



RECIPE FOR EFFECTIVE PRACTICE (ASTA Cookbook)

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Practice is a journey. It needs a destination. Frustration occurs when there is no sense of accomplishment. Most students approach practice by repeating a piece over and over with little success. Often they are assigned a set number of repetitions that they dutifully execute. Then they avoid practicing when it appears pointless because they do not see results. Here is a recipe for effective practice.

Ingredients:

Music students who want to improve their playing skills, parents and teachers who want to see their children progress, and students who are ready to assume more independence in their music study

Serves:

Music students, teachers, parents

1. Make a plan

Decide what you are going to accomplish. Set goals in very small steps so that you can insure success. Learning even one measure of a piece is a positive accomplishment, much more productive than trying to learn an entire concerto and ending up frustrated! Isolate just a single problem spot and within that spot, identify the different elements that need addressing. Focus on just one point. Think about the left hand, think about the bow, think about the rhythm, think about the tone, think about the intonation, and think about the musical expression. One small spot leads to at least 6 sub-spots. Address each separately.

2. Set a schedule

It is really important to practice consistently. Just a few minutes daily is better than cramming just before your lesson. Set a regular time for practice each day. Everyone's schedule is different. Some students find it most productive to practice in the morning before school. Some like to practice when they get home, before doing homework. Some like to practice just before or after dinner. Once you find a time that suits you, try to keep to your schedule. Remember to practice only on the days that you eat.

3. Structure your practice time

Begin your practice session with a warm-up which focuses on tone and technique, and review a favorite piece or two so that you get "in the mood." Next work on your current piece(s). Work in small sections, with specific goals and with a one-point focus. Be realistic - enjoy each step of your progress. Sometimes you won't see immediate results. The time you spend is like putting money in the bank. It will compound and mature at a future time. Remember, Rome was not built in a day!

4. Avoid pointless or mindless repetition

Practice does not make perfect. Practice makes permanent. PERFECT practice makes perfect! Repetitions which are incorrect just reinforce the mistake. Again, work in very small steps. Be sure that what you are playing is accurate. Practice a very small section slowly to get it perfect, then repeat it slowly. Gradually increase the tempo, being sure that it is absolutely correct in each repetition. If you are repeating a section 10 times, only count the good ones. Play "wipe-out": any incorrect repetition wipes out the previous ones and you start your count again.

5. Stress quality - not quantity

Teachers are often asked, "How long should I practice?" It is more important to have a productive practice than to have a long practice. Set attainable goals and stop when you have accomplished your goal. The actual time spent at the instrument will vary with the age of the student and the material to be covered. A general rule of thumb is that your daily practice should be at least the length of your lesson time. If you have a 30 minute lesson, do warm-ups for 5 minutes, practice review pieces for 5 minutes, work on your current repertoire for 15 minutes, and spend 5 minutes on sight-reading or previewing new material.

6. Use technology

Sometimes using a computer program or a piece of high-tech equipment can be fun and useful. Recording or video taping practice can be an effective tool. Tape small segments of your practice. This will help you self-evaluate your playing. Often seeing or hearing what you are doing will pinpoint the practice issues. There are also effective computer programs such as *Smart Music* which can assist in practicing.

7. Practice technique AND musicianship!

Music is about communication. It is an art form which effects our emotions and our listener's emotions. Be sure to include exploring and refining expressive elements (phrasing, dynamics, pacing) in your practice. Do not limit your attention only to skills. Remember, technique exists only to enable you to make music.

Practice is rewarding (and even fun) when it is productive. Remember, there are no difficult pieces. There are just impossible pieces and easy pieces. Practice is the process of making an impossible piece easy.