

## AN APPROACH

### *The Million-Dollar Lesson*

If there is a million-dollar lesson, it is this: Whatever you sow, you'll reap. Once the ideas in the following little section are understood, hours of waste and frustration can be spared.

Imagine a flat board about three feet square. Position it at about a thirty degree angle to the floor. Draw a curvy line from top to bottom, like a mountain road in two dimensions. At this point, a marble rolled down the board will obviously be oblivious to the line. Now take a gouging tool and very carefully cut a groove, following the line in one cautious, continuous motion. The marble will now follow the groove except at the sharp turns.

If in our next pass with the tool while deepening the groove we slip in haste and start a new path, we must pay for our haste by slowly reworking the depth of the original groove several times before the effects of the mistake are nullified, and the marble's path is secure. We must learn that haste makes waste, and that Mr. Baker's advice, "If you never make a mistake, you'll never make a mistake" is the same as "Whatever you sow...."

The learning center of the brain is just like the board: it depends on outside input, accepting information sent by the eyes, ears, and fingers as they perceive and move. RIGHT OR WRONG, your computer files everything, and repetition, good or bad, reinforces. This concept certainly (and often unfortunately) applies to practicing an instrument. Most everyone has had the unfortunate experience of accelerating too rapidly while learning a new passage and thus learning

to make mistakes! Yes, learning mistakes. **LEARNING THEM.** Both right and wrong reside in the memory with unprejudiced equality, ready for recall and **EQUALLY AVAILABLE** the next time through.

Analogously, the hasty painter is in for a lot of time-consuming repair work if he carelessly mispaints, and the sculptor is finished if he hurriedly hacks the nose off his half-completed bust. These impetuous gestures should be limited to less professional pursuits, or to sketches. In the case of the performer, the sketches are the already completed work of the composer: all the preparation for performance is analogous to painting and sculpting. Reworking is an unnecessary punishment, a true Hell right here on earth, something to be avoided from note one!

When we perform at even a modest speed, there is no time to consciously direct the fingers, lips, and tongue as to where and when to move. A basketball star, threading his way through a maze of defenders on his way to the basket, has no time to tell his legs and feet where to turn. Long hours of careful drill have established various patterns, leaving him free to make minute adjustments. Great performers, when asked what they are thinking about during a fine performance, have answered with everything from "beautiful thoughts" to "a sandwich and a beer." They do all agree, however, that their minds have been programmed to take care of technical details, leaving the conscious mind free to interact with other components of the score, be expressive, and even smile at a friend in the third row, if they are so inclined.

## PRACTICING TECHNICALLY DEMANDING PASSAGES

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Practicing is essentially repetition--you repeat things over and over. There is a goal in this activity. Through repetition you achieve something that might be called a groove in the brain or a habit.

Part of effective practice is organizing your time. If you have limited blocks of time, know what you are going to do with each time segment. Have a goal before you start to blow into the instrument, and play with intent - a perfect repetition, making the phrase in one breath, keeping right hand down for intonation and tonal beauty, going faster than before are examples of goals.

Samuel Baron's "first rule of practicing" is, "Don't practice mistakes and don't practice bad playing." Or as Julius Baker says, "if you never make a mistake [in practicing], you'll never make a mistake [in performance]." This means **practice slowly!**

**Metronome techniques** (use only for short passages, not entire pieces)

1. The old standby is to start very slowly (half tempo). On each repetition of the passage, put the metronome one notch faster until you achieve the fastest tempo at which can play cleanly. Each day keep track of your maximum tempo. It may take weeks to reach the desired tempo, but be patient.

2. Method #1 works well in most situations but causes a buildup of tension. An ingenious variation is what I call "Up 3, Down 2." Clarinetist Peter Hadcock taught this method at the Eastman School of Music. If your eventual tempo is  $\downarrow = 126$ , play the passage three times at  $\downarrow = 63$ . Then move the metronome up three notches to 72 and play once, and only once. This may feel like quite a jolt, but don't worry. Next, put the metronome down two notches to 66. Now you can relax! Play the passage three times. Then move up three to 76 and play once. Then, down two to 69. Repeat this process as follows:

<u>three times at</u>	<u>followed by once at</u>
69	80
72	84
76	88
80	92
84	96
88	100
92	104
96	108
100	112
104	116
108	120
112	126
116	132
120	144
126	152

Obviously, this requires much time and patience, but it really works.

3. Robert Marcellus, the great principal clarinetist of the Cleveland Orchestra, taught another metronome technique. He had students repeat a section a number of times (evidently the number varied) at half tempo followed immediately by one playing at full tempo. I like three times at half speed followed by one at full speed.

Use metronome method #2 to learn a passage and #3 to maintain a passage.

**C. Rhythmic variation.** If you have a passage of even sixteenths (or any other note value) you can substitute new rhythms for the written ones. This enables you to learn more quickly, because the longer note values give you time to think, and the quicker values force you to act.

**D. "Working back" method.** Our usual inclination is to start at the beginning and work to the end. Thus, beginnings of pieces or of sections tend to be more polished than endings, and we break down in the middle. Sometimes it's better to start at the end. Of course, the reverse process--working forwards bit by bit--also helps. So start at the end and work your way forwards to the beginning.