

**New SMA Member Jenny Macmillan, private piano teacher, passes on her wisdom on the subject of**

## SUCCESSFUL Practising

The subject of practice is a fascinating one as little progress can be made without good practice habits. However, it is not much discussed. 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 a student does put in the hours, progress is unlikely to be good unless the practice is focused.

Good practising involves identifying problems and devising strategies to overcome the difficulties. It involves repeating short sections while listening carefully to the tone quality, intonation, rhythm, articulation, breathing, phrasing, dynamics, and so on, and being aware of the physical movements involved. 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. Students need to be clear *what* they are to practise, *how* they are to practise it, and *why* they are to practise it.

### Teaching how to practise

The ratio of practice time to lesson time is probably 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.

It is important that the student understands the reason for practising a certain passage in a certain way – it is more motivating practising 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 bowing or breathing technique; it may be the performance of slurs or *staccato* notes; or it may be a musical issue such as how to shape phrases. The point should be emphasised through repetitions of the task in the lesson.

### Structuring practice sessions

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.

One important element of practice is dividing the music into logical and manageable chunks for practice, then building it up again into a piece for performance. Strategies need to be devised for practising the difficulties in each short section.



These may involve changing some aspect of the music, for instance, practising *legato* passages *staccato* (varying the articulation), soft passages loudly (varying the dynamics), fast passages slowly (varying the speed) or quick passages in dotted rhythms (varying the rhythm).

### Questioning and progressing

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 goes into much greater depth and detail in her book Successful Practising. See page 3 for Karen Walker's review. Ed.*

## SMA MUSIC AWARDS News

After the successful trial period for school choirs during 2010 - 11, the Council of SMA has now extended the SMA Music Awards Scheme to include all forms of school music-making – orchestras, bands, ensembles etc. This scheme is an opportunity for you to receive unbiased comment, designed to help you improve the quality of music-making in your school. This is particularly important now, as inspections are focussing more and more on the quality of work. For an entry form go to [www.schoolsmusic.org.uk/sma-awards/](http://www.schoolsmusic.org.uk/sma-awards/) or email: [secretary@schoolsmusic.org.uk](mailto:secretary@schoolsmusic.org.uk) or tel: 01767-260815.

### Nationwide music competition for young people to find

## Next BRIT thing

Young people aged 11-19 from Great Britain and Northern Ireland are being encouraged to register for **Next BRIT thing** - a major new nationwide music competition backed by the UK music industry and the Government.

**Next BRIT thing** is looking for young musicians in any genre to share their performances, compete in online charts and perform live. There are separate categories for both pop and classical music, with an additional award for composition. More details on [www.nextbritthing.com](http://www.nextbritthing.com)

## AUDITIONS launched

### The National Children's Orchestra has announced the launch of its auditions for 2012.

Membership is open to young musicians who will be aged 7-13 on 31 December 2011. Auditions will take place in October 2011 with slots available on a first come, first served basis.

Interested players can download an application form at [www.nco.org.uk/taking-part/taking-part](http://www.nco.org.uk/taking-part/taking-part).