

A Practice Regime

LONG NOTES AND 'SLOW' SCALES

The warm up part of a typical practice session should really involve the relaxing, almost contemplative, aspect of long note work and slow scales. The object here is beauty of tone, evenness across the range, gradual and sudden dynamic control and careful listening. (The ears being the musician's best critic!).

Slow scales should help in preparation for work on pieces if there is some relevance to the actual music, for example, should you be working on the Weber Concertino then the key of ' f ' is relevant and the scales major and relative minor and the dominant and diminished sevenths should be explored.

REPERTOIRE

Here is where most people start of course and indeed where a great many problems arise due to inadequate preparation i.e. warm ups! We are all challenged by repertoire since this is at the very heart of what we do but there is an approach that I feel could help us all ACHIEVABLE GOALS. Quite recently an advanced student was surprised by own approach to methodical practice over a short yet quite demanding passage. I worked in a disciplined way not until it was right, but until it could not go wrong! By setting yourself attainable targets of short-ish duration and working in a slow and diagnostic way, much can be gained.

The musician should hear first the way a particular musical line should sound and have an artistic 'ideal' in mind, which can be worked towards. Microscopic attention to detail, sloth-like speeds, physical and aural awareness and musical sensitivity should all come into play. The total removal of TENSION will be the result of careful, patient, relaxed, thoughtful (even contemplative) practice of SMALL elements of your repertoire. Using your memory rather than depending on notational reference can be most liberating AND allows the musician to focus on the most important issue of HOW IT ALL SOUNDS!

THE DIAGNOSTIC APPROACH

Quite often one encounters particular technical and musical issues in a piece that make specific demands of you. Let us say that 'fast staccato' becomes a small problem; in this instance I would advise departing from the actual music and working on the issues raised by designing appropriate exercises and/or moving towards other music of an 'etude' type (e.g. Kell 17 stacc. Studies for Clarinet). We can borrow from the aesthetic of our warm up exercises in terms of a slow and methodical approach here.

Very often the difficulties we have with challenging moments in music are in fact only a tiny physical idiosyncrasy, the diagnostic approach can so helpfully focus us on the small issues of our playing.

'My hand bumps the instrument between registers, upsetting my legato'

'I am concentrating so much I forget to put air into blinking thing'!

SIGHTREADING

This is where musical literacy is promoted and deficiency and capacity revealed.

Since this vital musical skill features in every single lesson that I give (and every personal practice session) I feel that it can be usefully integrated into your own regime.

Putting new and diverse music under your eyes reveals the amount you have assimilated into your playing.

Try recording your first efforts and listening back with the gift of hindsight ears! Most revealing! Repeating this exercise can be a worthwhile therapy.

The aim of a good musician should be to express with fidelity the notated music, incorporate the details of the more expressive qualities either notated or implied, to maintain a relationship with the pulse/rhythmic qualities and to offer something of a personal reading.

I could not conclude on the matter of sightreading without saying that doing this exercise with an accompanist and/or duo partner is perhaps a 200% better experience than the above!

EXAMS.....CONCERTS.....ETC.....

Working towards a goal of this kind can be a stimulant of a most positive nature and long term practice schedules can be designed to meet these challenges. Many of my students are very busy with their music making and so a practice regime is not so much a luxury as a necessity.

Balance is important here and every musician is different, so be mindful that the demands you place (or have placed) upon yourself are related to your ability to respond as you would wish.

IMPROVISATION

It is not just the dedicated 'jazzier' that benefits from this area of musical expression.

You could go so far as to say that inventing some variable articulation exercises in scale playing is a kind of improvisation. With the wealth of 'play a long' CD's and tapes available today the musician has little excuse for not 'having a go' in the privacy of their own home!

Extemporisation, the 'off the cuff' invention of a melodic phrase is an ancient musical skill and one that is coming back into use and fashion. Try simply 'meandering' around chosen key centre, at first by step and in breathing phrases, move on to development of themes by listening to your original idea and recording yourself, playing against the original improvisation, composing little riffs and 'hook phrases to bounce off'. All of this can be developmental and of course.....fun!