

## Episode 8: Learning to Practice

### Intro

Hello and welcome to Tonal Diversions. I'm your host, Lori Archer Sutherland, and this is my journey as a multifaceted musician. I'm a composer, clarinetist and more who is navigating the world of is classical music, and I'd love to share my adventures with you.

### Episode proper

Today I'd like to chat about learning how to practice. It's something that, at least when I was in school and college, it just wasn't talked about all that much. It's not that we never got any practice tips. We just didn't get a lot of information on how to actually practice and make that work for us. I've honestly learned a lot more about it in adulthood than I ever did in school. I try to teach these tips to my students so they get the head start that I didn't have at their age.

### How do most of us learn to practice?

There are a couple of things that we all learn to do, and they do help to an extent. The techniques work, but we're not often told how to make them work for us and for the actual passage that we're trying to work on.

### *Repetition*

First up is repetition. Just keep playing it over and over again and surely the next time it will be right, and we just keep doing it over and over and over. We're told to play something ten times in a row perfectly, and if we mess up, we have to start all over from the first round.

### *Slow to Fast*

The next one is slow to fast. This usually involves a metronome. You keep playing that passage with the metronome starting slowly, then speeding up incrementally, and you just keep doing it until you get to tempo. But inevitably we hit a wall and we just can't seem to go any faster. And at least for me, that usually hits below the tempo that it's supposed to be at. And it's so frustrating because I just can't seem to get it any faster.

### Next Steps

And that's about it for learning how to practice. And then we get frustrated and wonder why nothing is improving, especially if we finally nailed that tricky passage yesterday and today it seems like we've never played it before in our entire lives. We end up feeling like there's no point and maybe we're not cut out for this music thing after all. But there's good news. There are other things we can try. I hope these tips give you some new tools to try out in your next practice session, and I'd love to hear if you have success with them.

### *Have a Plan*

First up is to have a plan. It can be really helpful to have an idea of what you'd like to focus on when you sit down to practice. Is there a certain passage where you need to work on fingerings? Is the rhythm in another section giving you trouble? Do you need to work on speed or articulation? What are the things you're trying to accomplish in this practice session?

### *Focused Repetition*

We can do focused repetition. Notice that this is different than just repetition, because repetition can be a great tool if you pay attention. Part of why we don't do that well with it is because we're not listening or focusing when we're doing it. We just mindlessly repeat whatever we're supposed to repeat for the number of reps we're supposed to do it, and we're not really noticing whether the reps are correct.

If you're lifting weights with bad form, doing lots of reps could lead to injury instead of building you up. I think the same can be applied to music. If you're doing a lot of repetition but making the same mistake on each one, aren't you just reinforcing that mistake instead of correcting it? It will also make it harder to correct later on because you've built up a habit of playing the wrong note.

### *Chunk It Down*

The next thing to try is to chunk it down and build it back up. My students hear this from me all the time. It's one of the main things I tell them when I'm getting them to learn something. Just like you don't eat an apple all at once by shoving it the whole thing in your mouth. You have to take small bites. You don't learn a piece all at once.

### *Notes*

Two places to really chunk down are notes and speed. For notes, I use a lot of rhythm manipulation. For example, if there's a run of 16th notes, I'll start by playing them as dotted rhythms, long-short. Then I'll switch it to short-long. Then I'll change them to triplets or other variations. I'll link to a handout I created about this. While it's specifically for clarinetists, the principles can apply to so many other instruments. This helps for learning what comes next in the passage, as well as isolating tricky transitions.

### *Speed*

For working on speed, I am still a fan of slow to fast practice, and it does have its place. I do believe that if you can't play something slowly, you're not going to be able to play it at tempo. Kind of a walk-before-you-run type of thing, but you can still chunk down sections instead of doing the entire run every time.

But on the flip side of that is something that I've started doing more on my own after hearing about it from another resource. I've started doing fast but chunked practice as well, because I've hit that speed wall any number of times. Like, I'll play something fine at 120, but even bumping it up to 121 and things just fall apart. So I still break it down into small pieces. But I try to do each of those small pieces fast at full tempo and then add more to that segment and try that at full tempo, and so on.

This came from an episode or a post from Noah Kaguyama, who does the “Bulletproof Musician”, and he had interviewed someone and they talked about this technique, and I started using it, too.

### *Working Away from the Instrument*

Another thing we can do is to work away from our instruments. I know that sounds a little counter intuitive, but when you think of athletes, they do this kind of stuff all the time.

### *Rhythm*

So one thing you can focus on away from your instrument is rhythm. I'm a big believer in clapping or tapping your rhythm. A friend of mine would often say something to the effect of "if you can't say it, you can't play it." And I found this to be true. It can be so helpful to isolate just the rhythm where you don't have to worry about what note is coming next. You are only worrying about this one thing and concentrating on that, and then you can put the notes back in with it.

### *Structure and Form*

The other thing to do away from your instrument is look at the structure of the piece. This is a great time to look at how everything is put together. You can start with the basics of key signature, time, signature, tempo, and look beyond that. What are the themes of the melody? Are there any rhythms that predominate what happens in the harmony? You don't have to know a lot of music theory to start seeing similarities, differences, or patterns. I really encourage you to look for patterns because that can help you practice things later on. If you know that the same theme in a Rondo comes back four times during the piece, that's good to know. And then to find out if it's actually the exact same each time, or if there are little differences that you have to watch out for.

### *Create Your Own Exercises*

Consider making up your own exercises. This can be a really interesting way of looking at a problem. What's the trouble spot in a piece you're practicing? Can you turn that bit into its own exercise? Turn it into long tones, or play the scale it's based off of or something? Do something with the rhythm. There's value in making up your own exercise, because sometimes that actually works the best. I mean, talk about a custom solution to what you're doing.

### *Give Yourself a Reward!*

And finally, just reward yourself. Play something fun just because that's why we play, isn't it? To have fun and to make music that we enjoy playing. So especially if you've had a really hard practice session, pull out your favorite tune and play it. It doesn't matter if it's a song that you played in 6th grade that is really easy, but you still love. Just play it. Give yourself a reward for putting in the work that you did.

### *Resources*

I do have some resources that I'm going to link in the show notes, but I'll also talk a little bit about them here.

### *Bulletproof Musician*

I love the site "Bulletproof Musician" by Noa Kageyama. It's so helpful, and I stumbled upon it years ago, and I don't even remember what I was searching for that led me to it, but I've been a faithful reader of it for a while now. The articles about practicing and performing are incredibly

helpful. I've incorporated many things over time that I learned about from this site. The part I mentioned earlier about the fast but chunked practice came from this site.

### *Books*

And then there are a few books. The first is *The Art of Practicing: A Guide to Making Music From the Heart* by Madeline Bruser. I'll confess it's been a long time since I read this one, but it was on my bookshelf and I thought it was worthwhile to take it out and look at it again. She talks about practicing beyond the technical aspects of notes and rhythms and incorporating musicality. She also emphasizes the physicality of making music and to be sure we're not harming our bodies by using good posture, hand position, and other considerations. So it's worthwhile to read those sections because musicians do face a lot of injuries.

Next up is *Performing Under Pressure: The Science of Doing Your Best When It Matters Most* by Hendrie Weisinger. While this book isn't specifically about practice and it doesn't focus on music, it's a great read and is quite insightful. Most of us musicians will have to perform at some time or another, so why not add another tool? This complements the "Bulletproof Musician" site really well.

And finally, *Practicing Sucks, But It Doesn't Have To! Surviving Music Lessons* by Phyllis Sdoia-Satz and Barry Satz. This one focuses a lot on private lessons and the interactions between student, teacher, and caregiver. It still contains some really good nuggets about the art of practicing and tips on how to do it more effectively.

### *Conclusion*

I hope this episode has helped bring awareness of some other practice tools you can use and that maybe your practice sessions will become a little bit better and maybe not quite as painful. I would also love to hear tips on what else you do in your practice sessions because I might be able to incorporate them for me or my students and I'd love to know if you try any of these out and if they work for you, so please feel free to contact me at podcast at Tonal diversions.com until next time.

### *Outro*

Thank you for listening to Tonal Diversions subscribe wherever podcasts are found and share with a friend until next time. Bye!