

## Good practise - a guide

Dave Griffiths

A man carrying a violin case, who had lost his way, asked a passer by "Excuse me but how do I get to the Albert Hall?" She replied "Oh that's easy practise, practise, practise".

There is a well used phrase "practise makes perfect". Yet how and what exactly should be practised in order to be perfect and is perfection what is always required? There was a programme on TV recently about a famous New York music school. It looked at the practise regimes of some of its most gifted pupils who all had ambitions to be concert players. Some practise for as much as 8 hours a day. It concluded that there was a point beyond which no matter how much more they practised no more learning would take place and for many their practise was ineffective. It is not how much practise but the quality of the practise that makes the difference.

practise is only useful if it is well organised and constructive and the person practising is sure of its purpose and knows exactly what they want to achieve. This applies if you are aiming for concert stardom or simply to enjoy the pleasure of playing an instrument for fun. In either case the student wants to attain a level of ability and confidence that will fulfil their ambition.

So how is this achieved? There are several questions to answer to create a practise profile. These are:

### *How much time are you going to allocate to practise?*

Decide how much time is available, possible and achievable. To get the most from your practise it is important to feel good during the time you spend practising. If you try to cram practise into an already busy week you will feel uncomfortable and under pressure which will effect your state. By deciding how much time is realistically achievable and committing to it by putting it in your diary and telling everyone who needs to know that this is your practise time, then you have a space which you are in control of and can feel good about.

### *When will you practise?*

Are you a day time person, a night time person, an early riser or always late for things? We are not all the same. The best practise time is when you are awake, alert, fresh and full of energy. In this state you will learn quickly and remember what you have learned. The brain works best when you have exercise, a healthy diet and enough sleep. Choose a time of day when it is the best time for you and your biorhythms. Your practise will be more effective and you will achieve more in a shorter space of time than if you are tired, hungry or stressed.

### *How often will you practise?*

The unconscious mind learns through your conscious mind providing it with enough information to be able to reproduce the skill or action at any time in the future. It is much more productive to practise little and often than occasionally for long periods. 30 minutes a day will produce more unconscious learning than 3 hours once a week. Playing an instrument involves muscles and psychomotor responses. If you are training to run for exercise you need to warm up gently and that regular exercise creates muscle tone and greater levels of fitness. Trying to get fit by suddenly running a half marathon results in pain and injury and no fitness at all. It is the same with playing an instrument.

### *Where will you practise?*

Do you feel good about the space you where you practise? Is it conducive to concentration? An ideal space is not always possible and yet it makes a difference if you feel good about it. Is there noise from other rooms? Can you negotiate for your needs with others with whom you share the space? Is there enough light? Is the room well aired? Do you have a chair suitable for your posture for playing your instrument? Is the space free from distractions? What can you do to create or find a practise space that when you start to practise you already feel good to be there.

*Are you ready to start your practise?*

Prepare to practise by taking a minute to focus on your state. Relax by breathing deeply. Breath in to a count of 5 and out to a count of 6. As you breath out release all thoughts and tensions from your previous activities to ensure you are thinking as a musician about what you are about to do. In other words make a space inside to engage with your instrument and the music you are going to play.

*What will you practise?*

Decide before you start what you are going to practise. Break down your practise time to include scales, arpeggios, exercises and pieces. Create a scale routine that will ensure you practise in both sharp and flat keys, then in major and both minor scales, melodic and harmonic. Its useful to practise the scales related to the pieces you are learning. Make a routine of playing the scale of the piece before you play so you begin to orient your fingering and muscle tone to that key.

Scales: Make scales fun. Be inventive with scales so they are not only linear ascending and descending but also varied. Create patterns like up a third down a second I III, II IV, III VI or in groups of four notes I II III I, II III IV II. Use scales to practise tremolo and dynamics, down stroke and up stroke, tone quality and sustain. Most important for the mandolin is to practise scales descending because you have to cross a string to a fingered note not an open note as when ascending.

Mix your practise with pieces exercises, scales, arpeggios and, very important, mess about having fun. But if you are pushed for time spend your time practising what you want to play not what you can play.

*What are your goals?*

Set yourself specific goals by asking yourself "What do I want to achieve by the end of this practise session?" Be sure you know this and be realistic so that it is achievable. A goal will define an outcome e.g. "By the end of this practise I will be able to play the scale of D harmonic minor over two octaves ascending and descending" or "By the end of this practise I will have solved the fingering and plectrum direction problem I have been experiencing in bars 29 and 30 of my current performance piece". Having goals gives your practise purpose, direction, and your success is measurable.

## PRACTISE TIPS

a

### *New pieces*

Before playing a new piece read it through without playing. Instead imagine you are playing it, going internally through the motions of fingering. Look for passages that may be challenging and make a note of what they are, whether fingering, timing or maybe a position change. Imagine then playing these in slow motion and see if you can find a solution to any obvious challenges before playing the whole piece for the first time. When you do play the piece for the first time play it slower than marked. If it is difficult much slower.

The reason for doing this is that if you play a new piece straight away at speed then any mistakes you make will be imprinted on your unconscious. If these are not dealt with straight away the mistake will be repeated thus strengthening the imprinted mistake. After several plays through by repeating the mistake three or four times an unconscious imprint of the section will grow possibly accompanied by a fear or tension becoming associated with it . So never practise making mistakes. As soon as you spot one isolate and deal with it or it will take longer to eradicate it. This will inform your goal setting

### *Practise slowly*

Playing an instrument is a physical psychomotor skill. For your left hand fingers to learn where to go in co-ordination with your right hand (or vice versa if you are left handed) the muscles and the neuro pathways that control them need time to learn. if you practise slow you will develop all the skills you need to play fast . Your muscles and neurology will learn much quicker and more skilfully with slow and successful repetition.

### *Problem Solving*

With a difficult passage or a recurring mistake isolate the bar or bars in which the challenge occurs. Free your mind of negative associations and look with great affection at the passage as offering you a great chance to improve as a player. Play the bar at normal speed noticing as you do exactly where the problem occurs. On which notes exactly? Play a couple of times until you are sure you have spotted the problem notes in the sequence. Now ask yourself "How is this a problem for me?"

Is it the fingering, the positioning, the plectrum stroke or negotiating a string cross maybe. Now slow it down, check which muscles you are using. Can you play it very slowly successfully? What do you have to change to make it work? Make the change and try it slowly. When it works slowly repeat it successfully at least 9 times then gradually speed it up. Now go back a bar and play through the new solution. Does it now work. If not go back and adjust. If it works going back a bar play through to the bar after. When that works return to the beginning of the piece and play it through. It should now play easily. if not repeat the process until you find the solution.