

*It's generally agreed that little musical progress can be made without good practice habits. But what are good practice habits?*

**Jenny Macmillan** offers some personal advice on...

# SUCCESSFUL PRACTISING

## *A word on practice strategies*

No two people will agree on what makes a good practice strategy. And not every idea is suitable for every piece. But at some time in my experience as a student, teacher or observer, I have found each of the following strategies to be useful. If the ideas seem to veer on the side of advocating detailed, analytical practice, it's because the majority of young (and not so young) instrumentalists tend to do too much playing through pieces and not enough diagnosing and solving problems.

## *Tackling problems*

First, a few ideas for practising specific difficulties:

- » Start with the most awkward part of a piece while you are fresh, so it gets covered every day
- » Break up the problem into simple parts, for instance scale and arpeggio patterns, awkward leaps or tricky rhythms, and practise short sections accordingly
- » Make the problem more complex. For instance, if there is a leap of one octave, practise leaping two, three and four octaves. When you return to the one-octave leap it will seem easier
- » Use a metronome. When a tricky passage can be played perfectly at a steady speed, gradually notch up the metronome until the passage can be played at full speed
- » Temporarily allow yourself to play inaccurately: wrong notes, loose rhythm, poor intonation. Use the whole body freely. Then gradually focus on one aspect at a time to improve it



## *Accuracy*

The ability to identify errors and learn how to deal with them needs to be developed as early as possible.

- » Practise a beat or a bar up to speed and stop. Play the next beat or bar and stop. At each stop review what you have done and think about what you want to do next – listen, look and analyse
- » Stop at each mistake and practise to overcome the difficulty, otherwise you may not remember it. Don't fudge – all the notes are important
- » After attempting a difficult passage several times and finally playing it successfully, it is important to repeat the passage correctly several times in order to retain it. This takes discipline
- » It is important to practise not only the assigned passage, but also to put it into context – to arrive in a controlled fashion. Start a beat before, or a bar before, then two bars before, then at the beginning of the phrase, each time checking that the awkward passage is still correct

## *Mosaic practice*

- » Work at all similar passages in the piece, for instance melody throughout,

accompaniment throughout, staccato sections, piano sections, semiquaver passages

- » Choose a piece with stepped dynamics, for instance piano and forte but not diminuendo and crescendo. Play all the soft passages, then all the strong ones. Then, in the order they appear, sing the strong ones and play the soft ones, and vice versa. Then play all the way through the piece, stopping at each change of dynamic to prepare physically and mentally for the new sound.

## *Opposites*

- » Practise legato passages staccato for active fingertips, or staccato passages legato for accurate fingering
- » Deliberately practise exaggerating the opposite of what you want. For example, upbeats generally need to be played softly; how do they sound when played strongly? This helps develop the ability to listen acutely
- » Practise slow pieces fast to understand structure, phrasing, climax, or fast pieces slowly to get detail precise

## *Three practice maxims*

- » Practise fast, progress slowly; practise slowly, progress fast
- » The faster the piece, the slower the practice
- » The slower you can play, the better you'll be!

## *Final tip*

If a student is not progressing well, ask them to record a practice session. Viewing or listening to this invariably sheds light on where the problems lie.

Jenny Macmillan's new book, **Successful Practising: A handbook for pupils, parents and music teachers**, is available for £15 from [jennymacmillan.co.uk](http://jennymacmillan.co.uk).

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