

Practice and Performance Tips

What follow are some of my (somewhat) random thoughts on practice and performance. Perhaps they will be useful in learning how better to approach both playing in public and all the individual preparation needed to do so effectively and with confidence.

Higher, faster, louder means nothing if you can't play lower, slower and softer. Relax. Slow it down and focus on achieving the best possible sound you can make. The higher, faster and louder will come with time, but it is impossible without working out the more mundane things first.



Use a metronome. When preparing a difficult segment of music, be able to perform it at +/- 20 or 30 beats per minute of the suggested metronome marking. So, if the marking is 120 beats per minute, you should endeavor to be able to play it between a speed of 90 and 150 beats per minute. You may think that if you can play it faster than marked, that slower will not be a problem. Often, playing slower is just as difficult as playing faster. Be prepared, always, to do both.

This comment comes under the heading: *just my opinion – use your own judgment*. Sometimes, warm-ups are somewhat overrated. I have seen many people spend literally hours a day doing warm-ups. I, myself, used to warm up much more than I do now. I realized that I was creating a situation where my embouchure would not function well without being “perfectly warmed up.” Oftentimes your embouchure will not feel “perfectly warmed up.” You should be prepared for how it feels when the mouthpiece is cold and your lip feels tight and unresponsive. Once I realized this, I began shortening my warm-up to accommodate this idea; and now I barely warm-up at all. It really worked for me, and I'm no longer a slave to my warm-up. I tend to think that feeling warmed up is all in your mind. So, long story short, sometimes it's a good idea to just play a few notes and get going!

All of us get a little nervous in auditions. Some of us get so nervous that it severely impairs our ability to perform well. Believe me. I've been there! The only way to get over this problem is by figuring out how to function even when your palms are sweating and your heart is beating at a thousand beats per minute. So, what's a musician to do? Try this. As you approach an upcoming audition, start practicing your audition music directly after running up a few flights of stairs – enough to get your heart rate elevated. The running will get your heart pumping, so when you begin to practice your music, it will simulate – maybe even to the extreme – the physical sensations you will feel in an audition. Now, you can begin to learn how to deal with the increased heart rate and feelings of discombobulation!

Here is more on auditions... *No caffeine! Absolutely no caffeine!* In one of my first major auditions, I made the mistake, before the semi-final round, of drinking about five cups of coffee. Yes, I know it was foolish, but I had a couple of hours to kill. I was shaking uncontrollably going into the audition. It was not one of my better efforts.

Tryptophan works (tryptophan is that chemical in turkey that makes you sleepy). The exact opposite of my experience with caffeine was my experience with turkey and cheese on a toasted bagel. I remember that after eating this delicious bagel sandwich, I literally felt sleepy – almost groggy – going on stage to perform a solo with a big orchestra. If you get nervous for auditions, try a turkey sandwich. *I recommend Grey Poupon with that.*

While we're talking about nerves... Many musicians swear by their use of beta blockers – drugs which are usually prescribed to people with hypertension, congestive heart failure, arrhythmias and angina. These drugs actually slow your heart rate by causing your heart to need less blood and oxygen. The result is a feeling of greater relaxation. Now, if it sounds like maybe you shouldn't be messing with drugs used by people with heart problems, well, I would have to agree. Why mess with them? If you need a better reason, then I suggest that nerves, when controlled, can actually add something – a sort of excitement – to a performance. So, long story short, I suggest staying away from beta blockers.

The dress rehearsal doesn't matter. *Don't spend all your money* at the dress rehearsal. It does not matter how good you sound then – or in the practice room – or in your Aunt Nellie's basement. What does matter is sounding your best on game-day – at the concert. This argument does not apply to the always true axiom: *perfect practice makes perfect*. But, the day of the concert, learn to do whatever you need to do to sound your very best when it really counts. Even despite our best efforts, we sometimes will still fail. I've heard amazing players fall flat on their faces at one time or another. Give yourself the best chance at success. Don't put yourself at an immediate disadvantage by tiring yourself mentally or physically before the concert. I have never understood people who do that, but it is such a common thing. Save your best playing for the audience (they paid the price of admission: they deserve your very best!).

Learn every chance you get. Let me give you an example. I have never had a single vocal lesson, but I can sing pretty well. How is that? I attribute much of it to the fact that I always try to absorb as much information as possible from anyone better than me – or even by learning from hearing the flaws of other musicians (you can learn from that too). Then, once I learn something, I always apply it. For me, singing church hymns has always been sort of a vocal lab experiment. To this day, when singing a hymn in church, I do much more than just read the words and sing the notes. I work on vocal technique, enunciation of consonants, using proper vowel sounds, reading and recognizing more than one vocal part at once, etc. There are opportunities to learn about music everywhere!

Listen critically to yourself all the time. Praise yourself when you sound good and exhort yourself to do better when you sound bad. After all, we all have good and bad moments. Too many of us do one of two things: we either bury our heads in the sand and don't really listen to ourselves with a critical ear, or we forget to inwardly praise ourselves when we do sound good. Be aware of how you sound and be proud of yourself when you sound good!

Sing. Yes, I know you are brass players, but it is my opinion that if you cannot sing, you cannot play an instrument. Singing very literally tunes us up. Students who sing and play benefit from both. The singing is benefited by the ability to read music well (which is usually a great strength of an instrumentalist), and the playing is benefited by the improved pitch and greater innate musical awareness (a strength of singers). So. Sing.

Listen to and imitate great musicians. To this very day, I could play Wynton Marsalis's version of *Carnival of Venice*, with all the inflections and musical gestures intact. I might miss a few notes from not having practiced it in years, but I can still hear in my head exactly how he played it; and reproducing it is just the next logical step. Find musicians you like and imitate them. It can't help but make you a better musician!

Practice what you need to perform. If I were going to prepare for an orchestral audition, I would obviously spend more time on orchestra excerpts, but I would also focus more on loud playing and on being able to just pick the instrument up cold and blow the walls down. Whereas, preparing to play for River City Brass Band, I spend a lot of time working on my endurance and flexibility. If I were preparing for a run of jobs playing lead trumpet in a big band, I'd build my strength and work on my range. Few things annoy me more than someone playing a third trumpet part who warms up playing arpeggios to double-high "C," and then has trouble playing a low "C" in the performance. You perform how you prepare. Always keep that in mind when you are in the practice room or warming up for a concert.

Last, but definitely not least... **Make music. Always***. Feeling compelled to be musical when the word *solo* is written above your part is easy. The *true musician* makes music on the whole notes in the background of that solo. Don't ever get lazy about this. **Make music. Always.**

*I find this statement works most effectively when you hear it spoken in your mind with the voice of Alec Guinness (Obi-Wan "Ben" Kenobi from the "Star Wars" movies).