



JB
MASTERCLASS
SERIES



PRODUCTIVE PRACTICE HABITS

CHASING EXCELLENCE
IN THE PRACTICE ROOM

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PRODUCTIVE PRACTICE HABITS:

Sometimes a lack of progress in the practice room can lead to frustration, and finding those small, daily victories can be so essential to keep us coming back for more. Establishing positive habits early on can really bypass a lot of unnecessary work.

Here are a few reminders that can help keep things in perspective:

- Embrace struggle – there is no growth without it
- Everyone walks at their own pace – your only competition is yesterday
- Balance between attacking weakness and “making a joyful noise”

Keep It Consistent:

- Budget time earlier in the day for a proper Daily Routine:
 - Breathing and Buzzing
 - Glisses and Long Tones
 - Articulation: Scales, Arpeggios, and Overtone Series
 - Slurs and Flexibility

Be sure to establish a Daily Routine and be willing to live with a sequence of exercises for a while before changing things up. It can be difficult to gauge progress if you change up the exercises too frequently.

- Allow for an additional practice session to focus on Fundamentals:
 - Tone Stability, Consistency, and Technique
 - Arban: Complete Method for Trombone
 - Mueller: Technical Studies, vol. 1-3
 - Kopprasch: 60 Progressive Studies
 - Slurs and Flexibility
 - Edwards: Lip Slurs
 - Colin: Lip Flexibilities
 - Lower Register – Valves
 - Blume: 36 Studies for Trombone with F-Attachment
 - Ostrander: F-Attachment and the Bass Trombone
 - Sight Reading
 - SR Machine (app)
 - Sight Reading Factory (app)
 - LaFosse: School of Sight Reading
 - Dufresne: Sight Reading Studies

For the Fundamental Block, I suggest that students make a list of 3-6 issues that are a priority to improve, assigning each one to a particular day of the week. It's a great way to personalize your practice to be sure you're targeting what you believe your weaknesses to be.

- Spend time working on Expression and Creativity
 - Weekly Etudes: Set up a rotation between books
 - Bordogni – MWF
 - Blazhevich – TRS
 - Solo Repertoire
 - Duets, Trios, and Chamber Music
 - Play by Ear & Improvisation
 - Listening Sessions

There is simply no substitute for setting aside daily time to roll up the sleeves and put in some work. Students who plug daily practice sessions into their schedule (like other classes) will have a much better chance of spreading the workload over the entire week, rather than cramming for the next lesson. I encourage students to split their daily practice into 3-4 smaller sessions, rather than one large session. This can help to cover the material in a balanced and more focused manner, and also sidesteps physical or mental fatigue.

Ultimately, strive for a balanced focus of fundamental and musical development. Refine your voice, but also be sure that you have something to say.

Keep It Goal-Oriented:

- Go into the practice room with a definitive game plan.
 - Identify the mission
 - Know what you're going to practice before walking into the practice room
 - Find a balance between running reps, and targeted spot checking

Keeping a practice journal of some sort can help establish some type of continuity between practice sessions. Determine your long-term and short-term goals and make a game plan for addressing these in your day.

- Stay on point.
 - Record yourself and listen back to identify wasted time or “noodling”
 - Take a break when you begin to lose focus
 - Be able to walk out having spent your time **exactly** as intended

Whether preparing for a lesson, recital, or audition, making a timeline can help clarify how best to use the time you have. Is the music showcasing something that is a larger issue in your playing? If so, might time be better spent improving that aspect...rather than drilling bad habits?

My first teacher, Dr. James Roberts (Jacksonville State University, retired) fostered the concept of taking a “blue-collar” approach to practicing. This is something I still believe in...the rewarding and almost cathartic feeling of a job well-done. Packing up for the day knowing that you did exactly what you set out to do.

Keep It Simple:

- Do the “little things”
 - Mark breaths: which are determined by your intended phrasing
 - Define all terminology: which indicate the composer’s interpretation
 - Have a definite metronome marking for where you are and want to be
 - Bracket all problem areas for targeted practice
 - Reminders: accidentals, phrase direction, dynamic nuance, and rubato

More than anything else, I think minimizing frustration in the practice room is essential for having a healthy and positive outlook. Doing the “little things” takes almost no effort and helps to avoid silly mistakes. It’s surprising how many students allow their frustrations to remain by refusing to do the simple things like incorporate constant sources of pitch (drones) and tempo (metronome) into their practice sessions.

- Approach problem-solving with LOGIC (not emotion).
 - WHAT is the problem?
 - WHEN does it occur?
 - WHY is it happening? (identify several possible reasons...it’s not exact science)
 - HOW to fix it? (identify at least 1-2 ways to fix each reason for the problem)

It’s also important for students to understand that progress can sometimes be a messy process. Yes, it’s important to practice like you are performing. However, that can sometimes bring the constant pressure of “perfection.” Thinking of the practice room as more of a lab can open up the possibilities of creative problem-solving and experimentation.

Try to recognize when you’re just spinning your wheels in the practice room. It’s like driving in snow: laying on the gas pedal will just dig deeper. Stop, put it in reverse, turn the wheel...and ease out of the rut you’ve created. Take an extra second to actually think about what you’re doing, and make a course correction.

Keep It Positive:

- Start where you **are** – and move steadily to where you want to be
 - Slow Practice: Keep it slow, but play **exactly** how you intend at faster tempi
 - Law of averages: Have you played a passage correctly or incorrectly more times?
 - Recognize the difference between critique and criticism
 - Embrace challenges – they are essential for improvement

Interestingly enough, two philosophies that have really stuck with me as being incredibly helpful have been from trombonists associated with the Boston Symphony Orchestra! In his book “Methods of Effective Practice” (which I highly recommend), Norman Bolter encourages students to start with what they **can** do...and go from there. At this past summer’s Georgia Trombone Summit, Toby Oft spoke about the importance of having a healthy inner dialogue. He illustrated the difference between critique and criticism by encouraging students to talk with themselves as a parent to their young child. To instruct, and not to demoralize.

Many students seem to have an outlook on slow practice as a last resort. “I should be able to play this closer to performance tempo.” Starting with what you **can** do (at a slower tempo) is a fantastic way to establish a fluid muscle memory and develop a solid musical idea. I think a common tendency when practicing slow is to play in a style that will not translate to a faster tempo. Consequently, all of the cleaning a student does at the slower speed completely falls apart once the tempo is increased. Just remember...when you slow things down, what you’re

really doing is taking your final musical product and ***stretching it out***. That means that note lengths should be longer, and the space between pitches should not be exaggerated.

- Always track back to sources of inspiration.
 - Listen to world-class musicians:
 - Trombonists and non-trombonists
 - All genres and styles....keep an open mind
 - Live performances – both as participant and as audience member
 - Leads to a feeling of “I just want to go and practice now!”

Inspiration and Motivation are so closely related, sometimes it can be hard to decide which influences the other. I like to think of inspiration as a large cup with a very small hole in the bottom. If I go too long without filling the cup, it will eventually be empty. Recordings and live performances are essential to maintaining a healthy dose of inspiration.

Cultivate an understanding and appreciation for what makes someone a universally appreciated artist (whether on our chosen instrument, or not). Listening and observing are the most rudimentary forms of learning and can have a lasting impact on development of personal taste. Listening to a wide variety of trombonists can shape your fundamental and musical concept...illustrating what is possible on our instrument.

One final word of encouragement is to find your circle of people. While individual time in the practice room is an inevitable and necessary part of making progress....it doesn't need to feel quite so isolating. You can actually create a social aspect to your practice regimen that involves a close group of friends. Try to schedule your practice sessions around the same time of day (or night), and split time between working alone and with each other. Whether in the form of chamber music or simply bouncing ideas off of each other and offering advice, you are creating an environment that is based on the realization that you're not alone in this endeavor. Everyone is working and trying to improve...so why not help each other out?

“As iron sharpens iron, so
One person sharpens another.” --- Prov. 27:17