

Notes for Young Players! - How Do You Practice?

by Steve Abrahall

1. Get Organized

Get yourself a diary--probably a week to 2 pages layout is good (or if you have a laptop put it all in that--ultimately what ever works for you ... but get a diary!!) you're going to have lessons, gigs, rehearsals, classes, and around that you're going to have to organize your practice. Your diary is your friend so don't lose it! Also, don't forget to block in some R&R!

2. Practice

Think about what is the most difficult stuff you have to play. Keep in mind that you only ever have 3-4 really productive hours a day. Use that time when you're sharp (for some it's first thing in the morning ..me I'm a night person). Use your best time to do the most difficult stuff.

When you have a gig or a lesson coming up, look at what you need to play for that session and arrange your practice during the week accordingly. If you have something that's very challenging, work slowly up to it with a metronome. Try and plan your practice so that you can play the piece at speed (or even a little faster) at least 3 days before the lesson or concert.

If you have something that's just really big and scary to work on (That first big concerto, a Beethoven orchestral part or whatever) remember that if you can break the problem down, you are doing good work. Don't let the overall size of the thing scare you. Take a passage (a line or two) and say to yourself, "What's the difficult part of this passage? Is it the string crossing? Is it the speed and a fingering issue? Is it about controlling

dynamics is it about phrasing?" Ask yourself what is the problem and how can you break it down?

Get into the habit of inventing your own simple exercises to help you knock over the problem. If it's a string crossing issue, put the metronome on a slow tempo and just play the open strings involved (it may be an A to G string crossing or another such problem). How does bow placement feel? How should it work? Then add the left hand to the process while still playing very slowly. Go back to the open strings and crank up the metronome a few clicks then add the left hand again. Keep doing this until you reach the tempo or it starts to sound bad. If that happens (it starts to sound bad), it's ok; either wind the metronome back down or stop and approach another problem (or take a short break). Record what speed you got to with the metronome on that day (diary use again). Try the same passage the next day--you'll probably find an improvement!

3. Break it all down

Make a note of all the most difficult parts you have to practice and make a list of this material. You may have 4 or 5 orchestral parts 2 or 3 major works and goodness knows what else that your working on. It's really easy to miss something that you should have worked on. To get around this I developed a system that worked like this.

Every week I'd go through all the music I was working on. I'd list only the difficult sections of each work--I would not practice easy stuff--and I'd review the list after lessons as well. In retrospect I call it the Matrix approach!

Name of work	Page	Line	Bars
Issue			
Mozart	2	4	2-15
Dynamics			
Bach	4	3	4-16
Fingering			
Concerto	1	3-17	10-18 34-48
Tempo			

If I had limited practice time I would focus only on the most difficult parts. Most days my goal was to get through the list at least once.

Also, you can use this information in lessons. Ask your teacher how to approach a particular section. Can they show you how they would play this? This is about using your lesson time productively--sometimes your teacher may not be aware of all the music that your working on or you may have a spare 15 minutes in the lesson.

4. Away from the bass

You can do constructive work away from the bass as well. Take your music around with you. Sit at the piano and play the notes (sing them even if you can't play them on the piano; singing the notes helps your body to become part of the music, and is very good for intonation). Listen to recordings--see if you can find different versions of the same work. What do you like about and dislike about the different versions? How can you incorporate that into your playing? Write these notes down. Chat with other musicians about what you're listening to and see they think about it. Take the time to sit down with a score and a piece of music and go through it with a recording maybe once a week.

Look at your music just before you go to sleep. What are the most demanding parts? What do you need to remember to play these parts well? Visualize yourself playing stuff perfectly (even if you can't quite do it yet); this helps prime your subconscious. Give yourself time to warm up and remember to take a break about every 45 minutes. Get up and stretch for 5 minutes (go get a glass of water or whatever). Be aware of your body; although it's great to hunker down and work hard, you can forget that your back is getting sore or your hand is starting to feel cramped up. Be careful!

Use a mirror when you practice. Is the way you move around the instrument smooth? Does it look relaxed? Watch your teachers to see how they move when they play. Try and realize that bass playing is a very athletic physical process; it is like being a long distance runner.

5. Remember to eat!

Food is energy which can be turned into music! Make sure you grab at least 2 meals a day! And snack on something. If you're playing the bass all day, this is a very large amount of energy your going to need. Remember: the body needs fuel!

6. Record

Record your lessons. Listen to them the next day; make notes and act on those notes. Also, record your practicing at least once a week and listen back to it. What's good and what's bad? See if you can get a recording of groups you're playing with; this can be useful. You can never hear what you sound like from the point of view of the audience as you're always with the bass and not in the audience...this can be useful information!

Once every 4 months, try and record a major piece on which you're working. Over the years you will have a record of your progress and sometimes it's good to have a recording that you can submit for an audition as opposed to having to run about and organize something at the last minute.

And finally: have fun! You're going to learn, make friends and become a musician! Enjoy that process.

Steve A.