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Performance Practice Strategies

It is very important to continue to practice properly and intelligently for a lesson, performance, or an audition every day up until the performance. Practicing is not running through a piece several times at tempo or dabbling with a little slow practice. Practicing is a conscious effort to use sound practice strategies in a disciplined, professional, and productive matter. In this document are several practice strategies that have been proven to be effective in helping musicians prepare for material to performance level and help improve fundamentals skills and musicianship in general.

“If your metronome is not on, you are not practicing. You are only re-familiarizing yourself with the music and it will not improve”

“Practice does not make perfect. Practice makes permanent”

Strategy One: An Objective Method for Proper Practice

1. Begin work on a piece or section by playing through it in its entirety without stopping, as one would do during a performance.
2. Identify the areas that contained mistakes and/or felt uncomfortable and unreliable.
3. Finding the Foundation Tempo
 - Isolate a passage and set a metronome to a speed slightly slower than the tempo selected for the run-through. Play the passage.
 - If a mistake occurs, reduce the metronome setting by five points and play the passage again. If a mistake occurs, reduce the tempo by another five points.
 - It is crucial that one always play with proper dynamics, articulation, phrasing and expression at all tempos during the evaluation process.
 - Continue in this fashion until the passage can be played perfectly with 100% confidence and conviction.
 - This is the foundation tempo. Finding this foundation tempo is crucial. If one is uncertain if the tempo has been found, lower the metronome another five points.
(There is no advantage to selecting the faster tempo and, in many cases, it will diminish the final result. It is common for the foundation tempo to be to be twenty or thirty points slower than what one has considered slow practice.)

4. Once the foundation tempo has been established, play the passage five times without any mistakes. (If mistakes are made, decrease the metronome setting by five points and try again)
5. Increase the metronome by five points. Play twice.
6. Continue increasing the metronome speed by five points until the technical breaking point is reached. Go back five points and see if the passage can be played perfectly. At this point, stop the process for the isolated passage.
7. The next step is to practice getting into the passage. Start playing from the beginning of the phrase, or other logical point. Set the metronome back 10 points and play from this point through the practiced passage. If mistakes occur, reduce the metronome by five points. Repeat this process if necessary until the new foundation tempo is established for this longer passage. When the passage can be played perfectly five times, increase the metronome by five points, play twice. Continue the process until maximum speed established with original passage is reached.
8. After completing this process, leave the passage and go to the next item that needs attention.
9. During your next practice session, problems that were worked out in the previous session may occur again. When this happens, repeat the method. Most of the time, problems in your music cannot be solved in one practice session. That is why one cannot simply spend time the night before a performance or lesson and expect that everything you will still be there the next day. It often requires that one repeats this method two, three, four or more sessions before problems are fully mastered and become habit. However, if one loses patience and abandons a sound and disciplined practice strategy, the problems will take weeks if not months to fix and will most likely yield inferior results.

Practice Rhythms

For passages that are the same rhythm primarily, one of the most effective practice methods is to use practice rhythms. See next page for a list of practice rhythms that can be applied to any mono-rhythmic passage.

Bonade Practice Method

Daniel Bonade, one of the greatest clarinet players in history, used to practice a passage nine times at half tempo and then one time at tempo. He called this one practice unit and then he would do ten units. One's first reaction to this technique is that it would take too long. This technique is only to be used on a one or two measure unit. If one tries this method, it really doesn't take that long, perhaps fifteen to twenty minutes. These twenty minutes, however, will yield a far superior product than months of reading through the passage and dabbling with a little slow practice. If ten units seems too much, try one or two. Most people seldom do more than three or four slow repetitions, so even taking this approach in smaller doses will be highly effective.

Memorize the Passage

This is a highly effective no-nonsense method for learning a passage. When one practices something from memory, it feels different and utilizes a different aspect of the mind. It is perhaps the ultimate method for learning a difficult passage.

Practice the End First and Work Backwards

It is common for a prepared etude or piece to be better at the beginning than at the end. This is because at the beginning of a practice session, the mind is more clear, patient and less tired. Furthermore, one often runs out of time and less time is spent on the end of a piece, or less days or weeks are devoted to the material. One doesn't get to the end of our piece initially as often as we should. Therefore, the beginning is often more familiar resulting in higher quality.

One can solve this problem by working backwards. Varying the practice session by beginning with last half or section of a piece can balance the familiarity and comfort level of the material. Some teachers advocate using this strategy more than starting from the beginning. The thought is that as one plays a piece they continue to move into more and more familiar material.

Practice in Chunks

This practice strategy is effective because it trains muscles to play with the technique that is required for playing notes quickly. One can start to develop the "technical feel" of the passage. It is also highly effective at very slow tempo to allow monitoring of air, embouchure, tongue and other fundamentals.

The general strategy for this method is to break down a passage into a one or two beat unit. The idea is to determine a small unit where there is a single mistake. Often the mistake can be corrected at tempo, or close to the tempo. Apply the foundation method if this isn't possible. Once the problem is corrected, proceed to the next one or two beat unit. If this mastered, combine the two (Try setting the metronome a bit slower to insure the two units will be performed perfectly, then move it up to the desired tempo).

Units don't have to be defined by beats in the measure but can go from one internal subdivision to the same subdivision one or two beats later. One can get creative and explore the feel of a passage in many ways using this approach.

Practice Rhythms

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Sample Passage

♩ = 120

Musical notation for Sample Passage in 4/4 time. The piece begins with a treble clef and a 4/4 time signature. The melody consists of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some beamed sixteenth notes. The piece concludes with a whole note G4.

Practice Rhythm 1

Musical notation for Practice Rhythm 1. The piece begins with a treble clef and a 4/4 time signature. The melody features eighth and sixteenth notes, with some beamed sixteenth notes. The piece concludes with a whole note G4.

Practice Rhythm 2

Musical notation for Practice Rhythm 2. The piece begins with a treble clef and a 4/4 time signature. The melody features eighth and sixteenth notes, with some beamed sixteenth notes. The piece concludes with a whole note G4.

Practice Rhythm 3

Musical notation for Practice Rhythm 3. The piece begins with a treble clef and a 4/4 time signature. The melody features eighth and sixteenth notes, with some beamed sixteenth notes. The piece concludes with a whole note G4.

Practice Rhythm 4

Musical notation for Practice Rhythm 4. The piece begins with a treble clef and a 4/4 time signature. The melody features eighth and sixteenth notes, with some beamed sixteenth notes. The piece concludes with a whole note G4.

Practice Rhythm 5 ♩ = 80

Musical notation for Practice Rhythm 5 in 12/8 time. The piece begins with a treble clef and a 12/8 time signature. The melody consists of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some beamed sixteenth notes. The piece concludes with a whole note G4.

Practice Rhythm 6

Musical notation for Practice Rhythm 6. The piece begins with a treble clef and a 4/4 time signature. The melody features eighth and sixteenth notes, with some beamed sixteenth notes. The piece concludes with a whole note G4.

Practice Rhythm 7

Musical notation for Practice Rhythm 7. The piece begins with a treble clef and a 4/4 time signature. The melody features eighth and sixteenth notes, with some beamed sixteenth notes. The piece concludes with a whole note G4.

Practice Rhythms Continued

Practice Rhythm 8 ♩ = 80

Musical notation for Practice Rhythm 8 in 4/4 time. The melody consists of quarter notes and eighth notes, with two triplet markings over groups of three notes. The piece ends with a whole note C4.

Practice Rhythm 9

Musical notation for Practice Rhythm 9 in 4/4 time. The melody consists of quarter notes and eighth notes, with two triplet markings over groups of three notes. The piece ends with a whole note C4.

Practice Rhythm 10

Musical notation for Practice Rhythm 10 in 4/4 time. The melody consists of quarter notes and eighth notes, with a triplet marking over a group of three notes. The piece ends with a whole note C4.

Practice Rhythm 11

Musical notation for Practice Rhythm 11 in 4/4 time. The melody consists of quarter notes and eighth notes, with a triplet marking over a group of three notes. The piece ends with a whole note C4.