

Efficient Practice

I admit it. I love to practice. I look forward to a day when I have nothing to do but sit down with my tuba and a stack of music. But for most people (including myself), that kind of day is few and far between. A majority of my practice sessions are typically 45 minutes in length and paced throughout the day. I often schedule three or four 45-minute daily practice sessions. I believe it is important to improve your training, your focus, and achieve balance in all that you do on a daily basis. In music, a great performance is a product of proper and thoughtful training. Strive to be efficient and creative when you practice or rehearse. Efficient practice begins with a *schedule* and a *plan*.

Schedule It

Keep a practice notebook. Pencil in practice as part of your day. In order to improve on your instrument, consistent practice is most important. If you make it an official part of your day, you're more likely to make it happen. In your practice notebook, plan your daily schedule the night before. Think through the next day and make a schedule that includes the time you will wake up, perhaps exercise, warm up, go to class, practice, go to class, run an errand, eat lunch, practice, study, practice. Write down the time you will begin and end each practice session.

Plan It

For each practice session, determine what it is that you intend to accomplish. Write it down. You may even break each session into the number of minutes you will practice that particular piece. A stop-watch or kitchen timer may help stay you on task. Set the timer for the number of minutes you intend to work on a section or a piece of music. When the timer goes off, move on to the next piece or passage.

Make It Efficient

If it seems like you never have enough practice time, then efficiency is of the essence. Strive for perfection and consistency in your playing. It's important to keep it fresh and approach each practice session in a focused, yet playful manner so it doesn't get boring and so that you eventually master the passage or a piece for an inspired performance. Identify exactly what it is that you need to improve in every piece that you're working on. Make that your goal. Perfect it. What do you do when you've exhausted all of the ways to practice something and you still haven't mastered it? Try one of these ideas:

- Sing/Play notes only – perfect every note
- Sing/play rhythms only – sing or clap the rhythm. Play the rhythm on one note.
- Slow to fast repetitions – play at half speed perfectly five times in a row then move metronome up 2 clicks and repeat five times perfectly, continue until you reach your goal tempo. Practice 20 clicks beyond the goal tempo to make the goal easier.
- Play opposites – if it's slurred, articulate it...if it's articulated, slur it
- Shake a shaker and sing your part – this engrains divisions of time and correct rhythm
- Sing – play on the piano and sing with. Then give yourself a starting note only and see how far you can sing perfectly. Learn to hear the correct intervals.
- Memorize – one note, one measure, one phrase - put it together from memory
- Play backwards
- Play opposite dynamics

- Add a note – technique building. You can do this forward or backward. For example, if you have a sixteenth note passage, begin with the first note, repeat -then play the first two notes, repeat -then play the first three, then four, five, six, etc.
- Play the passage down the octave
- Accent every other note in the beat or in the measure. (1 --- - 2--- --3- ---4)
- In an extended passage of sixteenth notes play only the first note (the 1 or the 2) of each grouping. Then play only the second note (the “e”) of each grouping, then play only the third note (the “and”) of each grouping, then play only the fourth note of each grouping (the “a”)
- Move fingers, say note names
- Fingers only and listen to the rhythm of the fingerings. Strive for exact timing with fingers and metronome only.
- Verbally identify the scale pattern or arpeggio in the passage – additionally practice an Arban’s scale exercise in that key.
- Play the passage with a drone – this contributes to better intonation
- Play one measure, sing one measure – works ear connection to instrument
- Fingers and air only
- Air only – blow air away from the instrument to facilitate the phrase
- Imagination practice – stare at the music and hear a different instrument playing the line, then hear your instrument playing the line. Play the line with your preferred instrument sound
- Play everything staccato – especially in a slow, melodic passage. Put your metronome on and play only the “front” of each note. This is a good timing exercise.
- Buzz your mouthpiece – for clarity and smoothness
- Play the passage “too fast” – this helps move you past the “fear” of going fast. Play it at least 20 metronome clicks faster than your goal tempo. Concentrate on relaxing the body during this exercise.
- Play in a different style or emotion – swing it, play happy, sad, pointed, smooth
- Write words to the song – make up words for every note in the piece or passage.
- Slur everything – this redefines your air-flow on a wind instrument.
- Play the passage in one or two other keys
- Speak and conduct – this is very effective for coordinating difficult rhythm patterns or meter changes
- Make up a completely new piece in the style of what you’re working on
- Create a drum set beat in Garage Band – play your orchestral excerpts with a rock beat. This creates a very strong sense of time and “groove”
- Record yourself – you are becoming your own teacher. This is a great way to assess and improve your own playing.
- Video yourself – what are your observations - are you practicing efficiently?
- Play with Smart Music – for inspiration. There are several solo accompaniments and numerous scale patterns, ear training, and jazz patterns to inspire.
- Play along with your favorite recordings of orchestral music or soloists

Conclusion: Make your practice sessions efficient and enjoyable. Absolutely anything can be accomplished with a desire, a plan, and of course - time and patience. It has been said that it takes 10,000 hours and 50,000 chunks of knowledge to be a master at something. For musicians, in order to master your instrument, that would equate to 10,000 hours of practice. Whew! Back to the practice room! Here are a few books I like to use for practice and performance inspiration:

Brass Gym and Breathing Gym by Sam Pilafian and Patrick Sheridan
Practicing Successfully by Elizabeth Greene
Musician's Way by Gerald Klickstein
Inner Game of Tennis by W. Timothy Gallwey
Performance Success by Don Greene
Improvisation Games for Classical Musicians by Jeffrey Agrell