

Efficient Practicing

By Joel Smales



Joel Smales

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Have you ever felt like you've hit a brick wall in your practice/performance routine? You know there is more you are capable of, but you just don't know how to get there? Maybe your practice routine has become stale or stagnant...or maybe even non-existent! I want to encourage you to try something new to freshen up, hone up, sharpen your skills and improve!

When practicing, it is important to be **warmed up**. When you are warm, just like any athlete, your muscles and reflexes are ready to go, you are loose and agile, under control, ready for anything that any piece of music or any band leader/conductor will throw your way. When you are warmed up, you control the music and not vice-versa!

Practice – don't just play. It is important to be sure you are not just *playing* the same things over and over again. When all we do is "practice" the music, grooves, riffs, licks, and solos we already know how to play, we aren't learning anything new! Pull out a new (or old) book and start to sharpen your sightreading skills. Start a new solo. Work on that groove or coordinated idea you don't quite have yet. Practice what you don't know or cannot yet play. This way, you are always *practicing* something *new* and not *playing* the same ole stuff you can already play!

Organize your time. If you know you only have 30 minutes to practice, allow yourself some time to warm-up, work on sightreading and then whatever new idea/solo/exercise you're working on. If your time is limited, work on snare drum and hands one day and mallets the next. Drumset can be added to the mix every third day. Be creative, yet efficient and diligent, being very aware of the time you have and how you're spending your time practicing.

Practice slowly. The slower your practice, the faster you learn! If I have a crazy piece to learn in a short time, I can learn it quicker (and more accurately) when I practice slowly. If I try to practice it up to speed from day one, I will make mistakes, learn it incorrectly and psyche myself out! When practicing slowly, I have time to digest the music, learn the correct phrases, notes and stickings, while at the same time reinforcing a positive mental musical state!

Practice backwards. Work on your music from the end to the beginning. Start with the last or one of the last phrases of your music and play it to the end. Then work backwards from there to a phrase or two before that. This way, you are reinforcing where you started your practice session by always repeating the last few phrases. I will practice m. 60-68, then 52-68, then 46 – 68, then 38 – 68, etc. A lot of repetition and reinforcing going on here!

Enjoy yourself. I know it's not all fun and games, but when we can learn something new and progress to new musical heights, the enjoyment of our success is worth all our efforts in the long run.

Some Practice Quick Hits:

1. Practice slowly
2. Practice what you don't know
3. Keep working on what you cannot play
4. Practice backwards
5. Sightread daily
6. Practice smartly
7. Warm-up
8. Be organized
9. Count
10. Analyze
11. Listen to others
12. Listen to yourself
13. Expand your horizons
14. Take some lessons
15. Record yourself and listen back
16. Relax and breathe
17. Enjoy yourself!

