

HOW TO PRACTISE AN INSTRUMENT

The following notes are the direct result of recent experimental data from studies on how the brain responds when we are practising and playing a musical instrument. If you would like more background, I have written an essay, with references, at <https://www.billanderton.blogspot.com>.

The usual way to practise is to play until you make a mistake, then either go back to the beginning and try again, or fix the mistake and play on. Despite being commonly employed, both methods are unhelpful.

Rather, you should identify the error, remove the bar or phrase from the piece or study and treat it completely separately. So,

1. Identify the error
2. Work out what is going wrong and how to fix it
3. Play the bar or phrase carefully and correctly
4. Repeat many times over. If you make a mistake, repeat the process until you are completely confident that you won't mess up again.

In general, practise your study or piece for about ten to fifteen minutes, then take a short break before continuing, preferably with a different item on your practice schedule.

In addition, take micro breaks every now and again – only ten seconds or so, when you should stare into space and do nothing.

Going back to the subject of eliminating errors (or improving your technique), do a minute or two's mental practice as part of the mix. That is, imagine how to play correctly, or imagine inwardly applying a particular technique, for example, keeping your bow straight, or making an accurate shift. Mental practice is significant help when combined with physical practice.

Don't make adjustments as you play, for example, to correct an intonation inaccuracy. Rather, note the out-of-tune note(s) and, when you finish playing, go back and fix it as above.

Using a metronome

I'll take it as a given that you have the ability to play along with a metronome.

If you have a rhythmic or timing problem, the usual practice is to put the metronome clicking the beats and play along. Wrong! Here is the correct procedure:

1. Set the metronome to play on the off beats only.
2. Next, set the metronome to play only on the down beat (first beat) of each bar.
3. Set it to click on the down beat of every second bar, then every third bar...

Check back here for updates.

Bill Anderton, 17/08/22