

## **Sarah's quick guide on How to Practice**

Knowing how to practice seems like a pretty basic idea, especially if you've been playing an instrument and taking lessons for a while. But to describe exactly what to do is trickier than one might expect.

**Goals of practice: To be efficient and effective.** The basic goal of practice is to get better on your instrument and to increase your understanding of the music. When we practice, we want to get as much bang for the buck as possible – we want the work we're doing to be extremely effective without having to spend 10 hours a day at it. In my many years of doing music, I've seen over and over that the people that put in the work can and do bypass those with natural talent. If you've got both, congratulations! Beware of trying to slide by on talent – it'll come back to bite you.

### **How to get started:**

Sometimes the hardest part is just getting the flute out of the case. Two things can help with this obstacle: 1) tell yourself that it's great to play, even if it's a short practice session, giving yourself permission to do a short session sometimes and 2) having everything easily accessible, so there's no wasted time looking for music or cleaning rags. Do short practices on purpose sometimes, so that you believe yourself when you say that you don't have to do a long session every time.

**Schedule your practice time.** It can be as precise as you need it to be. If it works best to put it on the schedule just like you would a class or a doctor's appointment, then do that. Maybe it works better to say "after dinner." But make a plan.

**Make it regular and frequent.** You want practicing to become part of your lifestyle, just something you do every day, like brushing your teeth, doing homework, or getting exercise. If it has to be shorter one day because of time constraints, then don't fret about the length, just do what you can. You can do longer the next time. You absolutely will make great strides if you have regularity. This is the place where hard work can win out over raw talent.

**Every bit counts!** Even 10 minutes of practice will make a difference, and it's worth it. So, if you've got a few minutes before dinner or soccer or dance, pick up your flute and do a little.

**Make a special place for it.** Have your music, stand, metronome, tuner, pencil, and flute all together in one place, and make it easy to get started. This is your flute spot!

### **The Nitty-Gritty:**

#### **Lyrical passages:**

**Tone:** The famous Moyses tone exercises. Play each note on the flute (there's only about 36 of them), and really get to know it. What air speed does the note like? How should

you angle the air stream? How much air for a loud note vs. a quiet note? Can you find the very center of that note? It may seem tedious, but luckily the flute is consistent, so if you spend the time, you'll be able to predict exactly what will happen when you're playing. Play every note as beautifully as you can, every single time. Pretty soon, it'll become second nature, and will be easy to control your sound.

**Phrasing:** Now you need to connect these beautiful notes together. The most common mistake is to "protect the connection;" that is, you may get softer as you change from one note to the next, because you're afraid of cracking or hearing finger movements. Don't protect the connection, blow right through it. Try crescendoing through it, and you'll find out exactly what happens. Think of phrasing as a ball – it's meant to keep rolling, and very rarely should come to a complete stop. Or like a fish in the ocean – they have to keep moving to stay alive. Keep the phrase moving.

**Interpretation:** A lot of times people think they don't know how to interpret music, but it turns out that they actually do. The best way to see what phrasing feels natural is to "speak-sing" the music – sing the music without thinking about pitches, and listen more for when it goes up and down, what kinds of momentum it has, where does it feel intense, or flowing, feel what mood comes to you. Usually players can do this better than they think. This acts as the bridge between an idea and actually playing that idea.

### **Technical passages:**

**The art of chunking:** according to neuropsychiatrists, the brain can only handle up to 7 things at a time, and prefers 3 or 4. Think of the dashes in phone numbers or social security numbers, and how difficult they would be to remember without the dashes. When practicing music, this means that the best plan is to break the music into 3-5 note chunks, and practice the chunk over and over. Eventually the chunk becomes a unit; that is, it'll be identified, usually by its first note, as 1 thing now (instead of 5), and can be joined to another chunk that has undergone the same treatment. In this way, the whole piece can be built up into totally manageable pieces.

**The slow build:** This is the one everyone knows about – start slowly and speed up bit by bit. But by slow, we mean incredibly slowly, so that not only is everything correct, but it sounds great and feels great, and is a slow-motion version of how you want the performance to go, dynamics and all. So, the hardest part is actually getting the first perfect slow version down! Moving it up from there is much easier-use the metronome for this. Make sure to be able to play it perfectly many times in a row at a given speed before moving up – you be the judge, but be a discerning judge.

**The perfect brick:** This uses the chunking method, and emphasizes the idea that each chunk should be perfect before trying to join it to other chunks. It should be comfortable and sound good and memorized. Think of building a house – you wouldn't want to use crumbly bricks to build your dream home. Or cooking your favorite food – every ingredient should be fresh and delicious and of the highest quality.

**Putting bricks together:** When you've perfected a couple of chunks, it's time to put them together. Don't try to play the whole piece yet! Put two chunks together, either by adding one note at a time from one chunk to the next, or simply by putting the two together, and then repeating the practice process with the now-larger chunk. This gives your piece a totally solid technical foundation.

**Mixing it up:** another way to approach technical passages, especially running 16<sup>th</sup> notes, is to mix up the rhythms, accents or articulations in the passage. Change the rhythm to a dotted rhythm, or flip the slurring pattern, and then play it all staccato and then all legato, or play it backwards. Every different way you practice the passage gives you a slightly different angle with which to view the passage, and in the process you get to know it better and better.

**Start at the end:** Try practicing by beginning at the end of the piece, so that these passages get as much mileage as the ones at the beginning.

**Repetition:** Practice is repetition, Practice is repetition, Practice is repetition. The more you repeat a passage, the more and stronger the connections in your brain will be. Your brain will think this must be pretty important information if you're repeating it so much, and it'll devote more neurons to the cause. On the flip side, if you play the passage rarely, it'll get the message that this isn't terribly important, and put its energy elsewhere. Imagine that a chunk is 5 notes, and it takes about 1-2 seconds. So, to repeat that 60 times will take only 1 or 2 minutes. It's not unreasonable to play a chunk 200 times during one practice session, and it really gets the job done. This is efficiency and effectiveness in action!

**Do what your teacher says!** This may seem pretty obvious, but can be surprisingly tricky. To get the very most out of lessons, really listen to the teacher and try to do exactly what he/she says, and without having to be told more than once. If you're told to play a passage staccato, then play it that way, from that moment on. If you're told to play with more dynamics, then do so, every time. Depending on your point of view, you may already be doing this, or you may resist it because you don't want to be a brainless robot. But what actually happens if you follow directions is that you get past the basic musical problems immediately, and can get to the more personal, creative, and expressive music making much, much sooner (very far from brainless!). **Surprisingly, the more you follow directions and do what you're taught to do, the sooner you can become creative and play the music in your personal way.** You won't waste time on basic, universal technique, and thus you'll have more time to express yourself, and possess the technique to make it happen.

Also, the more you do what your teacher says, the easier you make it for them to teach you what they know. You'll learn what this particular teacher has to offer if you really listen and try to accomplish what they ask. And you'll really find out what the teacher teaches well if you can get past the first things that they ask you to do. Likewise, when playing at a masterclass or competition, do whatever the coach asks during that class, even if it contradicts what your teacher said. Afterwards, you go back to your teacher's

recommendations. The information can become part of your knowledge base, which you will draw on for the rest of your life. If you feel conflicted about a technique, talk to your teacher. But don't just decide to ignore what your teacher says because you don't think you agree – you'll create stagnation in the lessons, and lose the opportunity to learn from someone that has a lot of experience. **Learn to trust and respect your teachers** – they really know their instrument and have lots of experience to share with you.

**What not to do:**

**Don't: Play the piece straight through and think you're done.** You can, and should, play the piece through sometimes, to get used to the endurance it requires, and to understand the piece as a whole. But you'll waste a lot of practice time if you do this for more than 5 or 10% of your practice time. Also, playing through a piece too often is the surest way to get tired of the piece!

**Don't: Always start at the beginning.** Many many players fall into this trap, and then the end of the piece (often the exciting finale) is the rustiest part.

**Don't: Play the easy parts the most.** You need to target your tough spots, and dive into them with energy and optimism!

**The metronome is your friend!** Use it everyday. It'll help you to build a strong inner beat, and notice your tempo changes. It's an excellent tool for knowing how fast you can do something well, and to speed things up slowly and solidly.

**The tuner is another great tool.** Refer to it at various points during your practice. It may tell you surprising things; for example, that you're out of tune. ☺

Remember, the hard work and time spent is so rewarding! You end up with an incredible amount of skill on your instrument, and with the ability to do hard work and get results that totally transfers over into other facets of life. You've also made millions of connections in your brain that wouldn't have been made otherwise, so you're smarter, too. It is never time wasted.

**Do the work – it's worth it!**