

Better Faster: Top Ten Music Practice Tips

By [Doc Snow](#)

Maybe the oldest music joke of all is the story about the tourist in New York who asked a taxi driver how to get to Carnegie Hall.

The answer (for those who haven't already heard this one) was "Practice, practice, practice!" Good answer, considering the idea that mastery of any complex skill typically takes about 10,000 hours—that's 5 years worth of 40-hour work weeks!

But the truth is that it's not *really* 10,000 hours—like the Pirate's Code, that 10,000-hour figure is "more of a guideline." Practice smarter, and you'll improve faster. Here are some simple tips to do just that.

See all 16 photos

The main performance space at Carnegie, Isaac Stern Auditorium, named in 1997 honor of the beloved violinist. (Stern died in 2001.)



Tip One: Practice for a reason!

And not some lame, general reason, either. You want to accomplish something specific when you practice. Let's break it down. There are three kinds of things musicians practice to do:

- 1) Technical practice. They learn physical skills, build specific physical conditioning such as a brass player's 'lip' or a guitarist's finger strength, or learn musical materials such as [scales](#), arpeggios and the like.
- 2) Practice to solve problems. This means playing the hard parts of a piece, the ones that don't (yet!) sound the way you want them to.
- 3) Practice for continuity. This means learning to play or sing through music you intend to perform without stopping or hesitating. It's the kind of practice that's most like performing, and it's important. Unfortunately, it's the only kind of practice that some of us ever do—"unfortunately" because only doing one kind of practice is not a good way to get better fast.

Allison Sudol rocks out on piano. Image courtesy Btbbets and Wikipedia.

Let's see how this way of looking at practice works. Here are three common situations. Can you match each situation with the type of practicing required?



- A) A band student must learn six major scales, with their arpeggios, for the next "pass-off." (Playing test.)
- B) A garage band must learn three new songs their singer has written for their next gig. They've practiced all the separate parts during the writing and arranging sessions they've done as a group. They just have to polish the songs for the show so that they sound really, really good.



- C) A college music student is getting ready for the Music School **concerto** competition, which by way of a prize offers a performance as soloist with the School orchestra and a \$500 scholarship. But there's a section in measures 33-37 which always seems to sound out of tune, out of time, or both.

"Live Drummer."

If you said:

A)--Technical practice; B) —Practice for continuity; and C)—Practice to solve problems, then you've got the idea. If not, here's why it breaks down that way.

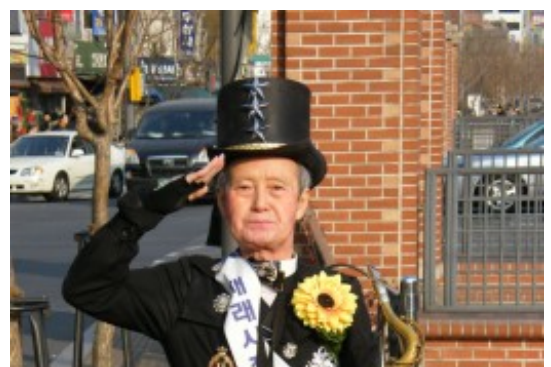
"Awesome musician."

In A), the student is trying to absorb the scales and arpeggios. (His teacher is hoping they are well-enough absorbed that the student's playing is improved in general.) That is learning musical materials, as well as the physical movement patterns that go with them, so the musical and physical patterns can be used freely and confidently in performance situations. That's technical practice.

In B), the band is trying to learn to get through their songs smoothly and confidently. They want to kick butt, not just stumble through! They've already figured the details out; they're trying to put the pieces together in the most convincing way possible. They are practicing for continuity.

They are also trying to build their own confidence in their ability to 'get through' the piece, so in a sense they are trying to prove something to themselves. Unfortunately, some musicians get hung up on this part. They are so busy proving they are ready that they neglect the problem-solving they need to do to actually *be* ready.

In C), the student knows the piece, but she is trying to figure out a trouble spot—why does she have the difficulties she does, and what can she do about it? Obviously, that is practicing to solve specific problems.



This kind of practice is often avoided--sometimes even by those who think they are doing it, but who are really doing something that looks more like continuity practice. Perhaps that's because true problem-solving calls for patience with one's self, and the courage to admit that there's a problem in the first place. But it's also the most fun, in a way, because the challenge of figuring something out can be a bit like a game or puzzle. For some people, this type of practice can be almost addictive.

In each of the cases, though, there's a reason for the practice—the musician or group is trying to get something specific done. And they'll get it done faster, on average, if they keep their goal in mind. So:

Be purposeful!

Young trumpet and cornet students in the UK.



Tip Two: Concentrate, at least as much as you need to!

Each of the three types of practice calls for [concentration](#):

--If you're practicing for continuity, you want to ensure that you keep a strong mental picture of the piece, and where you are in it;

--If you're practicing to problem-solve, you really need to listen to the sound you're making and compare it to the sound you want to make, and you really need to think about how to get the two to match better;

--And if you're practicing technical exercises, you need to concentrate enough to make sure that you're doing them right—otherwise you are building in bad habits that will hold you back and that may even lead to physical injury. How much concentration that takes may vary, though. If you're doing a conditioning exercise that you've done hundreds of times, it won't take as much as would an exercise meant to help build a playing technique that's brand new to you. I know folks who have practiced scales while watching TV.

Use your own good sense, but:

Concentrate!

Key West street musician. This guy really has to concentrate. Image courtesy jster and Wikimedia Commons.





Tip Three: Slow it down!

This is mostly a tip for problem solving. When you're fixing a problem in a piece or a study, you are trying to learn to be in control of the trouble spot. The single best way to gain control is to slow down—make almost any physical movement slow enough, and most anyone can do it. Do it lots slowly, then a little faster, and repeat the process. If you stay with it, in time you'll be burning through it.

I almost wrote “*and soon* you'll be burning through it,” but that's not necessarily true. I remember times when it seemed I'd been practicing something for what seemed like eternity—months, even years—and with little improvement to show.

And I remember giving up on some things, thinking that there must be something wrong with me when it came to learning that thing. But I believe now that I just didn't persist long enough. In cases where I did persist, I did get better. Much, *much* better, in fact. You will too.

One other sub-tip here: slow down the tempo for the whole trouble spot, but keep that tempo a steady one. It can feel dumb to be holding a long note in the middle of a trouble spot, but if you always make yourself do it, your sense of rhythm will thank you. Using a metronome to keep that slow tempo honest can help with this. Plus, that way you can gradually increase the tempo on the metronome and you'll be better able to tell that you are really improving. Then you won't get discouraged as quickly.

Slow it down!

Some things you just can't control, even with slow practice.



Tip Four: Change it up!

A companion to Tip Three. Another good way to put yourself in control of a trouble spot is to change it! The simplest way is to

shorten it: try practicing just a few notes of a tough bit, perhaps "looping" them over and over. That way you can get a lot of practice on exactly the bit you need to practice, very quickly.

But you can change it up in other ways, too. For example, you can take out some notes—grace notes, notes on the beat, or whatever. It may sound a bit crazy, but it can really help. One reason is that it can make the rhythmic framework much easier to grasp; another is that it can let you relax a bit and really concentrate on the notes you *are* playing.

Or you can insert pauses, making difficult notes spots for you to "land on." When you land on a tough note, you hold it, allowing yourself time to listen to it and to feel the physical effort of playing that note. When you know exactly how a certain note sounds and feels, you are in good control of it.

Here are some examples of changing it up:

Musical examples of "changing it up."

Skilled transposers—and those who aspire to be—can practice passages in different keys. Legendary [Chicago Symphony](#) trumpeter "Bud" Herseth has been a big advocate of this.

So don't be afraid to

Change it up!

Bud Herseth, with Air Force trumpeters.

Why practice this:



When you can practice this selected portion:



This selected portion with a "landing note":



Or this simplified portion:



...AND GET BETTER FASTER?!?



Tip Five: Get feedback!

There's a tendency for some of us to practice in a sort of vacuum: we go over things, and perhaps we listen, but we don't use outside verification as much as we could. And so we don't improve as much as we could.

The most obvious way to check what we're doing is to ask someone who knows. Your music teacher is a great choice as a

critic; sometimes bandmates are a great choice, too. (Especially the ones who care more about the music than about your feelings.)

Increasingly popular as 'critics' are audio and video recordings. Hearing something from the 'outside' can help us be a better critic for ourselves--it is surprising how clearly you hear things about your playing on a recording that you didn't hear at all when you were actually playing.

But the best everyday checks are the metronome and the tuner. Playing to a metronome will rapidly let you know if you are keeping good time or not. And using a tuner can let you know if you are playing out of tune more than you might have suspected. (Of course, there are other options along this line, too--there is practice software now, and the good old keyboard can help with tuning, too, if you use it.)

The bottom line is that few of us are as good as we tend to think we are--so check the impression your ear gives you.

Get feedback!

Avant-garde jazzman Sabir Mateen, flute, with drummer Steve Noble. Image courtesy Andy Newcombe and Wikipedia.



Tip Six: Let the errors go!

I know that sounds like the opposite of what I just said, but Tip Five was about problem-solving, and we're moving on now to talk more about practicing for continuity. It's true that when you problem-solve you have to be alert for errors so that you can fix them. But when you are practicing for continuity, you should practice ignoring errors too.

That's because errors can be a huge distraction in performance. As soon as you think, "Oops, I messed up," you lose your focus on the music you're playing. You're focused on yourself. Maybe you're beating yourself up: "How could I do a thing like that?"

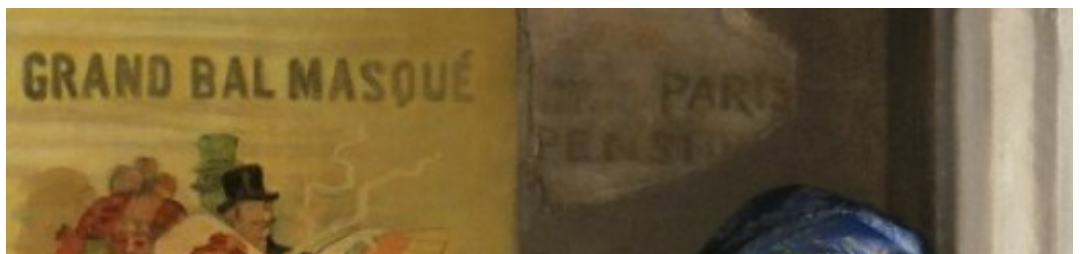
But in either case, you're not thinking about what comes next.

Danger! Flubbed music ahead!

So, when you're practicing for continuity, you need to practice keeping your focus on the music itself, and how it goes. If you make a mistake, just keep playing. In other words,

Let the errors go!

"Street Musician," by Allan Banks. Hey, I see beautiful costumed lutenists playing in the street all the time--in my dreams. Maybe if I moved to Paris. . .





Tip Seven: Keep thinking the music, even if you can't keep playing it!

Catchy, but what does this mean?

Well, if—God forbid—you actually make a mistake, the thing you don't want to do above all else is to lose your place. If you stop playing, that's bad—but if you still know where you are in the music you can jump right back in. If you're lost, though, further errors are very likely to follow before you figure out where you are.

When you are practicing for continuity, then, you want to build both a strong mental image of how the piece goes—some musicians have called this the “through-line”—and your ability to stay with that through-line through thick and thin. One way of doing that is to intentionally stop playing while practicing for continuity, while still imagining the sound of the music as you count through the 'silent' portion. For example, you could play every other measure, imagining the measures between.

It's a great exercise to

Keep thinking the music!

Eddie South playing some violin jazz. Eddie, like all jazz greats, knew how to keep the 'through-line' going. Photo by William Gottlieb, courtesy Library of Congress and Wikimedia Commons.





Tip Eight: Keep it relaxed!

Above, I've written as if continuity practice must always be a mini-performance. But not always! You may not be physically or mentally ready to make it all the way through a particular piece. In that case, it's better to practice continuity by sections.

This is particularly important where physical **stamina** is involved. Always starting at the beginning of a piece and working through to the end can lead to learning that the ending is synonymous with physical fatigue and tension. To defeat this, try practicing the piece for continuity by sections, but beginning at the end and working toward the beginning.

Marc Ternel, winner of the Sigi Muller bassoon prize, keeps it relaxed. And they wonder why bassoon gets stereotyped as "the clown of the orchestra."

Another variant is to include 'imagined sections,' as described in Tip Seven. No doubt there are other possibilities. But find a way to

Keep it relaxed!



Tip Nine: Keep the tempo—or tempos--honest!

I know I'm repeating myself here, since I already advocated using a metronome in Tip Five, but part of a piece's through-line is keeping the tempo where it needs to be. It may be constant for the entire piece—in which case use of a metronome is easy—or it may vary greatly. In that case, the most convenient way of checking tempo is to use accompaniment software, or a recording of the music. But, however you do it, checking tempo as you polish a piece for performance is extremely important.

Keep the tempo honest!

The Musician merit badge. Surely a Scout keeps an honest tempo?





Tip Ten: Take care of your body!

I kept the most important tip for last. There are a couple of ways that this tip applies.

First is that your body is part of your instrument. (If you are a singer, it is *all* of your instrument!) Therefore, to play your best, you need to maintain your body, too. I recall a trombonist, for instance, who said that his best practice sessions always started off with a mile run. Good nutrition, rest, and avoidance of an unhealthy lifestyle won't automatically make you a great musician, but they can give your talent and hard work an additional competitive edge.

Second is that practicing (or performing) badly can be hazardous to your health. [Repetitive stress injuries](#) are a real problem among professional musicians, and are not unusual among student and amateurs as well. They can be painful, expensive, even career-ending.

But the good news is that they can be minimized by using good playing technique. (It sounds preachy, but playing technique is devised and has developed in part to be physically workable for players. It's part of our heritage of 'cultural wisdom' as musicians, and we ignore it at our own risk.)

It's also important to pay attention to the physical aspect of our playing. While we certainly have to learn to do things that may not be physically comfortable at first, when we experience excessive fatigue in specific muscles, persistent aches, decreasing range of motion, or muscle weakness we should pay close attention, and reconsider what we are doing *before* we suffer real injury.

Take care of your body!

A sketch of Johannes Brahms, one of the all-time most "awesome musicians."

Let's sum it up:

Tip One: Practice for a reason! (Know what you're trying to do.)

Tip Two: Concentrate, at least as much as you need to. (Then do it.)

Tip Three: Slow it down! (Put yourself in control of the tempo.)

Tip Four: Change it up! (Put yourself in control of the music's structure—you don't always have to practice it exactly as it is on the page. Sometimes it's smart to "dumb it down.")

Tip Five: Get feedback! (Make sure you are getting it right—use tuner, metronome, computer, recordings, and (of course) teachers and critics.)



Tip Six: Let the errors go! (It won't be perfect ever, but it can still be beautiful music. Let it be real, and let it go by.)

Tip Seven: Keep thinking the music, even if you can't keep playing it! (Just hold on to the 'through-line.')

Tip Eight: Keep it relaxed! Music is beautiful when it flows, so don't hang it up with worry and stress.

Tip Nine: Keep the tempo—or tempos--honest! (It's harder to do this than you might think, so check your tempo(s)!)

Tip Ten: Take care of your body! (It's the only one you've got, right? Music is good for you, but not if you do it wrong. And your body is good for music, but not if you use it wrong. So "heads up!" Pay attention to how it feels to play or sing—and fix it, if it hurts or causes weakness or tension!)

Jason Robinson. Image courtesy Michael Kalyman and Wikipedia.

There you have it: ten tips to help you keep your music fun, safe, and to make your practice time as productive as it can be.

I hope they work for you as they have for me, and bring you as much satisfaction as they have me. Most of all, I hope that they help you bring beauty, energy, joy, excitement and enlightenment to a world in need of it!