

Mr. Mayo's Practice Tips for Musicians

Revised January 2016

- You need to understand why you practice - Practice is the only way to gain success. If you do not spend time at your craft, you will not become sufficient and proficient on your instrument. If you are not working hard, someone else out there will, which means you are falling behind.
- Practice everyday. The amount of time you practice should increase as you get older. Sixth grade should practice at least 30 minutes, 7th/8th should practice at least 40 to 50 minutes, and high school should practice at least an hour. How you practice and how often are very important. This amount of time will only maintain your playing capability.
- Concentrate. Find somewhere quiet and have your materials in the same area. Turn off and put away any distractions, including cell phones. If you are using an application on your phone to assist, put the phone on airplane mode. A few minutes of focused practice will be more productive than hours of distracted practice.
- Have a goal for your practice session. What do you want to accomplish? Take note of both short-term goals and long-term goals. Keep a practice journal where you can write down your goals and progress. After practicing, review your goals for that session and write down what you accomplished and how long you practiced for. Then, write down the goals for your next session. This will help you to see your progress.
- Keep your instrument in good playing condition. Clean it frequently, oil it if necessary, etc.
- Utilize technology: tuners, metronome, SmartMusic, etc. When you first learn a piece, the metronome should always be on. When you know a passage well, you should rotate the metronome on one repetition and off one repetition.
- A good practice session contains breathing exercises/stretching, long tones, fingering/flexibility exercises, scales, rudiments (percussion), the focus material, sight reading, and a warm-down.
- Learn every element of the music as you practice: technique, phrasing, dynamics, articulation, sticking, etc. This will save a lot of time because you will not have to relearn the piece entirely.
- When looking at musicality, think of the music as a work of literature. Each note is a word. Each phrase is a sentence. Your note names in relation to your fingerings, stickings, or slide positions are your alphabet. Scales and arpeggios are your vocabulary. Key signatures are your vocabulary definitions. The work as a whole is a story. If you are unaware of your alphabet or vocabulary, how will you say a sentence or tell the story? You have to know the language of music. Where would you put commas and periods (breathing)? How would the sentence flow and what words require emphasis (articulation and dynamics)? How do the sentences relate to one another to make the whole story?
- Winds - Think about your breathing. Are you getting a full breath? Are you keeping the air in constant motion? How does your air relate to your dynamics and articulation? Are you using a lot of air? Are you using proper air speed? Is your air warm or cold?
- Do not just play what you know. Do not confuse activity with progress. Are you accomplishing anything by playing what you know? Focus on the parts of the music and concepts that give you problems. Most of the time, you are not going to sound great if you are practicing well. You learn by focusing on the concepts between your goals. If you are not making mistakes, you are not working hard enough; mistakes are just a natural part of the practicing progress.
- Do not take things too fast. Play through the piece, find the fastest tempo that you can play the hardest passage, and then set a metronome for even slower than that. Practice the entire piece at that tempo. The next day, set the metronome a few beats faster. Slower studying will always create better accuracy in muscle memory than rushing through a passage. If you are consistently making mistakes, it means you need to slow it down.
- Isolate problems and break things down into smaller chunks. Your long-term goal is to play a piece of music. Your short-term goal should be a few measures. The brain works best when it accesses small bits of knowledge.
- When fixing mistakes, focus on one mistake at a time. This will help to fully reinforce the correction. Taking on too much at once generally does not accomplish many goals
- When you fix an issue, make sure you work both before and after the problem. This helps to piece everything together. Learn from your mistakes so that you never make them again.
- Do not be hesitant to mark with a pencil on your music. Do not write in every pitch (this slows the education process), but circle things that give you problems, write in the note name for that one pitch you keep missing, write in the numbers of a complex rhythm, mark up some of the dynamics, etc. If you miss something once, just take note mentally, but if it happens multiple times, take note with a pencil.

- When learning a difficult piece of music:
 - Identify the easier parts of the music and learn them first
 - Identify and learn any parts of the music that are repeated
 - Identify the more difficult parts of the music and woodshed through them. Remember to take things slow and to use a metronome.
- Ideas for woodshedding (breaking down music):
 - Play the phrase using every articulation style (tenuto, legato, staccato, accented, marcato), every dynamic, and with mixed dynamics and articulations. This principal of playing the passage “inaccurately” can train you to play any passage with any articulation upon sight.
 - You can also play the passage with different rhythmic variations. This principal of playing the passage “inaccurately” can train you to play any passage with any rhythm upon sight.
 - Count and clap the rhythm, say the notes in rhythm, finger along as you say the rhythm/notes, and then play the passage.
 - Sing the passage, sing while fingering along, sing with proper articulation/musicality, and then play the passage.
 - Play complex rhythms on one note; you can also
- Do not be afraid to think for yourself in **solo** literature. Part of playing music is expressing ideas your way. Sure, you want to play what is on the page, but do not be afraid to show emotion and your interpretation of the piece with the composer’s intent in mind.
- If you become extremely frustrated, step back for a moment. You can also move on to another section of the work and return to the frustrating section later. If frustration continues, change things up: work on something new, change something about your session, work on singing/buzzing your part, work on a fundamental that will help you to improve what you are frustrated about, etc. Most importantly, be patient.
- When you are away from your instrument, visualize your music. Take your music with you and look at it as a passenger on the bus or in a car. You can work through difficult fingerings, slide positions, stickings, rhythms, etc. in your head, which can save you a lot of time during your practice session.
- Our brains work best at different times of the day. Some practice best in the morning, while others practice best in the evening. When you find the time that works best, build it into the family schedule. Splitting up your practice time into multiple sessions throughout the day with different goals each session can also be productive.
- If your sessions seem to be unproductive, have an experienced musician observe your session and give you tips.
- Focus on your sound. Listen to yourself truly and make sure it is what you would like to sound like. Hear what you want to sound like in your head and strive for that sound.
- Record your sessions and listen to yourself play. We often find more mistakes as well as many positive aspects this way. How are your entrances, releases, tone quality, musicality, articulation, breathing technique, values of notes, etc.
- In times of frustration, think about what makes you enjoy music. Why is it that you do what you do? In the end, playing your instrument about allowing yourself and others to enjoy the experience of your performance. No performance will be perfect, which is a concept for most of us to grasp. When you step up, put in the work, and allow accuracy and flaw to happen at your best with your personal enjoyment for music, you will reach as close to perfection as it comes.
- If you are only working on ensemble literature and feel that you are not being pushed, explore solo literature. Solos allow you as a musician to develop weaknesses and achieve new levels of performance. They can also lead to performance opportunities and being better prepared for auditions, which can lead to college scholarships. Make sure that you find quality solo literature. If you need help, please speak with your director.
- If you are feeling a lack of motivation, think about your end goals. We tend to only get motivated after an event has occurred. Think about when you clean your room. You tend to lack motivation when you are doing it, but you are proud of it when it is finished and usually are more motivated to keep it clean just after cleaning it. The key is putting in the work with the end goal in mind.
- End your practice sessions playing something you enjoy.
- Do not practice until you get it right. Practice until you cannot get it wrong.
- Develop your own efficient way of practicing and always look for ways to improve your practice methods.