

The Art of Practicing
(or how to learn a piece of music)
by George Sakakeeny

1. The Three Stages of Preparing a Work for Performance

Stage One: Figuring out what is there.

The result you want to produce in stage one is learning all of the notes, rhythms, articulations etc., so that you can play the piece, movement, section, or phrase accurately and consistently. You literally figure out what is there in the piece of music and train yourself to be able to execute it consistently. Stage one will be and should be the stage in which you spend the most time in your practice. When you attempt to perform the work, assuming the difficulty level is within your reach, if you make mistakes you have not completed stage one.

Stage Two: Playful Experimentation

The result you want to produce in stage two is coming up with your interpretation by experimenting with different musical ideas, ways of phrasing and articulating, and tempi. Stage two is the creative part of leaning a piece, movement, section or phrase. A musician can and should engage in stage 2 simultaneously with stage 1.

Stage Three: Practicing Performing

The result you want to produce in stage three is finding out what happens when you perform the piece, movement, section, or phrase from beginning to end employing everything you have accomplished in stages 1 and 2. You will literally practice performing the piece, i.e. run-throughs. Stage 3 is the only stage that many young musicians employ in their practice. When this is the case music takes a very long time to learn and is seldom if ever learned thoroughly enough to perform accurately and consistently or enough to advance their level of mastery on their instrument.

2. What One Actually Does During Each of the Three Stages of Practicing

Stage one: The most important thing to do during stage one is to always play all of the notes, rhythms, articulations, dynamics, etc. *correctly*. If you commit an error or have trouble controlling some passage, go back over it again and again struggling with the difficulty until it is no longer "difficult". The second most important thing is to have a goal for exactly what parts of your piece you are going to master in your practice session. Decide the results you want to produce in advance so you know what you are working on. At the end of your practice session take note of whether or not you produced the results you intended. (see practice log sample attached)

Begin by playing the piece, movement, section, or phrase through slowly enough that you can get through it. Notice which parts were easy to play and which were difficult or impossible, those are the parts you will focus on. Continue by dividing the piece into sections for practice and focusing on the parts you cannot play with ease. *You must never play inaccurately*. If certain parts are beyond your ability play them slower. Slow it down until it is easy to play accurately, repeat. 300 times slowly for every 1 time in tempo.

This list could go on and on. The main point here is that a musician must go beyond only learning the practicing the notes. We must determine how we want our music to sound and practice those ways of phrasing, breathing, articulating etc. that are consistent with our vision of the music we are playing.

Stage Three: Stage three is self-explanatory. Practice performing the piece. Begin at the beginning and play until the end employing everything you have mastered in the first two stages. **DO NOT STOP!** When you have finished a performance of the movement make notes, mental or otherwise, of what did not go well. Go back and work on those spots. Repeat. If you can't play a run-through without stopping, your work in stage one and two is incomplete and you should cease trying to do run-throughs until you have smoothed out the difficult parts. After you have mastered run-throughs of single movements, practice a performance of the entire work. Beginning to end, **DO NOT STOP!** You will find out what happens, where your concentration lags, and about your endurance to name only a few things. Practicing performing should only take about 10% or less of the amount of time you have spent preparing a piece. If you have completed stages one and two well, stage three should go very quickly.

When you enter the stage to perform, or play an audition, or enter a room to take a lesson, you should be able to play with ease and without stress since you have prepared virtually every aspect of your performance and then finally practiced the execution of your performance several times. This kind of thorough work applied consistently over a substantial period of time is what makes the difference between good playing and mediocre playing. It is what gives you "talent".

How much should a person practice?

I am often asked this question and there is a clear answer. Many experts agree that in order to attain mastery of a musical instrument a person must practice for 10,000 hours cumulatively. Many pianists and violinists reach 10,000 hours by the time they are in their early 20's if they started young and were highly disciplined as a child. Do the math. Decide by what age you want to attain a high level of mastery. Estimate how many hours of quality practice time you have put in up to the present day. Now calculate how many hours you must practice each day to get 10,000 hours under your belt by your chosen age of mastery. Then get busy!

Suggested reading:

The Talent Code by Daniel Coyle

Outliers by Malcolm Gladwell

How to Prepare Orchestral Parts (and Excerpts):

1. Get the full part.
 - a. Order from Patelsons or Kalmus.
 - b. Xerox the part.
2. Check out a score from the library or purchase one for your own personal library.
3. Read about the historical context (read the record jacket if nothing else!).
4. Listen to a minimum of two recordings to compare performances and concepts of the work.

When listening to the 1st recording listen with the part.
When listening to the 2nd recording listen with the score.
For both of these hearings bring a metronome.
5. Mark on your part a basic metronome marking for each movement or section (to be clocked with your metronome while listening).

(If tempos change mid-movement search to find the markings.
This will help you to be realistically prepared.)
6. Jot down notes in the margins of your part or in your notebook (these are your learning tools).

List any questions you are going to answer and make observations about the piece involving orchestration, moods evoked, accompanying instruments, etc.
7. Play through the part to get the feel.
8. Work out tutti parts to the tempos that you observed.
9. Play and work out solos so as to capture the imaginative ideas that are already present in your head.

Sing the passages if you need more help and/or picture a scene in your head.
Remind yourself about the questions that you've already dealt with.
Ask yourself what is difficult about each solo and seek to work out the difficulties that each possess.
Record yourself to check your progress.
10. Play the entire part with the record or tape on the earphones as if in the middle of the orchestra. (This can be a tremendous help!)
11. Listen to important orchestral works while washing dishes, making reeds, etc., to enjoy the music and get it in your ear. Seek to capture any opportunity you can to hear these works in a live performance. (This is invaluable- you will see a work in new ways from these such experiences.)

Work hard, delight in the expansion of your ideas and imagination, and experience the joy of discernment and growth as a total musician and artist.

Guidelines for Rehearsing Chamber Music

The rehearsing of chamber music can be an invigorating and creative aspect of a career as a musician. The difficulty of making it so is in the combining of the music itself with the varying perceptions of the music that the various people involved hold. A look at all three areas - the music, the perception or interpretation and the people - will be a starting point for learning to rehearse.

The Music

The following minimums must be discovered with every piece. All members of the group must be involved with this process.

- phrase lengths
- cadences
- metric patterns and changes in the pattern
- important harmonic movements
- motivic material
- formal structure
- climactic area of movement or portion
- your part's role at any time
- stylistic elements prior to interpretation
- mood or emotion

How do we do the above?

- Score study
- Listening with the score
- Rehearsing with the score and making decisions together

Perception or Interpretation

Now comes the fun part. We now decide how we want to interpret the piece using stylistic elements as a starting point. How do we want the audience to perceive our performance? In each of The Music areas above we now decide the how of:

- note length
- dynamic fluctuation - degree and timing
- direction - to and from peak areas
- speed of movement
- tempo fluctuation
- balance

Our interpretation becomes marred when control and technical problems are not solved on a personal and ensemble level. We need a plan for:

Articulation Problems

- Listen 100% of the time to your note lengths in relationship to others
- Define releases - what beat or part of and notate
- Define what type of attack - notate
- Attempt attack / releases that are difficult for your instrument for blend purposes
- Establish quality of resonance

The People

A professional musician does not have to like his colleagues to perform and perform well with them. Neither do you. Leave personal opinions outside of the rehearsal or performance hall.

- Treat others as you wish to be treated!
- Be critical in a tactful, non- threatening manner!
- All comments should be constructive in nature, not:
 - "Why do you always..."
 - " You never are able to...."
- Be nice
- Listen and learn from constructive criticism