

The Art of Deep Practicing
or
How to prepare a Work for Performance
 by George Sakakeeny

1. What is Deep Practicing?

The process of bringing our playing results into accord with our "*auralizations*" is what we call practicing. To Auralize: the act of forming a mental concept of sound and/or music that can be heard in the mind's ear. Auralization: the mental concepts of sound and/or music that can be heard in the mind's ear.

In other words, practicing is the process of acquiring the techniques and skills required to master our instrument, the piece we are learning, and especially to bring our artistic thoughts to life as musical sound. What makes it deep practicing is the depth that we bring to the process. It is the amount of struggle, both mental and physical, that we engage in that makes it deep. If you are getting positive results with velocity you have achieved deep practicing. To know what to practice deeply you must first be able to hear the music in your mind. You must have an *Auralization* of what you want to sound like.

Some things that are not deep practicing:

Running your scales while watching TV.

Playing your piece from beginning to end without struggling with any of the difficulties.

Doing anything that is not practicing during your practice session.

2. Meet "Mrs. It"

"Mrs. It" is not a person, but an acronym that provides an outline for assessing standards of musical performance. If you have prepared the music well, every part of MRSIT will be mastered. If one or more parts are missing, you have not prepared well. If you let "Mrs It" inform you on your journey toward mastery it will be comparatively easy to know what you need to practice.

M usicality
R hythm
S ound
I ntonation
T echnique

Musicality encompasses all of the other points of Mrs It and is ultimately the most important element, the bottom line so to speak of your performance. It is difficult to put one's finger on precisely what musicality is. Surely it includes phrasing, emotion, style and many other factors. It is also the category that contains artistic conviction, historical accuracy, flare, charisma, pizzazz etc. It is possible to have mastered the other four aspects of Mrs It and not musicality, but not the reverse.

Rhythm is required for musicality and for accuracy. It also has many sides. Fundamentally it could be defined as the ability to faithfully reproduce the rhythms written by the composer. But it is much more than that. What about rubato? Musical freedom must be rhythmical too, it must make rhythmical sense. A musician whose rhythm is weak cannot be considered masterful.

Sound like musicality is a subjective matter. That said all professional musicians are in agreement that one must have a sound that is both beautiful and functional. If you are going to play live music your sound must project. It must be able to carry your musicality to the audience, and it must sound pleasing. *The sound of any instrument is a combination of its tone and the expression of the performer.*

Intonation is not a subjective matter, you are in tune or you are not in tune. Now, what is in tune can vary depending on the context. There are different tuning systems and applications of those systems and all of that can get rather complicated. Suffice it to say that when you play your instrument you must sound in tune in whatever manner is appropriate for the context.

Technique is used here in the broadest sense possible. It refers to facility in fingering, articulation, breath control, and the control of any and every aspect of operating your instrument that is required to make music accurately and consistently. In a performance we could simply refer to it as *accuracy*. Also very objective in nature, you either play accurately or you don't. It is the level of accuracy that determines your mastery of technique. A young student may be accurate if he plays all the notes correctly; a true master of the instrument may consider a slight error in tone quality (that no one else could notice) a mistake. The more masterful you are, the higher your standards for accuracy and the smaller your mistakes become.

3. The Three Stages of Preparing a Work for Performance

What a performance is:

A performance can be any occasion that requires preparation and the act of performing, such as a recital, an audition, a master class, a concert, a studio class, or a lesson. Whether the performance you are preparing for is your next lesson or your Carnegie Hall debut, the method that we use to prepare a piece for performance is the same. Think of your preparation as having three parts or stages.

Stage One: Figuring out what is there.

The result you want to produce in stage one is learning all of the notes, rhythms, articulations etc., so that you can play the piece, movement, section, or phrase accurately and consistently. You literally figure out what is there in the piece of music and train yourself to be able to execute it consistently. Stage one will be and should be the stage in which you spend the most time in your practice. When you attempt to perform the work, assuming the difficulty level is within your reach, if you make mistakes you have not completed stage one. A piece that is beyond your reach is one that requires you to possess skills that you are incapable of acquiring at that point in your life. There is an order to the acquisition of skills, one should not attempt to run before walking or walk before crawling. An experienced teacher should know what repertoire is appropriate for your level. You should always be playing pieces that have the right amount of challenge so that you are always being required to improve, but not so much challenge that you can't do a good job on your repertoire at any given time.

Stage Two: Playful Experimentation

The result you want to produce in stage two is developing your interpretation by experimenting with different musical ideas, ways of phrasing and articulating, and tempi. Stage two is the creative part of leaning a piece, movement, or phrase. A musician can and should engage in stage two simultaneously with stage one.

Stage Three: Practicing Performing

The result you want to produce in stage three is finding out what happens when you perform the piece, movement, section, or phrase from beginning to end employing everything you have accomplished in stages one and two. You will literally practice performing the piece, i.e. run-throughs. Stage three is the only stage that many young musicians employ in their practice. When this is the case, music takes a very long time to learn and is seldom if ever learned thoroughly enough to perform accurately and consistently, or to advance their level of mastery on their instrument.

4. What One Actually Does During Each of the Three Stages of Preparation for a Performance.

Stage one:

The most important thing to do during stage one is to always play the music *correctly*. If you commit an error or have trouble controlling a passage, go back over it again and again struggling with the difficulty until it is no longer "difficult."

The second most important thing is to have a goal for exactly what parts of your piece you are going to master in your practice session. Decide the results you want to produce in advance so you know what you

are working on. At the end of your practice session take note of whether or not you produced the results you intended. (See sample practice log attached)

Begin by playing the selection through slowly enough that you can get through it. Notice, which parts were easy to play and which were difficult or impossible, those are the parts on which you will focus.

Continue by dividing the piece into sections for practice and focusing on the parts you cannot play with ease. *You must never play inaccurately.* If certain parts are beyond your ability play them slower. Slow it down until it is easy to play accurately, repeat. Play it 100 times slowly for every 1 time in tempo. Play your piece for days or weeks under tempo. When comfort on the material arrives you will be able to speed it up with ease. Comfort in this context means you can play the music consistently without making mistakes.

Use rhythms and articulations to woodshed difficult combinations of notes. Repeat each practice rhythm or articulation at least 10 times accurately. *Never play faster than you can play accurately. Listen deeply to yourself. You must always require yourself to play accurately.*

Notice what technical skills are required and practice those skills away from the piece. For example, on scale passages practice the scales that are utilized in the music. Do the same for arpeggiated passages, or thirds, fourths etc. Figure out what skill you need to play the passage and practice that skill. Then put your newfound ability to use by going back and woodshedding some more. In this way you will be developing your overall technique and not just learning one piece by rote.

Sometimes the difficulty you face is not a matter of finger technique. It could be breath control, articulation, rhythm, or a host of other problems. The ability to know what you need to practice is as important as the quality of your practicing. Keep "Mrs. It" in mind. You must learn to be a detective and figure out what is causing the problems you face in your playing. Once you know what needs to be practiced apply your time to that.

If you have trouble and get frustrated, fight the instinct to play the passage faster in a vain attempt to show yourself that you can do it. This is a horrible waste of your precious practice time.

When you have mastered a difficult passage put it back in context with the less difficult parts of the section you are working on. Now practice the section 10 times accurately gradually raising the tempo as it becomes easier for you to play the music. When the section is learned (this means you can play the entire section in a tempo with consistency) go on to the next section of music. After mastering each section always put it in context with the sections you mastered formerly by playing them together. A "difficult passage" could be as long as an entire section of a piece or as short as two notes.

You may have to woodshed the same difficult passages more than once until they are ingrained, or until you have mastered whatever skills are required to execute the passage. Remember, the point is to make the piece easy to play. If it *is* easy you will be able to play it with control, with accuracy and consistency, musically, and freely. And the opposite if it *is not* easy for you to play. *A practice session in which you mastered only one phrase is still a very good practice session.*

Stage two:

Stage two is the stage in which we experiment and make musical choices about tempo, phrasing, emotion, style, and the overall architecture of the piece. We are creating our interpretation, as we "auralize" the music. Theoretically there is no time when stage two comes to an end. However, performing is a practical activity, we have to make some choices and then train ourselves to execute based on those choices. For example, the tempo of a fast piece is primarily based on what would make the music sound good, but also what would make *you* sound good. It doesn't work to play pieces faster than you are able, or to try to play pieces that are beyond your reach.

Some things we do while working in stage two are:

Figure out the architectural structure of the piece.

Figure out exactly where the various sections of the piece begin and end.

Figure out exactly where each phrase begins and ends.

Figure out how the notes in each phrase are grouped. Mark the groupings.
 Figure out exactly where you are going to breathe and mark the breaths in the score.
 Experiment with different tempi.
 Experiment with dynamics so that the architecture of the piece becomes clear.
 Make the piece sound appropriate for its style period in terms of styles of articulation, phrase length, volume, tempo etc. (if you don't know what to do ask your teacher.)

This list could go on and on. The main point is that a musician must go beyond only learning the notes. We must determine how we want our music to sound and practice those ways of phrasing, breathing, articulating etc. that are consistent with our "auralization" of the music we are playing.

Stage Three:

Stage three is self-explanatory; practice performing the piece. Begin at the beginning and play until the end employing everything you have mastered in the first two stages. **DO NOT STOP!** When you have finished a performance of the movement make notes, mental or otherwise, of what did not go well. Go back and work on those spots. Repeat. If you can't play a run-through without stopping, your work in stage one and two is incomplete and you should cease trying to do run-throughs until you have smoothed out the difficult parts. After you have mastered run-throughs of single movements, practice a performance of the entire work, beginning to end. **DO NOT STOP!** You will find out what happens, where your concentration lags, and about your endurance to name only a few things. Practicing performing should only take about 15% or less of the amount of time you have spent preparing a piece. If you have completed stages one and two well, stage three should go very quickly.

When you enter the stage to perform, or play an audition, or enter a room to take a lesson, you should be able to play with ease and without stress or fear, because you have prepared virtually every aspect of your performance, and then finally practiced the execution of your performance several times. This kind of thorough work applied consistently over a substantial period of time is what makes the difference between good playing and mediocre playing. It is what gives you "talent."

5. How much should a person practice?

I am often asked this question and there is a clear answer. Many experts agree that in order to attain mastery of a musical instrument a person must engage in deep practice for 10,000 hours cumulatively. Many pianists and violinists reach 10,000 hours by the time they are in their early 20's if they started young and were highly disciplined as a child. Do the math. Decide by what age you want to attain a high level of mastery. Estimate how many hours of deep practice time you have put in up to the present day. Now calculate how many hours you must practice each day to get 10,000 hours under your belt by your chosen age of mastery. Then get busy!

Keep in mind that virtually anything can be practiced. We all know we must practice scales for example, but some of us need to practice staying relaxed in mind and body while playing. Some of us need to practice concentration, time management, personal discipline, or taking care of our wellbeing. You can even practice how to cook, play poker, drive a car, or build good relationships. You have the power to master whatever you wish if you practice deeply and consistently, be it your instrument, a hobby, or life skills.

Suggested reading:

The Talent Code by Daniel Coyle
Outliers by Malcolm Gladwell
Sound in Motion by David McGill

Practice Log

Date: _____

Practice session beginning time: _____

What I intend to practice in this session is: _____

The results I intend to produce in this session are: _____

Practice session ending time: _____

What I actually practiced in this session was: _____

The results I produced in this session were: _____

Amount of time spent practicing during this session excluding breaks: _____

Total amount of hours spent practicing in my life up to this point: _____

Date: _____

Practice session beginning time: _____

What I intend to practice in this session is: _____

The results I intend to produce in this session are: _____

Practice session ending time: _____

What I actually practiced in this session was: _____

The results I produced in this session were: _____

Amount of time spent practicing during this session excluding breaks: _____

Total amount of hours spent practicing in my life up to this point: _____