

Practice Smarter, Not Harder

by Thomas Bacon

The Basic Routine --

Objective: to attain and then maintain top playing condition on our instrument, having the physical strength, finesse and dexterity to produce our best musical results.

Method: develop a fundamental practice routine of exercises, appropriate to our playing level, that addresses all of the technical attributes required in our day-to-day playing needs, and apply this routine on a daily basis.

Many published examples of routines are available and every instrument has their own. For horn players these include: Farkas, Singer, Standley, Caruso, Brophy, Belfrage, and more. We're not talking about etudes here, but rather musical calisthenics - the musical equivalent of the stretches, aerobics, sit-ups, push-ups, and other exercises that people do at the health club or gym to keep fit. Mostly these musical exercises are repetitive patterns with measured rhythms, based on the natural harmonics of the instrument, or scale patterns that go through a series of keys.

The basic routine varies from player to player. Some call it a warm-up and make it the first thing that they play each day. Other players call it "daily dues," or "practice hour," or any number of other different terms, and with some it doesn't matter what part of the day that they do it, just as long as they do it regularly.

The whole point is: to obtain the objective, you need to have a method. Find or make up the right one for you. Then apply it diligently and well, and you can obtain the objective.

The Practice Techniques -

Beyond the basic musical calisthenics of the daily practice routine, here are the techniques to help you efficiently get the best results when practicing specific pieces you are working on for upcoming lessons, concerts, recitals, auditions, etc.

Chunking --

The technique of practicing small chunks, a couple of notes or a short passage, instead of always playing through an entire piece. Very often it will be only small parts of a musical work that make it seem difficult -- an awkward slur, an odd interval, a quick rhythm, a couple bars here, a short phrase there, etc. Identify and fix those little chunks first, and you will learn the piece much faster. Apply *Chunking* with great results in *The Metronome Game* and *One Note Practice*.

The Metronome Game --

Working on a fast passage that always sounds sloppy when you play it up to tempo? Play *The Metronome Game*. Here are the rules:

1. Turn on the metronome at a tempo that is somewhat slower than where you think you can play the passage easily and perfectly. It may be half the desired tempo, or slower, and that is fine.

2. Play the passage with the metronome.

3. Ask yourself the question: "Was that exactly the way I want it to be?" That is: did you play all the right notes with the right fingerings, dynamics, rhythms, etc. in every regard exactly the way you want to perform it, albeit slower?

4. If "yes," move the metronome up one number and repeat steps 2 through 4.

If "no," give yourself another attempt at the passage. If you get two "nos" in a row, move the metronome down one number and repeat steps 2 through 4.

The metronome game can be profoundly effective in working up fast passages in minimum time. But for this to be true, you must observe several things:

First is honesty. You won't get great results without it. If you allow a "yes" to get by that was sloppy, had a missed note, a "fluffed" attack, bad tone, or other little discrepancy, you will end up with a fast, and consistently sloppy performance.

Second, the question in step 3 is a simple "yes" or "no" question. There are no "maybes" or "almosts." If it is a "yes" you will know it immediately. You will not have to analyze it. If you cannot say "yes" immediately and with conviction, simply say "no" and get back to work.

Third, be patient. The metronome game can sometimes get you great results in one short practice session. Often though, if the piece is really challenging and has many difficult passages, it can take several weeks - or more - to work something up from half tempo to full tempo. But is it ever worth it!

You will be amazed at how effective *The Metronome Game* can be in working up pieces that seem almost impossible when you first attempt them. But don't cheat at this game. You may fool yourself and think you can get away with it, but you won't fool your audience.

One Note Practice --

When you play a passage with inconsistencies like missed notes or different sounding attacks on each note, try *One Note Practice*. Here are the rules:

1. **Play the first note of the passage ten times in a row.** Play it in measured time, with measured rests in between each repetition. For example, play the note at a moderate tempo for one quarter, then rest for three quarters. A metronome can be a big help.

2. **Each time you play it, ask yourself the question:** "Was that exactly the way I want it to be?" That is: did you play the right note with the right fingering, dynamic, articulation, tone, etc. in every regard exactly the way you want to perform it? Count the number of "yeses."

3. **Repeat until you have achieved ten "yeses" in a row,** resting briefly after each set of ten.

NOTE: The question in step 2 is a simple "yes" or "no" question. There are no "maybes" or "almosts," and there should never be debate. If it is a "yes" you will know it immediately. If you cannot say "yes" immediately and with conviction, simply say "no," then get back to work. This technique also works with two notes, or short "chunks."

Mouthpiece Practice (for brass players) --

Got a hard tonguing passage that's leaving you tongue tied, or a rough slur that you just can't get smooth? Many problems can be addressed with great success by practicing them on the mouthpiece until they become easy. Working on double or triple tonguing on the mouthpiece can be particularly beneficial. If you can make it sound even pretty good on just the mouthpiece, it will usually sound very good when you put the mouthpiece back into the horn. Some people even devote a substantial portion of their daily practice routine to mouthpiece exercises.

Play it All --

The technique of playing it through, in its entirety, counting rests, taking intermissions or other breaks in real time. Whatever "it" is, whether it be a full recital program, chamber music or orchestral concert, concerto, or audition, it should be played through from start to finish, without any restarts, and no stops other than what would be part of the performance. It should be as close to a simulated performance as you can achieve in your practice room. During the practice make mental notes of passages that don't go well, and address those specifically in *Chunking* later. In between movements or pieces, quickly jot down the mental notes in a practice log or diary so you will remember what you have to work on at your next practice session.

Distorted Rhythm -

This technique is especially useful when confronted by awkward passages of steady eighth or sixteenth notes. Try playing the passage at a much slower tempo, but with a very snappy dotted (almost double dotted) rhythm. Then reverse the dotted rhythm.

For example: take a troublesome scale passage, set the metronome at half or maybe one third of the desired tempo and play the passage with dotted rhythms instead of even notes. Play the short notes very snappy. Repeat a few times, until it becomes easy and sounds good.

Then reverse the rhythm so the notes that were dotted now become the short notes. Again play the short notes very snappy. Repeat a few times, until it becomes easy and sounds good.

Then play the passage one way, followed by the reverse way. Repeat a few times until you can alternately play it dotted one way, then the other, and they both sound good.

Then play it in normal rhythm. You will surely notice a difference.

Take it to the Easy Place --

If there is a passage that you play over and over, each time realizing that it is not what you want, but it just doesn't get better ... *Take it to the easy place!*

For example, if the problem is that the range is too high, then take it down. Transpose it a fourth (or an octave) lower and practice it there until it sounds just the way you want it to, then do it a half step higher, and so on until you reach the desired range. If it is too low, then transpose it up and gradually work it down by half steps. If it is too fast, play it slower (see *The Metronome Game*). If the passage is too long, then practice smaller pieces of it (see *Chunking* and *One Note Practice*), gradually adding the chunks together until you have the whole piece.

Other problems can be solved by taking it to a physically different place than the practice room. If you are having troubles with the concept of the music, take it out of the practice room, and into the listening room - listen to recordings of the piece, or pieces in similar style, performed by players you admire. Get more acquainted with the style, then go back to your practice room and try to emulate it, and ultimately make it your own. If you have to play something that is really loud, but hate to practice really loud in your little practice room, take it to a larger space where you can feel comfortable playing with a full, loud dynamic.

Concluding Thoughts --

- Practice makes perfect. But if you practice sloppy, you will perfect the art of sloppy performance. Only if you practice greatness will you perform great.
- Things take time. Patience is essential in achieving great practice.
- Approach each practice session with a specific goal and a plan how to achieve it.
- It's okay to say "no." In fact, it is essential if you want to achieve great practice habits. Say "no" whenever you hear something in your practice that is not exactly what you want it to be, then figure out how to turn it into a "yes."
- Frustration can become your ally, if not your friend. Saying "no" to yourself frequently, as you must in honest practice, can be very frustrating. Acknowledge this and accept it. Even embrace frustration as a great motivator, but never allow it to push you into dishonest and sloppy practice. Frustration can only be an observer, sitting in the chair next to you. There is no room for it inside of you.
- Learn how to use the metronome to achieve even greater discipline and focus in your practice.
- Learn how to combine different practice techniques to achieve maximum results in minimum time.
- Great practice habits take years of practice to develop.
- Practice is a lifelong adventure that should be constantly evolving.
- Practice the art of practicing.

Thomas Bacon has held principal positions with the Detroit Symphony, the Berlin Radio Symphony, and the Houston Symphony. He is a member of Summit Brass, the St. Louis Brass Quintet, The Golden Horn, and he performs worldwide as soloist, chamber musician and recording artist. Mr. Bacon has been on the faculties of Arizona State University, Rice University and Syracuse University, and has taught master classes at hundreds of colleges and universities around the world.