

SOME THOUGHTS ON PRACTICING by Michael Burns

Every Musician is told at some point that they need to practice. This advice may come from a teacher, band director, conductor, section leader, or from numerous other sources but how often are they told what to practice, and more importantly how to practice? In this article I would like to outline some hints and suggestions concerning the practice process.

Practicing can be broken down into several steps, some of which are outlined below:

1. Many people will start out the beginning of a practice session by doing some kind of warm-ups. These frequently consist of long-tones and/or scale exercises. This literally warms-up the instrument and the fingers, gets the air moving to create good support, and gets the brain ready for action. There are many diverse types of warm-up routines available for woodwind instruments and it is perhaps less important which of them is used just so long as a player utilizes one consistently.
2. After the warm-up the player may have several options--solo repertoire, ensemble music, technical exercises and etudes, etc. Depending on the time available and the amount of repertoire to be covered the player may choose to do a little work on each of the various items or a lot of work on just a few. Either approach can be fine as long as all materials are covered sufficiently over the space of a week or so. This may mean doing detailed practicing (see below) on one or two items one day and then working on another couple the next day.
3. Once the player has determined what pieces to start practicing after the warm-up then the real work begins. In some ways practicing is a bit like surgery. A surgeon cuts out the tissues that are diseased and damaged, trying to leave the healthy tissue alone. Practicing is most effective when we work to remove, or at least improve the problem spots, rather than merely playing through the passages that we can already play (the healthy spots.)

There are a couple of common practicing errors that I have observed in many students. One is to start at the beginning of a piece and play through continuously until a mistake is made, then go back to the beginning and start all over again, progressing until a mistake is made, starting over again, and so forth. The problem with this approach is that the student is essentially practicing what they can already play (the beginning up until the mistake) and frequently the mistake that causes the return to the beginning is at the same point. If the player repeats up to that point playing the same mistake over and over then they are reinforcing and actually **practicing the mistake**. The second error is one that comes about when students are practicing somewhere that others may hear them. A tendency is to want to impress your 'audience' and to play passages that you sound good on i.e. passages that you can already play well that sound impressive. Obviously these passages need less practice than those that you cannot play and time would be better spent determining where the trouble spots are and concentrating on them.

In order to find out where the areas that need practicing are it is sometimes good to do an initial play through, stopping to mark tough spots with a pencil for future reference. I like to enclose these areas in square brackets. If the passages are marked then it is easy to leap right into effective practicing on those passages on subsequent days. Practicing to fix errors and remove problems is not always pleasant and fun, and often does not sound very good during the process but it will give the greatest benefits in the long-term.

4. Once the troublesome passages are marked then the player needs to know how to work on them. There are several effective methods of doing this of which I will outline a few. Firstly, the player should try and determine what is the cause of the problem: e.g. wrong note or notes, difficult fingerings, register changes, difficult articulations, rhythmic problems, physical problems (air and embouchure,) etc. Depending on which of these areas are causing the problems different

approaches to fixing the passage may be necessary. Sometimes a passage can be fixed as simply as penciling in a reminder accidental in front of a note, often it requires more work than that.

One of the most universal truths concerning practicing is that **it should be done slowly**. The player needs time to be able to hear and feel all of the necessary changes in fingers, air, and embouchure from one note to the next to the next. The discipline required to play a passage that is supposed to go very fast very slowly to fix it is difficult to achieve for many young players, but it is essential to becoming a fluent performer. I found a wonderful image describing this process on the internet, it says *On the train journey the railroad ties are blurred to invisibility. But in laying the track you were painfully aware of the weight and placement of each tie.*

As well as playing the passages slowly, the player needs to use **repetition** to build the correct patterns into a habit. Care must be taken to ensure that all repetitions are correct. If you repeat an error over and over in the passage then that error also becomes habit.

Many practice techniques also **vary the repetitions** in some manner by changing the rhythms, articulations, or both (see below.) This can be very effective when applied to practicing a passage as you play varied repetitions that are even more difficult than the original, making the original seem easy in comparison. They also place the emphasis on different notes within a passage which can further pinpoint where the problems lie.

Another technique that I like for pinpointing problems is one that I call **Backwards and Forwards practicing**. If I have a passage that is 8 notes long then I would practice notes 1 and 2, then 1,2,3, followed by 1,2,3,4, 1,2,3,4,5, etc. all the way through the passage forwards. Then I would play notes 7 and 8, 6,7,8, 5,6,7,8, 4,5,6,7,8, etc. This is, of course, the backwards part. This technique shows the same passage from two different viewpoints-coming and going if you will. Since music is so goal oriented it often helps to see and practice a passage as starting here and going somewhere, or ending here having come from somewhere. I frequently find that the passage can be reduced down to one or two crucial notes that can be isolated by this technique. If I get those notes correct then the entire passage is correct. If I miss them then the passage falls apart.

Further practice techniques that I advocate are:

Spend a lot of time practicing passages that involve a lot of difficult finger/tongue coordination all slurred. Doing this allows me to concentrate on the fingers and the air. Once these are correct I can add the tonguing back in. An additional step may be to practice tonguing at the tempo and rhythm required all on one note before putting the passage back together. In my last article I also mentioned practicing a passage by **singing it out loud**. This eliminates the instruments, reeds, fingers, and embouchures from the equation and can often be very valuable. Coupled with this I firmly believe that **every note that a wind player plays should be sung** (mentally.)

Practice passages that involve ornamentation (trills, grace notes, etc.) without the ornaments, making sure that the rhythmic durations are correct. The trills and grace notes should be practiced separately also and then added back in.

Know your enemy. When a student has been working on a piece and is preparing it for performance I have them **make a list of potential mistakes** that they could make in the piece, being as specific as possible. We then go through and try to find a remedy for each mistake using some of the practicing techniques listed above. Then when they play I tell them that there is no excuse for making any of those same errors.

5. Players need to spend the majority of their time practicing to fix errors as described above, necessitating a stop/start approach usually concentrating on small areas. This needs to be periodically balanced with **practicing performing**, i.e. a straight run-through of the entire piece without stopping no matter what happens! This is particularly important when students are preparing for such events as concerts, try outs, auditions, recitals, etc. When a player is used to

being able to stop to go back and fix errors it is very difficult to keep playing without stopping unless it is also practiced.

Practicing should be a regular occurrence. It is far more beneficial to the player to spend some time every day practicing rather than to do longer practice sessions several days apart. That is, it would be better for a player to spend 30 minutes practicing every day for a week than to do two practice sessions of two hours each. Even though the latter example has given more practice hours in the week (four instead of 3 1/2) over time the regularity will pay off more.

Obviously, the more time spent in each of the regular practice sessions the better. However, **spending hours in the practice room does not necessarily mean that you are practicing well.** Practicing needs to be efficient, and usually a short intensive practice session is more productive than a longer inefficient session. Practice to fix mistakes, not reinforce them. Simply running through a piece several times is NOT efficient practice. See the last article for some suggestions on how to increase practicing efficiency.

Don't just practice notes, always aim for the music. You should always monitor and work on tone, intonation, dynamics, and phrasing, not just technique.

EVERY musician should own a metronome and use it when practicing. We all need to develop a strong sense of rhythm, and a metronome helps in this task immensely. Most instrumentalists need to be able to follow an external beat, whether it be from an orchestra or band conductor, colleagues in a chamber ensemble, piano accompanist, or what have you. In order to do this we all need to develop a strong sense of inner rhythm and a working familiarity with the concept of subdivision. This should be worked on in the practice room using the metronome. It can be very useful to a student to set the metronome at the faster tempo of one of the subdivisions (perhaps 2,3, or 4 times the beat tempo) rather than at the given beat level. Conversely, practicing with the metronome only clicking once per every two, three, or four beats, or even once per measure makes the player have to subdivide the inner beats to stay in time. Of course you will also set the metronome to the beat itself often. Which tempo you set the metronome to would be determined by the music and the individual player. Remember, **the metronome never lies!** If a player is not used to using one in their practicing they may be surprised at how much their tempo fluctuates.

If possible, **a regular time should be set aside for practicing every day.** This time should be adhered to no matter what. If you have a scheduled practice time you are much more likely to use it. It is all too easy to procrastinate, put it off, get involved with other activities and the practice gets neglected and forgotten. This situation often leads to the scenario mentioned above where the player needs to catch-up and do a long practice session to try to make up for the skipped practice time.

The more you practice, the better your playing becomes. When you improve on your instrument it becomes far more rewarding and enjoyable to play. Music is supposed to be fun! Many see practicing as a drudgery that has to be suffered through, but when done well it is extremely satisfying, and yes, practicing can and should even be fun.

The following is a list of some recommended sources for bassoon warm-ups:

Bassoon: Fernand Oubradous. *Complete Exercises for Bassoon*
Simon Kovar. *24 Daily Exercises for Bassoon*
Chris Weait. *Bassoon Warm-Ups*

Many teachers also advocate having students create or write their own warm-ups for their instrument. Others may borrow warm-up routines from other instruments, for example many

woodwind players use the famous brass warm-up patterns outlined in the Arban-Clarke method for cornet.

This is by no means a complete list. There are many other wonderful and successful practice techniques that I have had to omit for reasons of space. I would like to conclude with some final thoughts on practicing.

Telephone numbers must be accurate, close is not good enough. A number with area code is 10 digits. Even 90% accuracy could have far-reaching consequences!

Fast is exactly the same as slow, only quicker.

Know the results of your actions before you do them. You should learn, through practice, how to feel if the note that you are about to play will speak, be in tune, and have the correct volume.