

Introduction

"...now go home and PRACTICE!"

You may have heard this from your Band Director hundreds of times. However, as a young music student, if you don't have any more information than this, you may have no idea of what that means, what or how to practice, or even where to begin. Many young music students resort to playing things they already know how to play, only to get frustrated when progress on their instrument is slow, or worse yet, when their practice sessions only result in frustration or the development of bad habits!

You may have also heard the phrase: **"PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT."** While not entirely untrue, at Fossil Ridge we believe that excellence is a HABIT. It may be more accurate to say **"PRACTICE MAKES PERMANENT."** Therefore, to achieve excellence on a regular basis, you must have **"PERFECT PRACTICE!"**

Great musicians have developed the ability to practice effectively and efficiently. Since a large portion of a musician's playing takes place individually, their ability to practice correctly becomes essential to their development as a musician. In order to practice effectively:

- ***Be organized*** – set a goal for each practice session before it starts.
- ***Have a focus for each portion of the practice session*** – understand why you are practicing a particular exercise or excerpt.
- ***Set Performance goals*** – Have a good mental/aural picture of the desired sound.
- ***Develop a high level of listening/judgment skills*** – be able to honestly critique yourself about your performance.
- ***Take on the role of both student and teacher*** – be able to concentrate on performing, yet be able to listen for and detect errors.
- ***Be patient*** – don't move on until you have completed the task at hand.

- We ***highly encourage*** each student to ***record themselves*** as often as possible. You can check out a recorder from the Band Office, or use a recording "App" or the voice memo feature on your phone! You can learn a ton from hearing yourself play on a recording!

- ***Regular practice in shorter sessions*** is far more beneficial than long sessions that are sporadic. Sports analogy: how would your body feel if you ran for 20-30 minutes, 5 days a week, rather than trying to run for 100-120 minutes 1 day a week? ***How you practice and what you practice is more important than the how long you practice.***

Excellence comes from repeated, accurate repetitions at a high level of performance!!

Part 1 – “The How”

3-Penny System for Practicing Anything!

- Start with 3 pennies on one side of your music stand
- Isolate the section, scale, etc., that you are going to work on, and *find a tempo that you can play that section without mistakes*. This may be *extremely* slow, and that’s OK! Again, it’s about repeated, accurate repetitions at a high level of performance.
- Start the metronome.
- Each time you perform the excerpt correctly, with a mature, characteristic tone and no mistakes, move 1 penny to the other side of the stand.
- When all three pennies have moved to the other side of the stand...increase the tempo on your metronome by a few clicks (example: from 72 bpm to 80 bpm).
- Perform the excerpt again 3 times, moving a penny to the other side of the stand after each successful performance.
- When all three pennies have moved to the other side of the stand...increase the tempo on your metronome by a few clicks (example: from 80 bpm to 88 bpm).
- Keep going until you have reached your desired / goal tempo, and can perform the excerpt without mistakes consistently.
- **HERE’S THE CATCH:** if you make a mistake, stop, reset your pennies, and rest the metronome to the last tempo you were at without mistakes and start over.

While this may seem like it takes forever, you will see huge improvements very quickly, because you are now focusing on accurate repetitions, rather than just playing through something regardless of how it sounds.

Sports Analogy...

Imagine yourself as a sports team. Every time you play an excerpt or piece of music correctly, you win, and every time you play incorrectly, you lose.

1-4 Record: After playing a part of your music 4 times incorrectly, you get it correct on the 5th time, and then move on. Your record would be 1 win and 4 losses. This would be a poor team.

5-4 Record: After you get it correct, you then get it correct a total of five times in a row. Now your record is 5 wins and 4 losses. This is a winning record but about average. A top-notch team would not be happy with this record...you probably missed the playoffs!

15-4 Record: After you play it correctly 5 times in a row, you proceed to play it correctly another 10 times. Your record is now 15 wins and 4 losses. You are now a great sports team with a habit of winning!

“Most students practice until they get it right. Professional musicians practice until they can’t get it wrong!”

Part 2 – “The What”

For every practice session, you must have:

- *A Purpose* – “What do I want to get out of this session?”
- *An Ideal* – create an image of what you want it to sound like in your mind. Without that model, you’ll never know if you’re reaching your goal.
- *A Diagnosis*– Simply give yourself honest feedback about the performance. What were the positives and what needs improving?
- *A Solution* – determine what techniques have been used in class to solve your particular problem.
- *A Habit (Correct Repetition)*– probably the most important step. Once you have corrected the problem, you must repeat it correctly many times to make that correction a natural part of your playing.

Session Organization

Think of your playing in terms of 4 different sections, and try to cover each aspect in each practice session. There are many exercises that could fit into each section.

Throughout the week, spread out the exercises so you do not do the exact same routine every time.

- *Part I - Tone Development:* It is essential to start your practice with exercises that help your tone quality. Your sound is your signature as a musician! Once your sound is exactly as you want it, you can carry that sound into all other portions of your practice session. This might involve breathing exercises, long tones, mouthpiece work, or other tone-focused exercises.

Exercises may include:

- Breathing exercises
- Mouthpiece work
- Singing
- Long tones
- Flow studies
- Melodic line exercises
- Dynamic control exercises
- Pedal tone exercises
- Range development (upper and lower)

- **Part II - Technical Studies:** Work to maintain the highest quality tone while you work on technique. This portion of your practice will help in developing flexibility, clarity of articulation, and strong technical facility over your instrument. **Use the 3-Penny System Here!** Most students will attempt things too fast and will end up getting better at making mistakes rather than getting better at the music! **Exercises may include:**
 - ☑ Scales
 - ☑ Arpeggios
 - ☑ Thirds
 - ☑ Flexibility exercises/Lip Slurs
 - ☑ Clarke studies/Scale patterns
 - ☑ Articulation studies/Style exercises
- **Part III - Musical Studies:** This portion of your practice session might possibly require the most organization and focused goal-setting. Many people simply play through their music and never truly break down the music to perfect it. This part of your practice session should be “Quality over Quantity.” Work to refine the finer points of material that you have been working on in class or in your lessons. **Exercises may include:**
 - ☑ Solos or Etudes
 - ☑ Playing Tests
 - ☑ Music from Private Lessons
 - ☑ Band Music
- **Part IV - New Material:** You may have just gone over something new in Band class or lessons that you need to review the same day you first tried it. You might also want to include sight-reading in this part of your practice session. Rhythm counting and note naming are two great ways to improve and refine your music reading skills. **Exercises may include:**
 - ☑ Sight-reading books
 - ☑ Use Intermediate method books – start reading music that is a level lower than you are currently playing, then slowly increase.
 - ☑ Read other parts from players in the ensemble you are performing in.

***Planning, self-discipline, and consistency will pay off!
Playing a musical instrument is as much mental as
physical. Make sure you have “think time” in your
practice sessions.***

Keys to practicing/performing music

- Plan the exact segments to practice – know the segments of your music, and the concepts or ideas that you plan to implement on those segments.
- Practice small segments of music at a time – perfecting a portion of your music at a time is more productive than playing through all of your music.
- Increase your standards for that segment – practice to perfect every aspect of the music you are working on.
- Different practice techniques – perform each segment in several different ways (subdivided, on one pitch, on the mouthpiece, all slurred, all articulated, as written, etc.)
- Use a metronome and a tuner
- Record your practicing – listening to yourself can help you quickly and honestly evaluate your actual performance.
- Review work from a previous session
- Keep the overall goal in mind

Self-Guided Listening Questions

- Do I have correct hand position and playing position? Am I breathing properly? Is my tone the highest quality?
- Do I have a purpose behind practicing this segment of music? Have I accomplished that purpose?
- Can I correctly count this portion of music? Can I play those rhythms accurately on one pitch?
- Are all of the tones coming out of my instrument controlled sounds? When performing this segment, can you clearly hear each individual note?
- Is the line of music smooth and flowing?
- Are the articulations accurate and clear to the listener?
- Can I accurately perform this segment with and without a metronome? Am I pushing and pulling the tempo without knowing?
- Do I have control over my sound when performing dynamics? Does my sound or response change with the change in dynamics? Do I know where the high and low points of the music are?
- Can I consistently perform this segment? Can I correctly apply the concepts above to this segment several times in a row?

Final Thoughts...

- *You are responsible for your own practice time, practice habits, and success on your instrument.* The Band Directors and private instructors are here to assist you any way we can, but nobody can do the work for you.
- *There are no shortcuts to success!* Performing at a high level on your instrument takes time, dedication, persistence, and patience.
- *You “get out” in proportion to what you “put in.”* The more you dedicate, the more you have to contribute. The more you have to contribute, the more you enjoy your contribution.
- *The Journey is more important than the Destination!* Striving to improve on a daily basis, having pride in your performance and personal growth, dedicating yourself to a higher standard, and having the discipline to persevere through adversity are attributes that will help you be successful in anything you pursue in life!
- *Excellence never happens by chance.* The philosopher Aristotle said...“*Excellence is an art won by training and habituation. We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit.*”

“Don’t Wait to be GREAT!”