

FIFTEEN RULES FOR MORE EFFECTIVE PRACTICE

By Tedd Griepentrog

An old musicians' adage asks: "How do you get to Carnegie Hall?" "Practice, practice, practice." Apparently, I must have paid *my* dues practicing, as I made my professional debut at Carnegie at the age of 21. While only a select few of our students will ever make it to Carnegie Hall, the key to success at any level is learning *how* to practice.

Recently I was in my studio working with a couple of college music majors who return each summer for coaching. We laughed when they would make a mistake, and then regurgitate many of my favorite lines about practicing. I realized how many of the following phrases come up weekly in lessons with all of my students at all levels:

1. **IDENTIFY THE PROBLEM.** An auto mechanic recently told me, "I can't fix it if I don't know what's broken." The first step in practicing to correct an issue is actually to identify the problem.
2. **ISOLATE THE ISSUE.** How many times have you heard a student make a mistake, immediately go back to the beginning, start again, and then make the same error? Repeatedly making the same mistake is practicing how to play it **WRONG!** Focus on what needs to be fixed.
3. **START WITH YOUR EYES, NOT YOUR FINGERS.** The majority of errors that students make are in translating the dots and lines into directions for their hands. Take time without the instrument to figure out what's actually on the page.
4. **SLOW DOWN!** If you can't play it slowly, you can't play it fast! You can always speed it up once you know it.
5. **REMEMBER THE BASICS.** Check the key signature. Carry accidentals through the measure. Identify the structure. Check the time signature. Count the rhythms out loud. Find the strong and weak beats. Lead to the downbeats. Subdivide!
6. **USE THE PENCIL.** Professional musicians live with a pencil and mark their parts constantly. Why? Because if you keep making the same mistakes, you lose your position or don't get hired back. If using a pencil works for professionals, shouldn't students do the same?
7. **DISTORT THE RHYTHM.** When you have an issue with a technical passage, alter the rhythm to give your brain *and* your fingers time to process the printed page in different ways. Turn groups of four sixteenth-notes into dotted eighths and sixteenths. Reverse the pattern: play a sixteenth followed by a dotted-eighth. Try an eighth-note and a sixteenth triplet (this one's great for voice leading); reverse the pattern. Turn triplets into an eighth-note and two sixteenths, and the reverse. Just a few minutes of distorted rhythms on an isolated issue can eliminate hours of unproductive woodshedding.

8. **DISTANCE IS TIME.** If your fingers are too far away (especially those “teacup” pinkies!), it takes longer to get to the keys. Keep them curled and close so they’re ready to react.
9. **DON’T BE AFRAID TO EXPERIMENT.** Use alternate fingerings. Substitute trill fingerings in fast passages. Know your horn. Find fingerings that work for you and your instrument for both technique and intonation. Even if it’s not in the method book or fingering chart, if it works for you, use it!
10. **GET BEYOND THE NOTES AND RHYTHMS.** Dynamics and phrasing on a wind instrument come from breath control. Practice playing the phrase *without* changing notes. Focus on deep inhalation and controlled exhaling.
11. **HOW THE NOTES START AND END DETERMINES THE STYLE.** Look up all the musical terms (and titles) on the page to know what style the composer intended. Read the articulations carefully. Alter the way you tongue based on the symbols and terms. Style is not just about how you start a note. The differences between staccato, legato, marcato, marcatisimo, and leggiero depend not just on how you begin a note, but how you end it.
12. **IF IT DOESN’T SOUND GOOD, IT DOESN’T MATTER HOW MANY NOTES YOU CAN PLAY.** Tone quality is of primary importance. If you can’t produce a good sound, no one cares how fast your fingers can move!
13. **DON’T LET THE MECHANICS GET IN THE WAY OF THE MUSIC.** Your audience doesn’t see your printed page and likely doesn’t play your instrument. They don’t care about your reeds, that sticky pad or valve, the nasty key signature, the extreme range, how nervous you are, or why the composer wrote that terrible lick. Find ways to overcome the obstacles so you can focus on making music.
14. **LET YOUR EARS BE YOUR TEACHER.** Most students only have lessons once per week. The other six days, students must rely on their own ears to identify and correct problems. The best way to tell how the audience will experience your performance is to record yourself and listen critically. Is what you hear what you intended? Are the things you worked to convey actually being heard?
15. **PRACTICING IS ONLY THE MEANS TO THE GOAL.** The objective is an artistic, musical experience. The techniques you use to improve your playing help you achieve your goal. The more time you spend diligently practicing—not just playing—the better the performance will be.