

A GUIDE TO GREAT HOME MUSIC PRACTICE*

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Abstract

Some tips on making your individual music practice time efficient and productive.

1 Introduction

Music teachers¹ and directors are very important for anybody who is trying to become a better musician, but teachers cannot make you a better musician; they can only tell you how to improve. The actual improvement, you have to do yourself, and mostly on your own time.

Your private (or group) lesson time is the time that you show your teacher how you are doing at the moment, and the teacher will tell you what you need to work on next, and how to work on it. You don't really have time to practice or improve during your lesson, only to get the insight into how to improve. Your group rehearsal times (band, orchestra, choir) are mainly for the improvement of the group and for practicing playing together. Again, there is no time for you to actually work on learning the music or on becoming a better singer or player. Performances (individual or group) are for letting everyone enjoy the progress you have made. You should enjoy them, too, and not have to be worried about the technical details of the music. None of these times are ideal for actually making progress, so even if you show up for every lesson, rehearsal, and performance, you will have no time to improve! **Individual music practice is absolutely necessary if you want to become a better musician.**

Your teacher should give you guidelines on how often and how long to practice as well as what to practice. If you do not have a private teacher or if the guidelines are vague, you will find some useful tips here. Don't be afraid to ask your teacher or director for suggestions or clarifications. If you do not have a private teacher due to money or time constraints, consider getting lessons for a short time (for example over one summer) when you will have plenty of time to practice between lessons. Or see if you can find a teacher who is willing to give you lessons less often than usual.

It is important not just to practice, but to practice well. You can practice daily and still make very slow progress if you are not practicing well. To make the most progress with the least effort, your individual practice time should include the following.

The Ideal Individual Practice

- Set goals
- Set practice times

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¹"A Parents' Guide to Music Lessons" <<http://cnx.org/content/m11640/latest/>>

- Warm up
- Work on it
- Sight-reading
- Cool down
- Evaluate

2 Set Goals

Your practice should have long-term, medium-term, and short-term goals.

What are your long-term goals as a musician? Are there particular pieces of music you'd like to be able to play? A group that you'd like to join or form? Knowing what you want to do will help you decide what you need to work on and help you set your medium- and short-term goals. If you have a private teacher, she will automatically set your goals for you, based on your present strengths and weaknesses. But if being able to improvise jazz or rock solos, or joining the local youth symphony, or being able to play or sing high notes are important personal goals, make sure your teacher knows it! She may be able to give you a warm-up that will help improve and expand your high register or give you practice materials that will help you make the symphony auditions. And don't be afraid to ask what her goals for you are and why. It may help your practice time to know where you are headed.

Your long-term goals will help set your medium-term goals. What do you need to do to be able to do to make first chair or to start your own rock band? Improve your range, your reading ability, your tone quality, your tuning, your bowing or fingering technique? What method books would be most helpful? What less-difficult pieces will prepare you to play the pieces you can't play yet? If it's difficult for you to decide what you need to work on, ask your teacher, your director, or another musician you respect for advice.

Your medium-term goals, plus any performances or lessons coming up soon, will determine your goals for this practice session. You must be prepared for lessons, rehearsals, and concerts; and your director and teacher have chosen materials that will help you become a better musician. If you do not have any lesson materials to work on, and your ensemble music is easy for you, then find materials that challenge you in the areas that you need to be challenged. Stay focussed on what you want to accomplish right now, today, and on how that will help you get where you want to be.

3 Set Practice Times

Your teacher or director should tell you how often and how long your individual practice times should be. If not, keep in mind two general rules: practicing often is more important than having lengthy practices, and the better you are, the more you have to practice to improve.

Practicing every day is ideal. Skipping a day occasionally won't hurt, and may even be necessary to rest your muscles and keep you fresh and excited about playing. But you should know that after skipping a day, you will usually start out the next day further behind than you were on the day before you skipped. Skipping a day often (say, more than once a week) will make it difficult for you to make progress, because you will keep losing the progress you have already made. If you don't have time, just doing your warm-ups or cool-downs is better than skipping a day.

Young musicians and other beginners do not need long practices to make progress. A ten-year-old beginning trumpet player, for example, may only need practices of fifteen or twenty minutes; any more than that will probably just strain the playing muscles. But the better you get, the longer your practices will have to be if you want to keep progressing. A sixteen-year-old pianist who has been playing for more than ten years may need to practice more than an hour a day to make further progress. Professionals practice several hours a day. At the higher levels, you will have a private teacher who will help you determine how much to practice. If you have been practicing hard and have shown your interest and determination to become a good player and cannot afford a teacher to take you to the next level, please talk to your director or contact a local music program about finding scholarship money for lessons.

4 Warm Up

Singing and playing musical instruments are physical activities, and warming up is just as important to the musician as it is to the athlete. Don't play the hard stuff cold; you won't be playing to the best of your ability, and will be wasting time and energy, not to mention making yourself frustrated. Warm-ups may feel like a waste of time, but you can turn them into some of the most productive minutes of your practice. If your teacher or director has given you specific warm-up exercises, do them. If not, ask for some, find some on your own, or consider doing scales as warm-ups. Scales too boring? Do the hard ones (how are your D flat major² and C sharp melodic minor³ scales?), or do jazz scales. If you ever want to do solo or improv work, you've got to have your scales down cold. And remember, warm-ups are supposed to be easy. You're getting your body and mind back into the playing "groove", which takes a few minutes.

Want to have a great practice? When you're working on the hard stuff, it can be difficult to remember to play with your best tone quality and musicianship. It's a lot easier on the easy stuff. Sure it's only scales, arpeggios, or long tones, but try playing or singing them with the best tone quality, best technique, and best musicality you have. This will make warming up a little more interesting, but the big payoff comes later; you will play with a better tone quality and musicianship later in your practice, even when you are too busy to think of such things because the music is so hard.

5 Work on It

Once you are warmed up, get out the hard stuff and work on it. Some tips for improving as fast as possible:

- Don't practice it wrong! Don't play wrong notes, leave notes out, or play wrong rhythms. This just teaches you to play it wrong. If it's too difficult to play right, slow it down enough that you can play all the notes in rhythm, correctly, no matter how slow this is. When you can play it correctly slowly, start speeding it up, but never practice it at a speed that you can't handle.
- Don't just play through your music. Skip the easy parts; they're easy! Find the hard parts, slow them down, and practice them until you can play them right at the right tempo.
- If there's something you just can't play at all (a high note, for example), make it part of your warm-up. Find an exercise that makes it easier to get to that note (or to double-tongue, or to do that giant slur) and do it **every day the easy way**. Eventually it will start showing up in the harder music, too.

6 Sight-Reading

The ability to play most of the music that is put in front of you, mostly correctly, the first time you see it, is one of the most useful skills a musician can have. Like any other musical skill, the ability to sight-read well doesn't just happen, it is developed by practicing it specifically. Try to have on hand a wide variety of music, from any source, that is a little easier for you than the "hard stuff" you are practicing. Set aside a short time during most practice sessions to read through a section of unfamiliar music, playing it straight through, without stopping, slowing, or repeating beats, getting as much as possible right the first time (including articulations, dynamics, and musical phrasing, as well as notes and rhythms). After completing the sight-reading, you may want to do a little work on specific places that made you "stumble", so that it is more likely you will be able to sight-read a similar spot smoothly.

If large portions are too difficult for you to sight-read, begin with something easier, even something very easy if necessary. Over a period of months, try to work up to reading more complex passages. If you are at all unsure that you are playing the music correctly when you sight-read, ask your teacher to work on sight-reading with you, or tape your sight-reading sessions and study the tapes to see what you are doing right and wrong.

²"Major Keys and Scales" <<http://cnx.org/content/m10851/latest/>>

³"Minor Keys and Scales" <<http://cnx.org/content/m10856/latest/>>

7 Cool Down

While you were practicing the hard parts of your music, you may have become tense or frustrated, or forgotten to sing or play musically or with good tone quality or technique. End your practice time by playing or singing something you like that is easy for you. Relax and "perform" it for yourself, playing with your very best technique and musicianship. During this part of your practices, develop a "repertoire" of music that you feel very comfortable and confident playing or singing. Then you'll always have something ready if people ask for a performance.

8 Evaluate

To help set goals for future practice sessions, evaluate each session informally. What progress did you make on the difficult stuff during this session? What is still giving you trouble, and what could you do to address (in your warm-ups, practice, or lessons) that specific trouble? What should you work on in your next practice time? If you honestly believe a particular piece is ready for your next rehearsal or lesson, you can move it to your "cool down", and wait to get more feedback on it from others. When you are singing or playing something that is difficult for you, you are so involved that it is difficult to listen objectively, too. If it is difficult for you to evaluate how well you are playing a piece, consider recording yourself, at least occasionally, so that you get a chance to sit back and listen to yourself. Don't be hypercritical, but be objective: this is good; that is what needs work. Again, if a teacher is not available to help, play whenever possible for your director or other musicians and listen for useful feedback.