

# ***PRACTICE = MUSIC***

## ***AKA: ALL PRACTICE SHOULD BE MUSICAL***

**Ok...I have my music stand** (← the very first important thing for effective practice!!!)...**now what?**

Music teachers and directors are very important for anybody who is trying to become a better musician, but they can only tell you how to improve. The actual improvement, you have to do yourself, and mostly on your own time. Remember – **class is for rehearsing, practice is for improving!!!**

Practicing shouldn't be drudgery. After all, what we are ultimately doing is still making music – and getting better at it! Practice involves us bettering technique and reforming habits. This is done by **chunking** (breaking things down into small groups) and working them out through slow **repetition**. With a determined and positive attitude, practice stops being “hard” and simply becomes challenging!

Individual practice is **absolutely necessary** if you want to become a better musician. Practice does not mean that you just play whatever you feel like for a certain amount of time, but rather that you actually **practice**, and do it well! This is difficult because we grow up in a world that wants immediate and easily achievable perfection all the time. Practicing an instrument is just the opposite! It is a slow process, and getting better is not easy! This is also hard because we tend to only like doing what we're good at, and practicing is our admitting that we're not perfect. However, **practicing never begins with perfection**, so patience is a must. So what is practice? Practicing effectively involves the following components:

- **Setting goals**
  - o Long-term goals (“I will be able to play my entire part for [title of piece] by the performance”).
  - o Medium-term goals (“I will be able to play my part up until [measure number] for [title of piece] for rehearsal next week”).
  - o Short-term goals (“I will be able to play this measure that I am having trouble on by the end of my practice session”).
  - o Long-term + medium-term + short-term goals = practicing in chunks.
- **Setting consistent practice times**
  - o Just like any physical activity, practicing often is more important than practicing for a long time and then not practicing for days, and the better you are, the more you have to practice to improve.
  - o Each day that goes without practice is a day that you do not improve and even lose the skills, progress, and coordination that you had gained from previous practice
  - o Intermediate players should be practicing at least 30 minutes a day, and advanced players should be practicing at least 45 to 60 minutes a day.
- **Warm up**
  - o **Never** begin practicing without your **metronome and tuner** – and make sure you use them!!!
  - o Playing an instrument is as much a physical activity as it is mental, and warming up is just as important as actually playing the rest of your music (think like an athlete!).
  - o **ALWAYS start with buzzing and long tones (or chop-building exercises)**, and practice them with purpose.
  - o If warm-ups seem too easy, make some of them challenging (and still musical)! Work on the harder scales/rhythms, and use articulations that are challenging for you – and make them better. Remember – 99% of the music you are playing come from scales!
- **Work on your goals**
  - o Don't practice things wrong! Don't play wrong notes, leave notes out, or play wrong rhythms. This just teaches you to play it wrong. If it's too difficult to play right, **slow it down enough that you can play all the notes in rhythm, correctly, no matter how slow this is**.
  - o Difficult or inaccurate/sloppy parts? **ALWAYS start slow, then work up to faster tempos. A passage isn't mastered until you can play it six times in a row perfectly**. This refers to notes, rhythms, articulations, dynamics, and musical expression. Only then can you increase the tempo.
  - o Don't just move the tempo up one metronome marking at a time. Sometimes you can jump one or two settings to speed up the process. But make sure you always practice at a speed that you can handle.
  - o **Keep your body relaxed** to perform at your optimum. Tension is the enemy of speed. (Use a mirror to observe yourself – neck, shoulders, back, etc.)
  - o Don't just play through your music. Skip the easy parts – they're already easy! Focusing on the difficult parts is a much better (and less wasteful) use of your time.

- **Sight-reading**
  - o Like any other musical skill, the ability to sight-read well doesn't just happen. It is a skill that is developed by practicing it! Talk to your teacher for some materials that are a little easier than the most challenging things you are working on.
  - o Before playing, review the music with good sight-reading practices, then play it straight through at a reasonable tempo without stopping – even if you make mistakes! Try to get as many accurate articulations, dynamics, notes and rhythms as you can.
  - o When you are finished, go over a few problem spots so that you can better tackle similar spots in other pieces next time.
- **Cooling down**
  - o Practicing is not supposed to be easy all the time! Practicing something challenging can get frustrating for anybody!
  - o Daily practice does not have to occur all in one session. Take breaks to relax your muscles and mind, then return to your music when you are refreshed.
  - o Always play something that you are successful with at the end of your practice session.
- **Evaluating**
  - o After your practice session, ask yourself: What were my goals? What did I improve on? What are my goals for the future? Do I need to change some of my goals? Do I need to ask for help in achieving any of my goals?
  - o Do not be hypercritical of yourself, but be honest. With effective practice, you are getting better with every devoted second!

### More Specific Tips:

- Practice standing up, not sitting! This promotes good posture and good air support. You have time to sit for the rest of your life!
- When practicing, keep posture and joint muscles relaxed and loose (not locked, but firm if necessary). Relaxation and breathing exercises prior to the start of a practice session should be practiced and are very helpful.
- Once again, the two items that are absolutely **necessary** for practicing and must be used A LOT:
  - o **Metronome** (the painfully honest BFF you never wanted! ☺)
  - o **Tuner** (for long tones and beyond - AKA the other painfully honest BFF you never wanted!)
- Other helpful items that you should use:
  - o **Pencil** - Mark up your music is ok so that you don't make the same mistakes over and over again. Writing in fingerings is NOT ok...this becomes a handicap and eventually slows you down!!! What IS ok to mark? Circling key/tempo changes and trouble rhythms, circling notes or writing in accidentals you misplay, marking downbeats, circling entrances you miss, emphasizing dynamic changes, etc.
  - o **Mirror** (to check your embouchure and posture)
  - o **Sound recorder** – Record your practice sessions, then listen to them. The recordings don't lie!!! This is also a helpful technique to help you set future goals.
- Brass players may also greatly benefit from the use of a **BERP**. These devices allow brass students to practice buzzing and fingering notes with the instrument in playing position at the same time. See [www.berp.com](http://www.berp.com) for more information and local vendors.
- Practice in a **well-lit and comfortable and quiet place** where you will not be interrupted (not in front of a TV, near a beanbag chair, in front of your cell phone, etc.).
- **Practicing in short amounts daily is much more preferable than cramming.** This is important to the development of all of the specific, small muscles that are used toward playing your instrument.
- When trying a new technique or correcting an incorrect technique, try practicing in the dark or with your eyes closed, and concentrate on how your muscles feel when doing the technique properly.
- Play by ear a little each day. Put on a CD and just play along with your instrument. You can try to imitate what you hear or make up your own lines in the key the CD is in. It really opens up the ears and your feeling of your instrument.
- Your **ultimate goal is to produce music**, not just the notes you see on the page. Never forget to listen to yourself and make music as you practice.
- **Always practice with an ideal sound in your head.** Find recordings and performers of your instrument whose sound is "epic," or musicians whose musicality you admire, then aim to sound like them in your practice!

### Remember These Top Tips:

- "Practice what you can't play." – Larry Teal
- Always use a metronome.
- Don't waste time just playing music: practice it. Build good habits!
- Be organized and manage your time wisely. Watch the clock.
- "Repetition is the beast of excellence."
- It is not mastered until you can play it at least six times perfectly in a row.

# SUGGESTED PRACTICE ROUTINE

**Time**  
2-3 min.

**Activity**

1. Breathing – work for a “full tank.” Fill lungs completely with the following routine:
  - a. bottom lungs (gut)
  - b. lower back
  - c. upper chest
  - shoulders should not rise abnormally!

5-7 min.

2. (Brass) Buzzing
  - a. Play a pitch on a piano, then aim to match it on your mouthpiece **spot on!**
  - b. Play simple tunes on your mouthpiece, going for perfect pitch accuracy (slow and accurate is more important than fast and sloppy)
2. (Brass & WW) Long tones – for tone quality and intonation; two different types
  - a. A straight tone without dynamic change

*mf* \_\_\_\_\_ 10 sec.

- b. Start with air, **slowly** bring in the tone, growing to the loudest you can play (with a good sound!), then **slowly** die away to nothing

*pp* \_\_\_\_\_ *ff* \_\_\_\_\_ *pp*  
8 - 10 sec. 8 - 10 sec.

- Listen for a steady tone without wobbles, pitch change, or tone vibration. Work on 3 or 4 different notes each day in different registers, striving for a rich, open round sound. Use a tuner! Also try a drone pitch (if your tuner has one).
  - Also use a tuner to check notes that are typically problems on your instrument daily.
2. (Percussion) Chop warm-ups
    - a. Practice metered quarter, eighth, sixteenth strokes with metronome
    - b. Practice rolls, aiming for consistency of roll
    - c. Practice rhythmic exercises (these can lead into the following time for scales)

13-15 min.

3. Scales – a **very** important part of your playing and articulation
  - a. (At least) **Majors**: build up to working on all of them! (goal: you should have all majors proficient by the time you are done with middle school)
  - b. Practice with eighth and sixteenth notes working on evenness, tonguing and speed **with a metronome**. Use different articulations and rhythms to keep them interesting and to **warm up your tongue!**

A musical staff showing a scale exercise with eighth notes. The notes are grouped into pairs with slurs underneath, indicating a specific articulation or phrasing technique.

- c. **Chromatic**: begin with “mini” Five-Note Exercise pattern, such as:

A musical staff showing a chromatic exercise. It features a sequence of notes with a '3x's perfect!' annotation above a specific group of notes, followed by a repeat sign and further chromatic movement. The staff ends with 'etc.'.

15-35+ min.

4. Pieces – Work on phrasing, breathing, tonguing, etc. – all the things you’ve practiced to this point to incorporate them into playing a piece of music. Break each piece into several sections, mark breaths, know where phrases begin and end, make exercises out of technical problems, etc. Remember to always work for **perfection!** (Short sessions of practicing sight-reading also fit in this time)

# ***REDWOOD BAND EFFECTIVE PRACTICE CHECKLIST***

**Yes**    **No**

- Did I practice for as much recommended time as I was supposed to?
- Did I stand and/or have good posture at all times while practicing?
- Did I stay focused throughout my practice with no distractions?
- Did I start off with thoughtful breathing warm-ups?
- Did I practice buzzing/long tones/chop warm-ups with attention to accuracy and improvement?
- Did I use a tuner/drone when playing my long tones? And improve?
- Did I practice scales with a metronome and with different articulations? And improve?
- Did I practice my pieces and/or sight-reading? And improve?
- Did I practice with my long, medium, and short-term goals in mind?
- Did I chunk scales and/or segments of pieces that I was having trouble with?
- When I chunked segments, did I practice them with a metronome and get more accurate?
- When I practiced difficult chunks, did I start off slowly, then gradually speed up the tempo?
- Did I play a chunk perfectly at least three times before increasing the tempo and moving on?
- Did I "practice what I can't play" (as opposed to practicing the easy stuff)?
- Was I aware that my body stayed relaxed the whole time, especially during difficult sections?
- Did I mark my music with my pencil so that I would not repeat mistakes?
- Did I take a break to refresh if/when I got tired or frustrated?
- Did I record my practice session and listen to it to make more honest goals for myself?
- Did I improve overall? Better yet, did I master it?
- Did I practice always with an ideal sound and sense of musicality in my head?
- Did I make specific goals for the next time I practice?

## **How'd You Do?**

- 21 Yes** = Practice master!
- 18-20 Yes** = Not too shabby. Keep up the good work, and then add just a bit more.
- 15-17 Yes** = Satisfactory. Sort of.
- 12-14 Yes** = Not up to your potential.
- 9-11 Yes** = If this were for a grade, the F's would start here...
- 6-8 Yes** = Much more effort is needed.
- 3-5 Yes** = Wasting your time.
- 0-2 Yes** = Seek help for practice routine.