

Introduction

How to improve your practice?

Everyone is different when it comes to making music. Everyone faces different challenges and obstacles, everyone has different strengths and weaknesses. That's why there's no universal answer to how to practice. I have a few general guidelines and tools that you should try and experiment with. These methods have helped me make my practice more efficient and fun. But, it's very important that you ask yourself; "Does it work for me, am I getting better at the particular thing I'm practicing?" And if the answer is "No, not really", the way you are practicing that particular thing should be up for review and perhaps altered. Be your own scientist and be smart about *how* you practice music!

One important thing to keep in mind is that you need to keep yourself engaged and present. This may seem rather obvious, but there is more to it than you might think.

Mind vs. Ear

In my view there are two important voices in your head while you practice. The Ear and the Mind. The Mind is the voice that tells you, "I need to get groceries", "I need to call my parents", "I need to be able to play Giant Steps at 300 bpm" etc. The ear is the creative and intuitive part of you. You can see the Mind as a parent, and the Ear as a three-year-old child that wants to play and have fun.

It's helpful to make the distinction between these two voices because being engaged and present comes mainly from your ear. So in order to keep yourself engaged, you have to entertain the ear and offer it interesting things. Needless to say, a 45-minute scale exercise is not that.

When the ear says, "I don't want to do this anymore", but the mind says "no, you have to finish this because.....", that's when you lose your concentration and the connection with your ear. Concentrating is not about being lazy. You can't focus "really hard". It doesn't work like that. It's about practicing the right things in the right way and for the right amount of time.

Here are a few things that I've learned over the years, from several of my teachers and from developing my own practice, that can help you keep yourself and your ear engaged and improve your practice. Hope it helps!

Dry vs Creative Practice

One mistake often made by students is that they practice dry material for extended periods of time. By dry material I mean, material taken out of a musical context. Scale exercises, patterns, going up and down inversions etc. Done consistently, mechanical and dry practice will reflect itself in how you play music. It's also inefficient, chances are the new material won't become part of your vocabulary

and the skill you end up with is being very good at playing that particular exercise.

How to practice more creatively?

Try to apply the “new material” in a musical setting as quickly as possible. You should still practice it in a dry context first, but limit this dry practice to just a few minutes.

After these few minutes of dry practice, see if you can incorporate it in a little progression, for example:

||: V7 | IMA7 :||

or

||: IMA7 | VI7 | IImi7 | V7 :||

If that goes well, change the key.

If it doesn't go well, which is completely normal, you can return to the dry practice for another minute or two and continue that process. All of this should be “in” time and with a good feel, try not to sacrifice feel and time. If it's still too hard, see if you can change the level of difficulty i.e. limit the “new material” to something smaller / simpler.

After that, see if you can play it on a tune, on a blues, on rhythm changes, on an original; as many different contexts as possible. The “material” can be anything. An interval, a rhythmic concept, certain voicings, anything!

The main thing to remember is that you don't make it sound like an exercise.

You are playing; “in” time and you're making music. Integration is key here. Getting better at how to translate new material in your current vocabulary is the skill you are improving. Mastery of “the material” is not the point, as there is infinite material out there. Keeping the ear interested that's most important.

Segments

Another tool that I use and that has helped my practice a lot is Segments. I divide my practice in small blocks and I use a timer with most segments. Usually my segments are about 20 minutes, but this could be more or less depending on what I'm practicing and how much time I have.

Practicing in different segments with a timer can have many benefits.

It keeps you *honest* about your efficiency and use of time. If you mess around for the first 5 minutes, that time is literally gone.

It also keeps you *hungry*, stopping before you and your ear are completely satisfied will keep you excited about the subject your practicing and will make you want to work on it again tomorrow.

Another big advantage of everyday segments is that it starts a process; it gets the ball rolling, instead of pushing it up hill. It's not the only way to work but I recommend that you try it and see how it works for you.

The irregular practicer

Segments can be a great tool for students who have trouble with consistency. The irregular practicer usually gets very excited and will practice a lot for a few days in a row and then completely drops everything and doesn't practice for a week.

The overwhelmed practicer

You often hear people who say, "there is so much I can practice, I just don't know where to start" (so I don't...).

For both the overwhelmed and irregular practicer, I'd suggest to pick one 15/20 minute segment on a subject that you know is important for you and your development, for example some sort of ear training. Commit yourself to doing at least that everyday, no matter what happens, for two months and see what happens. Doing something small on a daily basis is a good way to get used to daily practice and can be a good starting point to build your practice routine.

Learning Songs

As a working musician it's a great asset if you know a good amount of songs and if you can easily pick up and memorize new repertoire.

First a few things that I find important when learning new repertoire;

Go as close to the source as possible - If you can't find the original recording from the movie, learn the melody from the pop singers of the day like, Frank Sinatra, Bing Crosby, Peggy Lee etc.

Learn the lyrics - It makes you feel more connected to the song, it's also easier to remember and deliver the melody well.

Transcribe the chords - Don't go straight to the Real Book. It's great ear training and you'll quickly become better at it. Don't worry if you can't figure out all the chords, get as many as you can. Try the ones that are hard for a day or two. If you can't figure it out ask someone or find a lead sheet to fill in the blanks.

Transpose - In order to get good at learning songs you have to start seeing structures. You will quickly see these structures once you start transposing. You'll go from learning songs "chord to chord" to learning them "phrase by phrase".

If all keys is too hard, at least try the key of C. This is a good starting point as it's an easy key to see common structures without all the flats and sharps.

Make a chart - Once you're done learning the song, write out a quick chart. This will force you to make a few choices.

Song learning is something that's great to do in a daily segment. How; After 20 minutes; stop! And that's it for that day! So the first day you might learn part of the lyrics and melody. Wherever you left of you'll pick up the next day and continue. This way it might take you a week to learn one song. But again, you'll start a process and you'll be eager to work on it again the next day.

Conclusion / Questions?

Be smart about what you practice, find out what works for you. Feel free to contact me with any questions or comments through my website; www.daankleijn.com.