

Following on from last month's advice on practice strategies, **Jenny Macmillan** delves deeper into...

THE PRINCIPLES OF PRACTICE



What is practice?

It is important to differentiate between practising an instrument and playing it. Playing through a piece or improvising for instant enjoyment or emotional satisfaction, together with most ensemble work, may be classified as incidental practice. 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. It implies working on short sections, listening carefully to the tone quality, intonation, rhythm, articulation, breathing, phrasing, dynamics and so on, and being aware of the physical movements involved. If practice 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.

Frequency

There are two key issues regarding practice: quantity and 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. Skills developed regularly over a long period of time are retained better than skills developed within a short time period. So regular, short practice sessions are generally more effective than fewer longer ones, although longer practice sessions – with periodic breaks – are required for more complex tasks.

Listening

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 is required. Practising away from an instrument – practising in your head, or 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 with the instrument.

The practice environment

The teacher should encourage parents to:

- » Provide a quiet room in which the child can practise
- » Make sure there is a clear time to practise each day
- » With younger children, read through notes from the lesson and perhaps even sit with the child, at least for the first practice after the lesson
- » Ensure plenty of music is heard in the home.

Addressing practice in lessons

A typical ratio of practice time to lesson time might be 5:1, so a fair proportion of each lesson should ideally be devoted to practice. This part of the lesson might consist of demonstrating practice techniques, discussing how to approach

practice, and role reversal, where the student explains how a specific piece or exercise might be approached. As teachers we can help our students devise strategies but, with limited lesson time, we can't make every possible suggestion and need to help our students work it out for themselves. Here are a few suggestions for doing this:

- » Each week, ask students to find one new way of practising that you haven't previously mentioned or that they haven't thought of before (or haven't done for a long while)
- » Focus on one new practice point in every lesson
- » Talk about how *you* practise – what is effective and what could be improved
- » Make notes on how you teach your students to practise and consider how this could be improved

An example practice session

It can be good to do the bulk of serious practice in the morning when fresh. 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.

Planning for next time

A few minutes at the end of the practice session to plan what to do at the next will result in a much more focused session next time. Post-it notes can be invaluable for this – to note down which section of the piece to start on the next day and which elements to work on.

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

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