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Good Music Practice

A Practice Method for All Musicians

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Preface

Hello, my name is George Urbaszek. I started to play music at 14 years of age. Then, at 26 I got really “serious” and decided to become a professional musician.



(This is a photo of me “hard at work” during a live performance.)

Although I began my formal music studies at the ripe old age of 26, I told myself I had nothing to lose. And that turned out to be totally true.

When I began formal music studies I also began teaching music. Initially this was to get money to pay for my studies. However, it turned out that I really enjoyed teaching.

I am what I consider an average learner, neither exceptionally talented, gifted, motivated, or fast at picking things up. Somewhere along the way I realized this “averageness” is actually a strength - a strength that helps me look into things deeply.

Through constantly observing my own learning, and the learning and teaching of others, I have managed to find ways to overcome obstacles.

I want to share my experiences, findings and solutions with you. Whether you are absolutely new to music or a seasoned music professional, you will undoubtedly find aspects of my GoodMusicPractice that will help you practice more effectively.

You will become more comfortable with your own practice of music and the clear outcomes you will achieve.

... And if you are a music teacher, you will be able to pass on relevant parts of GoodMusicPractice to your students.

Why Practice Music?

Although you probably have an answer for this question, the following may solidify your resolve.

- To achieve an enjoyable musical outcome
- To impress yourself and/or others
- Because you want to get things right
- Because you know that Practice Makes Perfect
- Because you have no choice, i.e. an inner urge compels you to practice
- Because you have an upcoming band practice or rehearsal or gig or concert or recording session and most of the above reasons apply

What Type of Learner Are You?

I have asked hundreds of students this very question. The response is usually something like “What do you mean?” I rephrase “How do you learn best?” or “Which learning and memorization techniques do you use?”

Only one student to date could answer this question somewhat accurately and had proven success with his school work by implementing his best learning strategies.

Eventually my students and I determine their most useful learning styles, and they henceforth progress rapidly.

When you research the topic of Learning Styles you will come across three core elements. They are

- Auditory
- Visual
- Kinesthetic (Touch)

There are many more sub-groups, and I will address those later.

Usually we use a combination of the three main categories (Auditory, Visual, Kinesthetic) when learning just about anything.

Without any further explanation from me, I would like you to think about how you learn best. Use a successful example from the past. Is there a prominence of Aural, Visual, or

Touch? If so, what are the proportions? It does not matter if you don't know right now. The main thing is that you are thinking about it.

>>> We are what we think <<<



Here are the three main learning styles broken down into more detail

Please Note: The remainder of this chapter is not available in this free sample of GoodMusicPractice

Your Practice Environment

It helps enormously to have a clean, uncluttered, airy, light, and sufficiently spacious practice environment.

Ideally, your instruments, amplifiers, sound recorders, playback devices, computers, microphones, music stands, and other resources you will need, are set up for easy access. You may have to unpack an instrument and tune it, flick a few switches etc. before you begin your practice sessions. That, however, should be the extent of your equipment preparation.

Besides being clean and airy, your environment should also be noise free. Sounds of nature are much more conducive to good music practice than the sound of traffic.

Make sure you can be undisturbed - turn off your mobile/cell phone and ensure that family members realize this is your time.

When to Practice

Here, we must be aware of our bio rhythms. It is detrimental to practice when you naturally need some “down time”, i.e. when your mind (and possibly your body) needs a rest.

We all have different routines in our lives. Have a good think about your life routine to see where practice sessions fit in.

Depending on your lifestyle, you may be able to practice several times a day ... or only once a week.

Many short practice sessions are proven to be much more beneficial than one long session. This is predominantly because our attention and concentration spans are relatively short - a result of the modern world. But, with good (self-) guidance, we can deal with this.

I will give a few of examples out of my life.

Example 1

When I was a music student at the conservatory, I was often too lazy to tune my double bass, rosin my bow, set up my bass chair etc. for just 10 minutes of practice in addition to my normal routine. (This was 10-15 minutes of spare time before leaving the house, or between classes.)

One day I asked myself: "If I actually did those 10-minute sessions, how much more will I practice?" I did the calculation based on 10 minutes* a day over 300 days per year. This amounts to an additional 50 hours of practice during one year! I was never lazy again for the same reason.

* Later on I found that you can easily practice a scale type (such as the Major Scale) in all keys within 10 minutes.

Example 2

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Three Essential Tips on How to Read Music

Many of us will be reading traditional music notation when practicing. How often have we played wrong notes, either when sight-reading or even after having practiced that particular piece of music? Most of us will say “Very, very often!” This is not unusual.

Below are three tips to help you get it right ... the first time you play it!

But first I must address the issue of “getting it wrong” and what situation that creates. Simply put, we get it wrong because we can’t do it. And we can’t do it because we are insufficiently prepared. Playing/singing music is 80% mental preparation and 20% physical application. If we have not reached and fulfilled the 80% mental preparation, the physical application is almost impossible.

Besides, when we play a wrong note and/or rhythm we get a bad impression and often cringe. This bad impression sticks with us - it becomes exaggerated. That is the way most of our minds work, or interpret the situation. This is normal. We then begin to think negatively - we think back instead of forward - and our preparation of the next note is stifled.

This is how you can get out of this cycle:

- You must know the rhythm of the note you are about to play or sing ... BEFORE you play or sing it.
- You must know where on your instrument you will play that note. If you are a vocalist or player of an instrument with non-fixed pitches (such as trombone) it is particularly important to know the sound of that note ... BEFORE you play or sing it.
- You must know with which finger you will play that note. If you are a vocalist you must pre-sing that note internally. (If you are not sure how this is done, ask a vocal coach.) Mental finger placement or pre-singing must be done BEFORE you play or sing that note.

Only after you are completely sure of the three steps listed above should you sound that note. The three listed steps do not have to be done in the listed order. Choose any order you wish.

Let me give you an example of these three steps. I will use the piano for my example.

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How to Practice Scales

Here are some tips on how to practice scales effectively. Most of us want to be able to play/sing scales fast. And there is good reason for this. Being able to play/sing these building blocks of music comfortably at a fast pace gives us the technical ability to execute fast passages.

Method 1 - The Additive System

Play/sing the first two notes of your chosen scale, then go back to the first note.

The note numbers are therefore 1 2 1.

In the C Major Scale this is therefore C D C.

Next play/sing notes 1 2 3 2 1. In the C Major Scale this is therefore C D E D C.

Then play/sing notes 1 2 3 4 3 2 1. In the C Major Scale this is therefore C D E F E D C.

Continue adding the next note of the scale, then descending to the starting note until you have reached your goal. This may be the octave, the double or even the triple octave.

Make sure all of this is done in time, possibly with a metronome.

Over one octave of the C Major Scale your additive sequence is this:

C D C

C D E D C

C D E F E D C

C D E F G F E D C

C D E F G A G F E D C

C D E F G A B A G F E D C

C D E F G A B C B A G F E D C

Here is music notation for the above example.

The image shows three staves of musical notation in 4/4 time, illustrating the additive sequence of the C Major Scale. The first staff shows the sequence C D C. The second staff shows C D E D C. The third staff shows C D E F E D C. The fourth staff shows C D E F G F E D C. The fifth staff shows C D E F G A G F E D C. The sixth staff shows C D E F G A B A G F E D C. The seventh staff shows C D E F G A B C B A G F E D C. The notation uses quarter notes for the ascending and descending sequences, with a final whole note C at the end of each sequence.

The number sequence for any seven-note scale (including the octave) is this:

1 2 1

1 2 3 2 1

1 2 3 4 3 2 1

1 2 3 4 5 4 3 2 1

1 2 3 4 5 6 5 4 3 2 1

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The reason it is good to go up and down the scale - to ascend and descend - is simple: There are almost as many musical phrases that descend as there are phrases that ascend.

When practicing, many musicians will only ascend a scale, and not descend. Big mistake! If you have fallen into this “trap” it is easy to get out of in two ways

1. The method described above (ascending-descending) and
2. By descending-ascending instead, i.e. begin and end on the highest note of your chosen scale.

Below is an example of the Descending-Ascending approach using the one-octave C Natural Minor (Aeolian) Scale.

C Bb C

C Bb Ab Bb C

C Bb Ab G Ab Bb C

C Bb Ab G F G Ab Bb C

C Bb Ab G F Eb F G Ab Bb C

C Bb Ab G F Eb D Eb F G Ab Bb C

C Bb Ab G F Eb D C D Eb F G Ab Bb C

Here is music notation for the above example. Watch the accidentals. There are 3 flats throughout: Bb, Eb, Ab.



... And here is the number sequence for the one-octave Descending-Ascending approach:

8 7 8

8 7 6 7 8

8 7 6 5 6 7 8

8 7 6 5 4 5 6 7 8

8 7 6 5 4 3 4 5 6 7 8

8 7 6 5 4 3 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

Note: The numbers refer to the scale tone number, regardless of whether the note is a “natural”, a “flat” or a “sharp”. You must have the note names worked out before you start any of the above exercises (unless you practice completely by ear).

Method 2 - The Countdown System

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Can We Practice in Our Heads?

There are many opinions on whether or not we can - or should - practice in our heads, i.e. practice mentally. I can tell you from experience that for certain situations “Head Practice” is perfect.

As outlined in the Learning Techniques section of this book, it is possible and beneficial to do visualization. This, coupled with sonic image, is appropriate at times when we do not have an instrument to hand or where we cannot sing out loud.

In my early days as a music student I did the majority of my music theory practice on public transport. This was ideal. When I travelled on busses or trains I had “downtime.” I quickly realized that I could turn this into “uptime.”

As a real-life example, I will show you how I learned all notes in all arpeggios.

1. To cover all keys, I decided to use the cycle of ascending fourths or descending fifths.
2. First I recited (in my mind) the chord roots. Starting on C, they are C F Bb Eb Ab Db Gb (F#) B E A D G C - Done.
3. Then I worked with Major Triads:
C E G
F A C
Bb D F
Eb G Bb
Ab C Eb ... and so on.

4. Then Minor Triads:

C Eb G

F Ab C

Bb Db F

Eb Gb Bb

Ab Cb Eb ... and so on.

5. Then Diminished Triads:

C Eb Gbb

F Ab Cb

Bb Db Fb

Eb Gb Bbb

Ab Cb Ebb ... and so on.

6. Then Augmented Triads:

C E G#

F A C#

Bb D F#

Eb G B

Ab C E ... an so on.

7. After covering the four triad types, I went on to 4-note arpeggios.

8. Major 7 arpeggio notes:

C E G B

F A C E

Bb D F A ... and so on.

9. Minor 7 arpeggio notes:

C Eb G Bb

F Ab C Eb

Bb Db F Ab ... and so on.

10. I continued until I had covered all 20 common chord types in all 12 keys. This took a few months. Via the systematic and focussed way I went about it, to this day



The All-Important Coda

Below is the article that planted the seed of this book. In a way, this article is a synopsis of the content of GoodMusicPractice.

The article contains an actual practice routine that you can apply to your own practice.

Find Out What Helps Us Continue Playing The Instrument We Love

Tips to help you stay on track with your learning diligence, whether you are a professional or an amateur musician

One of my online students asked this intriguing, interesting, and very important question: “Do you have any advice for discipline and diligence when it comes to learning?”

He went on to say “I find myself too often putting my lessons off in favor of other needs, then I get frustrated that I am only at lesson 26 still.

Is there a routine or a mantra or something you can recommend that supports learning diligence?

Sorry for the weird question but I find its something that does not often get discussed when learning an instrument.”

He may well be right in saying that the issue of learning diligence does not often get discussed. We (both the teacher and the student) can easily assume that all is well with our learning as long as we see and hear some kind of progress with our vocal or instrumental studies.

In my face-to-face lessons, I will bring up the topic on a need-to-address basis, i.e. when I find students becoming somewhat complacent about their desire to progress. Such a discussion is usually just a one-time event; however it can benefit lifelong maintenance of learning discipline - not only for their bass playing, but also for other aspects of their life.

If you find it easy to get distracted in your vocal or instrumental studies, you are not alone.

Although everyone is different, with different needs and desires, I will give some generic tips and advice on the topic of “Learning Skills and Learning Diligence”.

My tips will be divided into three broad categories

- Why continue learning
- What helps us learn best
- Learning disciplines and suggested routines

Why continue learning?

There is always a primary reason why we begin learning an instrument or vocal studies (or any other skill, for that matter) in the first place. You must ask yourself what that reason was for you. I am a bass player, and I remember my reason very well, although it was more than 50 years ago! I did not start playing bass quite that long ago, but the reason was already there when I was a young boy. My reason? The sound. Yes, the sound was, and still is, my primary attraction to the bass. (In the meantime I have figured out many of the reasons behind this attraction, but that may be left to another article.)

The day I began my studies of classical double bass at the conservatory, I was invited to sit in on a lesson of an advanced student. We had a chat after that lesson and he told me that I would encounter many obstacles along the way. His advice for when I was in doubt was to “remember why you are playing bass in the first place”. That *remembering* would put me back on track. He was right. It helped me a lot. There were several circumstances throughout and beyond my course that put me in doubt about my skills and diligence. To get beyond my doubt, I

remember “the sound” and all becomes good again. For me, the sound of the bass creates enthusiasm for the bass.

Your reason? I am sure you can easily figure that out for yourself. Sometimes it is not evident before you begin playing your instrument, but at some stage there would have been a feeling of “*This is it!*”. Find that moment and see if you still feel the same now - we usually do. When you become aware of that feeling, your enthusiasm becomes evident again.

What helps us learn best?

I am continually surprised at the very high percentage of people (of all ages) who do not know how they learn. Let me explain using the term “learning technique”.

We all have prominent learning techniques. These techniques are usually not known until we consciously assess the way we learn. The way we learn has a lot to do with the way we remember. Once discovered, making optimum use of our memory techniques leads to optimum learning. We therefore create optimum results, leading to optimum joy in our achievements as well as their positive bearing on our lives in general and those around us – what a result!

Here are a few learning and memory techniques for you to take a look at. Find out if any of these techniques apply to your learning.

- Learning by rote – this may include mental and mechanical repetition
- Visualization – anything from pre-seeing, pre-hearing, pre-feeling etc, to photographic memory

- Associative memory, i.e. associating something you are learning with something you already know (such as a name)
- Learning and remembering with the aid of colors – this technique is often a favorite of the female learner

Although there are other learning and memory techniques, it is up to you to investigate and become aware of your best learning technique – then put it to good use.

Learning disciplines and suggested routines

First, you should work out your circadian rhythm, the way your “body clock” operates. It is of no value if you have the time to practice at 2PM if that is your physical and mental downtime. Find the times of day or night that suit both your schedule and your body clock.

For some people it is more beneficial to do a few short practice sessions as opposed to one long session. Some trial-and-error attempts will help you find what best suits your lifestyle.

Accept that you have to practice to improve your skills. Without acceptance your sessions will be tedious and fruitless instead of constructive and bountiful.

Before you actually practice, work out what you are going to do and the process of your actions. You may need a reason for what you are practicing today, be it part of your long-term goal or something more pressing, such as mastering your part of a song for tomorrow’s band rehearsal. (Practising and rehearsing are not the same.)

Practice what you can't do first! This is crucial ... and I'll tell you why. At the beginning of a session, our minds are generally more able to concentrate, and therefore our intake of new material is higher than at the end of a session. Furthermore, what if we get interrupted during the session and cannot continue? We have learnt nothing new and leave the session with a sense of incompleteness, possibly leading to a bad conscience, resulting in too many negatives.

End your session with something you were already familiar with before the session (such as playing over a chord sequence) but add what you learnt during the session. This creates great satisfaction and a sense of true achievement.

Most musicians start their practice session jamming with something they already know. Instead, I advocate to have your jam at the end of your session, incorporating your new skills.

Below is a suggestion for a daily 30-minute practice session for an instrumentalist. All elements of this routine can and should be changed as often as required to suit your circumstance.

- NEW ITEM – Note identification 5 minutes
- Sight-reading 5 minutes
- Technique development 5 minutes
- Groove playing 5 minutes
- Playing a song 5 minutes
- Revision 5 minutes

Along the way, either with or without instrument in hand, you may find it helpful to use mantras to help your learning. Mantras are very powerful in the most positive way. They can be as simple and focussed as “C is on the third fret of the A-string” to something more general, such as “Every note is coming through my instrument in its best possible form to suit the purpose of the song.”

In summary

- Find the reason that enthused you in the first place
- Find your best learning technique
- Accept that you are practicing for a purpose

Enjoy Whatever Happens!

George Urbaszek

Bass Player and Music Educator

Creator of the first and only step-by-step course of online bass lessons at <https://creativebasslessons.com/>

If you have any queries, please email me at info@goodmusicpractice.com



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