

Practicing: A Love/Hate Relationship

Why do we practice?

To get better.

Do we have to practice?

No! Honestly, you don't have to practice. But, you can't expect to get any better if you don't practice.

How long do we need to practice?

This is a tough questions because it all comes down to what you do while you're practicing. You could practice for three hours and not get an ounce better. Alternatively, you could practice for 1 hour and get a ton better. It's the quality over quantity idea. It's about how you practice, not how long.

How to Setup a Successful Practice Session

1. **Warm Up:** This is where your fundamental work is. Want your tone to improve? Practice long tones. Want faster fingers? Practice scale patterns. Your warm up can center around general difficulties you are having or center around specific section in a piece you are playing.
2. **Have a Plan:** It is much easier to practice when you know what to practice rather than winging it. So make a plan!
3. **Take Note:** Write notes about what you specifically practiced. For example, if you practiced a tricky run in your band music and it wasn't quite clean, make a note of that! Think about why it wasn't clean and how to improve it. That way when you come back tomorrow, you already have an idea about what to do.
4. **Take Breaks:** Stopping for even 3-5 minutes while you're practicing can help IMMENSELY. Let's say for every 30 minutes of playing, take a 5 minute break. Sometimes your brain just needs a quick breather to refocus and start again.
5. **Practice in Increments:** Don't try to practice for 2 hours at once. First off, it's not good for your body and mind to be engaged for that long. If your goal is to practice for 2 hours, break it up into two 60 minute sessions, or four 30 minute sessions. When I practice for 2 hours, I warm up for 30 minutes, then practice in two 45 minute sessions.

Working Through Specific Tone and Technique Issues

Tone

So we have already established that if we want our tone to improve the best way is to practice long tones, but that is for our overall tone. Let's be a little more specific:

Think about a specific phrase in your music. You think you're playing this phrase really beautifully with a full and projecting tone. But are you 100% sure that is what the audience is hearing? No. So the best way to practice this is to record yourself and listen back! This is a game changer. Instead of playing the phrase over and over again hoping that your tone is beautiful, recording yourself allows you to immediately know what you sound like and make changes. No more useless reps.

But what happens if you don't know how to play a phrase? Well this is your chance to be creative!

Challenge Yourself!

Play the phrase three different ways

- Aim for a different note each time
 - Change your tone color during the phrase
 - Use your vibrato differently each time.
- (Once you have a plan, record yourself!)

Technique

There are two parts to practicing your technique: physical and mental. The physical part refers to the literal muscle movement of pushing down the keys on the flute. The mental part refers to your ability to release tension in your hands and fingers. These two parts of technique are interconnected - you can't expect your fingers to move fast if your hands are tense. You can spend hours working on a technical run, but if your hands are tense, it's going to be much more difficult to play it at a fast tempo.

How do we make sure our hands are relaxed? Mental engagement. When you're practicing your scales during your warm up, it is crucial that your hands are as relaxed as possible. You should be gripping the flute only enough so it won't fall. When you press the keys down, you should be using only enough force to make them go down. Your warm up is when you really need to put in the mental energy to make sure you are as relaxed as possible.

What about challenging runs in your band music? Whenever you come across a spot in your music where your fingers don't know what to do, take a moment to figure out why you're having trouble with this section. Most of the time it will be one of these three reasons: fast tempo, weird sequence of notes, or a tricky rhythm.

Fast Tempo

Find the tempo where you can play the run perfectly with relaxed hands. This should be a tempo that is mentally engaging but very doable. Once that tempo is established, that is now the fastest you can play the run. In order to start increasing, practice the run alternating between half tempo and your fastest tempo. Once you've alternated between the two tempos 3-4 time perfectly with relaxed hands, increase the half tempo by 2 clicks (which increases your fastest tempo by 4 clicks). You are going to continue to do this until you've reached the goal tempo.

Weird Sequence of Notes

First, find out what is weird about the sequence of notes. Do your fingers expect to go to a different note than the one that is written? Is it an unfamiliar interval? Identify where your fingers want to go and where they need to go. Ultimately, we need to unlearn that habitual finger pattern that is causing the mistake. Here are some technique practice hacks to reform that learned finger pattern:

- Slowly go between the note that is causing you trouble and the note preceding it. Play those two notes in different rhythms and speeds. Make sure it is clean!
- Group the run in different ways. If it is grouped by 16th notes, group them in triplets.
- Practice the run backward.
- Start with a small group of notes, then slowly add on more.

Tricky Rhythm

First, identify what the time signature is and what it exactly means. When you're looking at the measure with the tricky rhythm, mark all the big beats (for example, in 4/4, mark where beats 1, 2, 3, and 4 are). Next, figure out over what beats the tricky rhythm occurs and what subdivision it fits into. Finally, figure out how to count it. Once you're able to count it with no hesitation, set your metronome to a very slow tempo with subdivisions on and count it with the metronome going. Once you can do that, add in the flute (still at a slow tempo). After you are comfortable with that, start to take the subdivisions out.

All technique work should be practiced slowly with relaxed, tense-free hands and fingers

Reminders and Takeaways

You don't have
to accomplish
everything in one
day

Rome wasn't built in a day. If there are multiple difficult sections in a piece, focus on one each practice session. Practicing smaller sections with good focus and strategy is way better than running through everything.

Nothing is more defeating then going to practice and not knowing what to do. You end up wasting your own time and feeling like poop cause you didn't get done want you wanted to. Make a simple plan to keep you on track and feeling accomplished.

Make a plan.

Be kind to
yourself

This is the most important reminder. You practice to get better and getting better takes time. When you get frustrated, take a break. Being kind to yourself will help you improve. I promise.

