

ICWF 2025

The Art of Practicing

Stages of learning

- We can do it if we combine tasks that don't require many cognitive demands!
- Select one line -get centered – play – shake it off – repeat 5/7 times.
- Plan, play, reflect. This is better than having general goals.
- Prepare with detail and intention so you can be free to perform.
- Articulate what you want out loud – more deliberately - then write it down.
- Choreograph a mental routine – create a clean script in your mind.
- Slower improvements today are evidence of more improvement tomorrow.
- Focus with concentrated energy, not effort.
- What is your emotional content in the phrases?
- Do you have a subtext?
- Practice subdividing for muscles to fire optimally.
- Think about life being in every note and life within the long notes.
- Concentrating on the rhythm brings you into the present, out of the past and future, where anxiety looms.
- Find permanent solutions to fewer problems at a time.
- Blocked versus random practice. Find what works best for you!
- Memorize and practice text delivery.
- Warm up, practice, and record.
- Cultivate flexibility, not rigidity.

Physically

- How does your body feel in time and space?
- Get grounded, breathe, feel the space around you, and take up the space. Feel before you play.
- Own the space
- Walk around the room - touch and familiarize yourself with the space – this creates safety. And encourages a parasympathetic nervous system response.
- Check in with your body regularly
- Don't preset anything/always stay in a released position.
- Let go in between phrases for your parasympathetic nervous system to stay grounded.
- Regularly check in with your body and observe where you are. Are you holding tension?
- Learn and practice primal/abdominal breathing to maintain a centered, stable core.
- Trust your body – be an observer rather than a controller.

Mentally

- Choreograph your mental routine.
- How are your thoughts, emotions, and self-talk influencing your success with your practice routine?
- Think about what you DO want, not what you DON'T want – manage your inner critic.
- Magnify the positive and minimize cognitive anxiety.
- Hear the sound and feel of the piece before you play/conduct.
- Imagine you are improvising, and your inner critic will quiet down.
- If you feel more spontaneous, you will play more accurately. This will help your mind stay with you rather than go to things not relevant in the moment.
- Let unimportant and intrusive thoughts float by – isn't that interesting/no big deal! Stay curious.
- Create a vocal sound in your head.
- Think of the sound you want to make.
- Think of a performer you admire and imagine how they sing/play.
- Trust the body and brain to do what needs to happen in the moment
- When you are consciously monitoring, you are accessing the *prefrontal cortex*. This area of the brain works when we are learning a new skill. Once we know how to do the skill, there is more going on in the *cerebellum*. When we are trying to deliberately control during practice/ performance, we tend to access the prefrontal cortex and end up with fewer fluid moments. Focus on small, intricate technical details won't help!

Bring Stage Demands to the Practice Room

- Not the other way around
- Learn to play under pressure.
- Practice simulating a performance environment as often as possible- habituation.
- Imagine you are on the stage.
- Connect and communicate with your audience.
- Perform for others as often as possible.
- Create and visualize your subtext, projecting it into the hall with physical and mental awareness.
- Get your heart rate up and play/conduct feeling in this state.
- Get comfortable with this energy with fewer mistakes.
- Being physically uncomfortable does not mean it will be wrong.
- Practice performing by letting go of self-monitoring, evaluating, and problem-solving.
- Multitasking doesn't work.
- Practice taking risks in the practice room.
- Practice playing with 100% expression.
- Think about the sound and general feel, not minute details in the muscle movement
- Aim for an optimal target point in the back of the room
- Practice the musical aspects of stage performance with body awareness.

- Practice specifically for the demands of the performance.
- Remember why you are there!

Exercise

Play a piece without thinking. Every time a thought pops into your head, write it down. What kind of thoughts pop into your head? This can give you a preview of where you go off script in a performance.

Exercise

Play a metronome in the background and pay no attention to it!
 Play Baby Shark in the background.
 Gradually take away distractions.

Exercise

Blocked versus Random practice
 Blocked practice involves repeating the same section over and over.
 Random practice involves mixing up sections in a mixed order.
 In the early stages, blocked practice is good.
 In later stages, more random practice is best for retrieval.

Exercise

Self-Regulation: Grab a practice buddy – a stuffed animal

Exercise

Talk out loud as you are learning a new skill.
 Referring to yourself in the third person can work well. This idea is to create cognitive diffusion in yourself. Blame the strategy, never the player.

Ready, Set, Go!

- Center yourself offstage
- Walk onstage with calm composure and connection to the audience.
- Take your time.
- Are you immersed in the mood of your piece before you start playing?
- Breathe – pay attention to the sound of air and how it feels.
- Scan for tension – feel it melting away on the breath.
- Hear and see the opening of the piece you are working on – character, mood, pitch and rhythm.
- Focus on the first few notes.
- See if you can imagine and feel how effortless this is on a good day.
- Breathe/Play.
- How smoothly can you transition into playing without your mind wandering and your inner critic producing random negative thoughts and doubts?
- Connect, communicate, and feel joy!