thinking of the quality of the performance but also be mindful of the well-being of the performer, “Fostering the Love of Music.”



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