

# How to Practice Music Productively

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1. Set aside a regular time or times for daily practice so that it becomes as habitual as attending classes or brushing your teeth. It may be more useful to divide the daily practice time into two sessions. Be sure the daily total adds up to two hours.
2. Keep a journal of what your teacher says at each lesson – things which need more attention in each piece you are learning. Also make notes to yourself during each practice session – about your progress and areas of focus for your next practice session.
3. Make a plan for each practice session. Organize a series of manageable goals that can be accomplished in the one-hour or two-hour practice session.
  - a. After playing an entire piece or a section of a piece, ask yourself what was good as well as what should be improved. [articulation, rhythm, diction, fingering, dynamics, steadiness of tempo, etc.]
  - b. Select two or three specific things to improve before repeating the passage. Then concentrate hard on those areas when you play it again.
  - c. Try until you've played/sung at least **THREE CONSECUTIVE CORRECT REPETITIONS** before moving on to another segment. Many incorrect run-throughs of a phrase are not corrected by a single correct repetition.
  - d. Simply sitting or standing with your instrument/voice and mindlessly playing/singing through your “songs” is unproductive, inefficient, and wasteful. Use your brain and your ears evaluate in the practice room!
4. Wynton Marsalis: “Concentrate when practicing. If you can’t concentrate, stop and continue at another time.” Or go outside or into the hallway for a short walk and then return to practice again.
5. Begin each practice session with technical warm-ups, working on control of pitch and tone quality.
  - a. Spend 15 to 20 minutes of daily practice time on technique. This includes scales, arpeggios, Hanon and/or Czerny for pianists, and/or various studies or technical exercises assigned by the student’s applied music teacher.
  - b. Warm up your body as well as your concentration and focus while doing this technical practice.
  - c. The most effective technical practice is played **with a metronome to keep the tempo steady and to internalize a secure sense of beats and accents**, as well as articulation.

- d. Always warm up with technical practice in a steady tempo before you have a music lesson and before you perform publicly.
6. When working on your repertoire pieces, be creative in the order of practice. Don't always practice in chronological order -- for example, Bach – Mozart – Debussy. Practice intensively on one piece, moderately on another, and just play through the third piece. Vary the order of pieces to ensure that every piece gets some of each kind of practice during the week.
  7. Work creatively on individual pieces.
    - a. [see 8. below] Practice sections of the piece, isolating and mastering difficult passages before trying to play through the entire piece. With this preparation your goal is to be able to play the piece without stumbling, slowing down, or hesitating on the difficult phrases. The entire piece should be a unified whole in a consistent tempo and style.
    - b. As you learn new pieces, work slowly and methodically, in small sections. In practicing, as in eating, small individual bites are the way to master the entire piece/portion.
    - c. Divide the tempo, practicing half as fast, or even one-fourth as fast as the finished tempo. Be sure that you practice at a steady, even tempo with equal beats, no matter how slowly or quickly you play or sing.
  8. Concentrate your work on mastery of difficult passages in each piece.
    - a. Practice a difficult phrase in varied rhythmic accents and with varied articulation. Five repetitions using these techniques will accomplish twice as much as repeating the passage as written – and the process is much more fun and interesting.
    - b. Always begin your practice of a piece with review of the most challenging phrases and the segues leading into them and following them. Then plug the most difficult phrases back into the whole and see how much progress you have accomplished.
  9. For pianists [and adaptable for others]:
    - a. Practice a new piece **hands separately**, especially in polyphonic pieces such as Bach Two- or Three-Part Inventions or Fugues. After working on the articulation, fingering, and phrasing of each hand's part, put the hands together again, in a slow steady tempo.
    - b. Play hands together slowly with correct rhythm, articulation, and fingering. Slow the tempo down to accommodate early stages of learning a new piece. *Play the piece only as fast as you can play it correctly.*

- c. Always play the correct fingering. This trains your “motor memory” and will ultimately help you memorize the piece and perform with full focus on interpretation, rather than technique.
  - d. Divide a piece structurally to work on small sections [phrases, measures].
  - e. To learn an accompaniment figure in the left hand, play the notes as block chords instead of as-written. This helps you to understand the larger harmonic ideas of the composer which are not always obvious if you are struggling with an alberti bass or other broken-chord figure.
  - f. Learn every piece without pedal. Add the pedal only after you have utilized every other physical resource at your command. This prevents use of the pedal as a crutch to cover up sloppy playing.
  - g. Once pedal has been added to a piece, continue practicing that piece half the time *without* pedal to prevent any sloppiness from creeping in.
  - h. Combine all elements of your piece after they have been mastered separately.
10. Challenge yourself to arrive at each lesson, having exhausted your own personal efforts to master your music. Don’t depend on your teacher to correct rhythms or note-reading errors you were simply too lazy to figure out. Make the most of your time with your teacher, and work together toward the goal of creating beautiful music.
  11. YoYo Ma: “Never make a sound unless you hear it first.” That is, have a mental concept of that tone quality, pitch, dynamic value, articulation, etc. you want to create – before you play/sing it.
  12. Before performing or playing/singing through a piece in the practice room or in a performance, take time to focus on the piece. Silently listen in your mind to the most challenging passage in the composition and the tempo at which you are prepared to play that particular passage. Then set the opening tempo according to that passage.
  13. Performing: several weeks before a performance [recital, audition, exam], work on playing your piece straight through in a consistent tempo, without stopping and starting over. A continuous performance of each piece is an important goal for any musician – amateur, student, or artist-professional.
  14. Memorization: If you are to play or sing the piece from memory, plan “memory posts” throughout the piece – phrase beginnings to which you may go immediately and continue the performance without hesitation and without starting over. With this plan in place, you will feel more confident and have a more pleasant experience in performing from memory.
  15. Remember: “***Success comes before work only in the dictionary!***” -- Salada Tea  
Even the great performing artists practice regularly and systematically.