

THOUGHTS ON PRACTICING

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The most important thing to learn is how to practice. If you learn that, you will certainly learn how to play. Many students (and professionals too, for that matter) don't like to practice, don't do it enough, and don't use their practice time productively. Many students don't even know what to do when they are supposed to be practicing. A lot of doodling and messing around masquerades as practicing. We all know players who assert that they practice three or four hours a day, yet are rarely prepared for lessons, much less concerts. This page is intended to help with these problems.

How to Practice

How you practice is the essential point of the entire subject. If you don't do it well, it doesn't matter how much you practice, what you practice, or how often you practice. Practicing is essential to progress, but done inefficiently, it can actually be a barrier to progress. For many people, practicing is a process where they take something new, play it badly, and try to improve it through repetition. The reason they play it badly is simple: they can't play it yet. So, they begin again, play it badly some more, maybe twenty times more, and quit for the day having learned little except perhaps how not to play the passage. There is no other process in life that people begin in this way. If I ask you to build me a bookshelf, you wouldn't just collect a pile of scrap lumber, nail it together quickly, and then look at it - crooked isn't it? Instead, you would likely make a drawing, decide dimensions, buy the correct amount of wood, cut it carefully, etc. Done in this way, the assembly of the bookshelf becomes the easiest part of the process, just as the performance should be the reward for careful preparation.

Accomplishing this goal is not as difficult as you might imagine. The answer is contained in four simple words: NEVER DO IT WRONG. Never do it wrong. Every time you play the oboe, do it right. Of course, you should use good posture and play with a healthy sound production on a comfortable reed. But, you must also play the right notes in the right place with the correct fingerings. Every time. The secret lies in repetition - frequent CORRECT repetition. Both words are important - frequent AND correct. Never do it wrong, and do it right often. If you play something ten times right and ten times wrong, even slightly wrong, you've just wasted however much time it took to accomplish that. Even worse, those ten wrong repetitions are stored in your brain for future retrieval - usually during a concert. Ninety times right and ten times wrong is much better, but remember that those ten wrong ones are still in there waiting. Play it right every single time. You have only one chance to play it right in the performance. That means you must be able to play it right every time.

Playing it right every time isn't nearly as challenging as you might imagine. All you have to do is slow it down. Play at a speed where your brain can operate faster than your fingers. Anytime you can no longer control what's coming out of the oboe, you will make mistakes. Use your metronome and slow down. Only speed up when you start to feel confident that nothing could cause you to make a mistake.

The brain commands many complex physical actions in a way that we regard as automatic. Throwing a ball, tying shoelaces, eating a meal - all are complex actions requiring thousands of muscular responses. But we can do them almost without thinking because we have repeated them so often. Musical vocabulary must be learned in the same way. Learn it once, learn it well. The difficulty is in finding the patience to repeat the passage (correctly) often enough. It may take a thousand times or more for something difficult to become secure. Worse, with this method of working you will very quickly realize just how much work remains - when you're looking at sixteenth notes and playing them as quarter notes, it's hard not to become discouraged. You may lose patience and resume the old sloppy way of working. Don't. With the accurate method of practicing, you will eventually learn the passage. The other way has only ignorance as its advantage - you will never learn the music well, but you may not know that until the concert.

How Much to Practice

How much to practice depends a great deal on the age of the student and his/her goals for the instrument. For a twelve year old beginner, thirty or forty minutes a day may well be ample. For a college music major, forty minutes should be the minimum amount of time spent warming up for a practice regimen of between three and five hours daily. Time spent beyond five hours seems to me to be unproductive - the body and mind are too tired. Less than three hours, and improvement crawls to a snail's pace.

Split the practice time into several sessions during the day. Take a break of at least ten minutes each hour and go do something else. Talk to friends, read a magazine, but don't rush off to make a reed. Take a break. Your body and mind will thank you.

Two other things are as important as practicing enough - practicing carefully (see above) and practicing every day. In many ways, practicing is just like going on a diet. You cannot go on a diet three days a week. You cannot go on a diet for just a week or two. After a week or two, you have merely experienced all of the pain and irritability without seeing any of the reward. But after a year, besides having a whole new appearance, you also have a whole new world of good habits that will keep you healthy for the rest of your life.

Students who don't practice enough usually regard practicing as work and drudgery. More practice means more work and more drudgery. This reaction simply means that the student has never practiced enough to experience the reward. Trust your teacher; do what he or she says; do it well. After six months, improvement is guaranteed. By then, you'll be enjoying it so much you'll never go back to muddling through.

After not practicing well for many years, or not practicing enough, many students report that increased practice only makes them sound worse. Since that can't possibly be true, consider that you are merely more clearly aware of your shortcomings. After a few weeks, when you've worked them out, you can start to improve.

There is no such thing as being too well prepared. You get one chance to play something correctly. At that point, you don't want a 50% chance of accuracy; you don't even want a 99% chance. You want it to be right and give the listener the impression that it was easy. Remember - in order for it to sound easy, it must **be** easy. There is no faking this.

What to Practice

I, and many others, recommend that practice time be divided into three periods. One third should be spent on warm-ups and scales; one third on etudes and specific technical exercises; the last portion on pieces and excerpts.

Consult the [warm-up page](#) in this website for suggestions of how to spend your first hour. I cannot emphasize enough the importance of having a complete command of slow scales, long tones, fast scales, and other scale-derived patterns. These are the foundation of any technique, by which I mean both sound production and technical facility. With a technique, you can play anything; without it, you have to learn everything from scratch. Since a large proportion of the music you play is some sort of scale or scale pattern, mastering these is a most efficient way to practice.

Do not resist etudes. They are composed with a view towards solving specific technical or musical difficulties. Often, the difficulties of the etude (along with ways of cheating to make it easier) are readily apparent. Do not avoid the difficulty, meet it head on. Otherwise, you will never learn what the etude is meant to teach you. Invent your own exercises to solve specific problems. For example, the F Major arpeggio is difficult on the oboe - make up an exercise to improve it. When you've solved that, make up an exercise to get over the break cleanly. Make up exercises that address specific difficulties in the music you are learning - often, there is only one troubling passage in an otherwise playable piece. Isolating that passage and solving it makes your practice much more efficient.

Don't forget to spend some time sight reading. It's not a bad idea to do it for the last ten or fifteen minutes of your practice session. Don't go straight in at maximum tempo; give yourself a chance to play it right. But do it every day. Skillful sight reading is an invaluable professional skill, since performances with one rehearsal (or even none) are not uncommon. Mess up badly enough, and you might not be back. Of course, if your scales and technique are in good shape, sight reading just becomes a matter of assembling things you already know into different combinations.

"I could play it at home"

No you couldn't. You just weren't paying attention. Most teachers would gladly accept a dollar for every time they've heard this complaint, usually asserted with great sincerity. My impression is that usually the student couldn't play it at home either, but they bring a different level of concentration and awareness to their lesson. If you are well prepared, you can play anything in any situation. Make the practice session as much like the performance as possible. In other words, pay closer attention during your practice, and relax more during your performance. Remember that the performance is the reward for having done all of that preparation. Prepare so the performance is the easy part. You'll be a lot less nervous if you know what you're doing.

"I can play it fast, but I can't play it slow"

It should be needless to say, but this statement really means, "I can't play it at all." You should be able to play it fast, slow, in between, in different rhythms, in different articulations, in little pieces, in context, etc., etc. Conductors rarely just accept what you play without comment. Be prepared to be able to change your performance completely and immediately.

Metronomes, Tuners, and other tools

Incessant use of the metronome is not recommended; the clicks can actually obscure what you're trying to hear. But the metronome, used intelligently, is an essential practice tool. To me, it has two main uses. First, most commonly, it is used to discipline your tempo while preparing technical passages. Far from being a tool that whips your tempo forward, it usually ends up being a device to make you play slowly enough. Most people get ahead of the metronome, seldom behind. Make sure, when you use it, that you play **EXACTLY** with the clicks. Many times, students who practice constantly with the metronome, find they cannot play without it. To me, this shows a failure to play with precision. Play **EXACTLY** with the metronome. Make the clicks as far apart as possible, leaving yourself to fill in the gaps. Then, increase the speed very, very gradually. The object is to trick your brain into feeling that it's still the same speed. Any awareness of a faster tempo, and the benefit is lost. If you make mistakes, get

tense, or need a great deal of conscious thought to keep going, you're going too fast. Slow down and take your time.

The other use for the metronome is to check any tendency toward wayward rhythm. It is useful to play even very familiar pieces with the metronome once in a while. Note where you tend to rush and where you tend to drag. Try to identify any consistent tendencies - whether you tend to rush only articulated passages, for example. Remember to be really vigilant, and play exactly with the metronome or you'll receive no benefit.

Tuners are useful for tone and pitch development, but not as critical on oboe as they are to other instruments. On the flute or the trumpet, for example, players can rely on physical memory to reproduce almost exactly the pitch and sound they had before. On the oboe, this is a good guide, but not entirely reliable because the reed changes daily. So, use the tuner as a means of discovering your pitch tendencies (is your E always sharp?), and especially as a means of learning the relationship between pitch and resonance. Flat notes, sharp notes, and in-tune notes all have a particular quality of sound that is consistent regardless of register. Sharp notes sound thin, flat notes sound flabby, in-tune notes sound resonant and focused. Learn to detect these differences in tone color, even minute ones, and your ability to play in tune will be much enhanced. It is easier to hear small differences in timbre than to hear that you are five cents sharp. DO NOT use the tuner as a visual aid - in other words, don't just try to get the needle to go straight up and down. That's an easy trick and possible without learning anything. Make a determination first - are you sharp, flat, or in tune? - and then glance at the tuner to verify your suspicion.

Tape recorders are time consuming but can be valuable. Many students are more perceptive about the playing of others than they are about their own playing. Listening to tape recordings can help to redress this imbalance. Don't be afraid to use the tape, fearing that you won't sound good. Within the limitations of the equipment, the tape will sound how you play. If you don't like it, start working on it.

Advantage of slow practice

Apart from the obvious benefit of allowing you to play accurately, slow practice also allows you to play perfectly. It allows you to include nuances and inflections that might be difficult at full speed. It allows you to play really well in tune, with perfect resonance on each note. It allows you to seek a really clean technique with no bloop or slop between any of the notes. It allows you to control timbre and tone color to match your interpretation. Slow practice lets you really play well. Later, when the music is proceeding at full speed, some of this detail will be lost, and should be lost, but remnants of it will still be there, improving your performance.

Analysis (how to practice productively)

Do you get mad when you practice? Frustrated? Remember that while you're practicing, your function is to be your own teacher. You must do exactly what your teacher does - listen, make a diagnosis, prioritize, come up with a plan for improvement. You need a four-step process: 1. Is something wrong? 2. What's wrong (**exactly** what's wrong)? 3. How do I fix it? 4. Put the fix-it plan into action and persist with it until it either works or doesn't work.

Many students are only good at the first of these - they know something is wrong. Work hard to get to next step. Don't allow yourself to use non-specific words like "bad" or "ugly." Learn to use specific words like "sloppy," "uneven," "flat," etc. Now you have something positive to work towards. Once you know exactly what's wrong, coming up with a solution usually isn't too difficult.

Positive thinking

Attention during a practice session is usually on the elimination of error - a mindset that is correct and necessary. Be aware, however, that often some aspect of your playing works temporarily better than usual and easier than usual. In other words, sometimes you mess up and play really well. One day, it might be that your tongue goes faster than normal; another day, you might be able to play for hours without tiring; another day, you find that you are playing with bewildering accuracy. When this happens, make sure you learn something from the experience. Be as vigilant for really good things as you are for bad things. Be on the lookout for things that feel really easy: that's how you want your playing to be all the time. Many breakthroughs occur after accidents of this kind; don't miss them.

Mental practice

You cannot play what you do not understand. Your fingers will move no faster and no more accurately than your brain guides them. For this reason, mental practice - in other words, studying - is very useful. Get the score and learn the piece. Imagine how the phrases will sound in your ideal performance. Try them in different ways - without the worry of operating the oboe, you can play any way you choose. While you're at it, study and learn the other parts as well. The oboe is almost always just part of something larger. Make sure you understand it and your role in it. After you have done all of this work, you can return to physical practicing with a much clearer idea of what you should work on, and how you should proceed with it. Remember that imagination is the source of improvement. If you cannot imagine the music as more beautiful than you are playing it, you will not improve. Mental practice is part of the answer to this problem.

Often, students prefer practicing fast music to practicing slow music. In fast music, the goal is obvious - play it fast and accurately. In slow music, it's hard to know **what** to practice. Mental practice is the answer here, too. Imagine how the music would sound if it were sung by a great singer, played by a great violinist, played by an oboe with no expressive limitations. Then go back to the instrument. Now you've got work to do.