

# Getting The Most Out Of Every Practice Session!

PART I



## YOU ARE WHAT YOU PRACTICE

*By Gunnar Mossblad*

One of the common questions asked of any clinician or guest artist is, "What should I practice?" The easy answer is, of course, to list all the specific things we practice. We practice the fundamental technique of your instrument, study theory ear training, learn tunes, practice ii-Vs, patterns, transcriptions, listen, etc. Seldom does a clinician have time to elaborate on how to practice. However, the way we practice is just as important as what we practice. The quality of our practice session is directly related to the quality of our performance. Since everyone learns in slightly different ways, and everyone has different musical goals and talent, there is no one right way to practice. By applying and maintaining a balance of technical mastery, intellectual understanding, and musical expression to the specific things you practice, you will have a more

enjoyable and rewarding musical experience. Furthermore, learning how to evaluate your practice sessions will help to define your progress, and as a result the efficiency of future practice sessions can be improved.

In part I of *Getting the Most Out of Every Practice Session*, I will discuss the importance of goal oriented practice, and exactly what makes up a productive practice session. In part II, I will follow up with a discussion of ways to practice for musicality, technical perfection, and intellectual understanding, and offer some tips and thoughts on how to successfully evaluate yourself. Hope you enjoy it.

### **DEVELOPING GOALS**

Practicing without a clearly defined goal is a complete waste of time. Musical goals can be as specific as passing a scale test or earning the jazz chair in your

high school jazz band. They can also be as far reaching as recording with your favorite jazz legend someday. No matter what your musical goals are, it is important that you clearly define, and develop a plan to achieve those goals. A private instructor, band director or

professional mentor can be instrumental in helping to design a course of study that is appropriate for your individual needs. A well-developed course of study will identify a series of related, immediate and short term goals that, when reached, lead to overall results. These small goals or steps serve as an encouragement for the student by demonstrating their personal progress. Practice goals are categorized by the length of time it takes a student to complete them. Every practice session should contain a complement of immediate and short term goals that culminate in a performance demonstrating the successful completion of a longer term goal.

Immediate goals can usually be attained in one practice session. Reviewing a familiar set of scales, or a pattern in all twelve keys at a slightly faster tempo are good examples of immediate goals. These goals are most often materials that are familiar to the student, executed in a different or improved way.

Short term goals are usually reached within a few weeks or possibly a month or two of practice. They require a more complex learning or practice process. Short term goals are made up of many immediate goals that lead, logically, to a well-defined and objective conclusion. A good example would be thoroughly learning a new tune by memorizing the melody and changes, executing walking bass lines, analyzing the harmony, writing improvisational exercises, and eventually, being able to perform a cohesive improvised solo at an acceptable performance tempo. For some students this may only take several days or a week, and others may require even a month or more to absorb the intricacies of a particular tune.

Long term goals are more far reaching in scope, and involve conceptual and technical accomplishments that impact on all aspects of your performing. These far reaching goals can only be accomplished within longer time frames-by the end of a semester, year or even three to five years. Long term goals are the most subjective and therefore are also the most difficult to define, plan and accomplish. Examples of long term goals might be mastering the style of your favorite jazz master, or transcribing, memorizing and reproducing a famous solo. To a professional, long term goals often translate into specific recording or performing projects as well as overall career accomplishments.

Of course, immediate, short and long range goals must be related and lead logically to an overall result. The earlier a student of jazz can learn to develop and define realistic practice goals in all three categories,

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the more productive they will be. Even with clearly defined goals, not every practice session will go smoothly. However, with goal oriented practice, any student should be able to find some accomplishment in every practice session. When a particularly good

practice session has been completed a student should do something that is for their own personal enjoyment (musical or otherwise).

#### THE WHAT

Students of jazz spend their practice time divided between mastering the instrument stylistically and technically, and understanding as well as executing the language of jazz improvisation. With a greater amount of time devoted to the study of composition and ear training, the mastery of technical aspects of the instrument may take a slightly longer time. Further, a student must be careful not to overbalance their practice sessions with too much emphasis on what they love to do, or not enough emphasis on what they need to practice.

Although the amount of time a student spends practicing may vary from day to day or week to week,

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the ratio or proportions of a well balanced practice session stay the same. In any given day approximately 10% of the practice time should be spent on warm-ups, 35% on technical and theoretical applications, 40% on literature, 10% on critical listening and 5% free practice. Example 1 shows the specific breakdown of a typical 30-45 minute (beginner, grades 6-8), 90 minute (intermediate, grades 9-12), and 120 minute (undergraduate) practice session. It should be noted that not every practice session will end up having these exact proportions. A student's practice activities should average out to the proportions indicated in EXAMPLE 1.

**Example 1**

Suggested Practice Sessions For Beginning, Intermediate And Advanced Students

**A. 30-45 minutes (beginning level-Grades 6-8)**

Warm-ups ..... 3-5 minutes  
 Technical..... 10-15 minutes  
 Literature ..... 12-18 minutes  
 Free practice ..... 1-3 minutes  
 Critical listening ... 3-5 minutes  
 TOTAL ..... 30-45 minutes

**B. 90 minutes (intermediate-Grades 9-12)**

Warm-ups ..... 10 minutes  
 Technical..... 30 minutes  
 Literature ..... 36 minutes  
 Free practice ..... 5 minutes  
 Critical listening ... 9 minutes  
 TOTAL ..... 90 minutes

**C. 120 minutes (undergraduate university student)**  
 (the absolute bare minimum for a music major)

Warm-ups ..... 12 minutes  
 Technical..... 42 minutes  
 Literature ..... 48 minutes  
 Free practice ..... 6 minutes  
 Critical listening ... 12 minutes  
 TOTAL ..... 120 minutes  
 (numbers have been rounded off)

Being flexible and varying the content and order of each practice session keeps even repeated material fresh, and allows for creative exploration in one particular area, or making discoveries in something completely new. The specific content can, and should be developed in consultation with a qualified professional who specializes on the student's instrument.

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However, a brief discussion of the general content of the material is appropriate.

Warm-ups are simply exercises that prepare the student to practice. This can be compared to a runner doing stretching exercises before running. Warm-ups prepare the student to execute the physical and mental aspects of playing the instrument in the most relaxed and efficient way possible. Either jazz specific or classical warm-up exercises can be utilized. If traditional classical exercises are used, jazz style and tone should be applied.

The technical part of the practice session is one of the most important sections. It develops the technical skills of playing the instrument, and the mental agility to apply the learned techniques in music. Students either hate this part of practicing, and avoid it whenever possible or enjoy it so much that they spent too much time on this facet. The actual content includes the efficient physical and mental execution of scales, chords, patterns, and licks, completed in a variety of rhythmic, harmonic, and melodic situations. I strongly encourage the implementation of these materials by memory when the student understands the theoretical and aural concepts. At first it takes considerably more time and effort to memorize these materials, but the ear training, theoretical, and musical benefits far outweigh the extra time and effort it takes to thoroughly learn the material. A small amount of time should also be devoted to sight-reading. This is a skill that will help the student on any performance level. It is a wonderful way to introduce new material that the student might want to incorporate into the technical or literature areas of practice.

The literature part of a practice session should contain the study and execution of transcriptions and tunes. For a young jazz student, the study of the great jazz master's is imperative to developing the stylistic and improvisational concepts of the jazz language. This is best accomplished by studying transcribed solos that should eventually be duplicated by the student playing along with the original recording. The first couple of duplications are, without a doubt, long term accomplishments, and the first transcription selected should not be too difficult. There is much more to a duplication than the student will first realize. If a transcription is too hard it will be overwhelming to the student, and the end result will be negative. With young jazz students I recommend using just 4 or 8 bars of a larger solo for their first attempt at transcribing and duplication. To get the very most out of learning a transcription, the student should listen to the selection until they can sing along with the recording. Then, and only then should they try to play it on their instrument. After learning to play the transcription with the exact notes, articulations, tone and feel, the process of writing down the solo may begin, and another transcription should be started. Simultaneously, a student can work on other already transcribed solos for the language, analytical, stylistic and technical benefits. There is a wealth of published

transcriptions available from many publishing companies, but remember the benefits of the transcribing the music from the recordings far outweigh the studying of solos transcribed by someone else.

The literature section should also involve the learning of tunes. The study of standard jazz tunes and their performance practices is a neglected aspect of most young jazz musicians' practice routine. A tune is learned, when a student has listened and studied several versions of the tune, including the original; learned and memorized the melody, form, changes, and harmonic analysis; knows how to arpeggiate and walk the changes, play scales and exercises over the changes, and can improvise a solo in at least the traditional key (but hopefully other keys also) at a respectable tempo; and, has transcribed and composed their own solo (like an etude) based on the changes of the tune. Once this routine is established and completed for one tune, learning a new tune every couple of weeks is not too difficult.

Free practicing may be the most important time of any practice session. Young students may or may not understand why they need to practice their scales and technical exercises. However, when it comes time for the student to play whatever they want to, they are nurturing their creativity and personal interests. This creative free time often stimulates some very interesting projects for young students. I vividly remember, finding and experimenting with the altissimo register of the saxophone as early as the 9th grade, and to this day, altissimo playing is one of my interests and strong points. Every time the student comes to this part of their practice session, they are reminded of the enjoyment music brings them. After all, I cannot think of anybody that started playing an instrument because it was not fun.

Critical listening is actually incorporated in earlier sections of the practice session. However, there is no substitute for putting the instrument down, relaxing on a couch or in a comfortable chair and spending some quality time listening while studying the history of jazz. A little time every day being exposed to the great jazz masters as well as the young jazz lions is great for learning the performance practices and concepts of jazz. This is also a good time for developing creative ideas, and defining goals. By being exposed to a variety of listening and historical information (liner notes, books, etc.), a student will develop a stronger concept of jazz artistry. This in turn will translate to their own practicing and performing.

In Part 11 of *Getting the Most Out of Every Practice Session*, I will discuss ways to practice for musicality, technical perfection and intellectual understanding, and offer some tips and thoughts on how to evaluate yourself. §

# Getting The Most Out Of Every Practice Session!

PART II



## YOU ARE WHAT YOU PRACTICE

By Gunnar Mossblad

In part I of "Getting the Most Out of Every Practice Session" (August/September 1998 *Jazz Player*), I discussed the importance of establishing and maintaining a well-balanced, goal-oriented practice routine. In this second part I will discuss how to practice for intellectual understanding, technical perfection and musicality, as well as offer suggestions for a method of evaluation that will help anyone become their own best teacher.

### PREPARATION

Even an ideally planned practice routine will not be successful if you are not focused on specific tasks and goals. Without proper focus, you will merely be going through the motions of practicing and not learning anything. Using the same principles of good study habits that work for general studies will ensure a positive and productive practice session.

First and foremost you must be in a comfortable, relaxed environment that is conducive to learning. A practice area, or music room, should be established where the "tools of the trade" are readily available for use. Establishing a special area for music listening and practicing saves setup time whenever you practice. It also encourages you to use the space at times other than your normal practice time. Having a place to leave your instrument set up and ready to play encourages you to pick up your instrument and play when you get inspired. Playing your instrument for even a short time can be very productive to your overall musical development and enjoyable as well. The accessibility of music in my house has encouraged my young five year old son to explore many different kinds of music on the piano, drums, Latin and African percussion, and even my saxophones. At his young age he has already developed an apprecia-

tion for music. A specific practice area also acknowledges the importance of music as a cultural and intellectual endeavor in your home, much the way a library encourages reading and confirms the importance of literature.

### TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Once a practice location is established the area should be outfitted with the "tools of the trade." In addition to your instrument, you'll need a small table or shelf with room for a metronome, tuner, some music, and incidentals (reeds, valve oil, practice pad, etc.). A sturdy music stand, comfortable chair, and a stand for your specific instrument are also important. A journal to log your practice activities, goals, and accomplishments for later evaluation should also be included in your list of tools.

A very important, but often neglected item with beginning students, is a stereo that has both listening and recording capabilities. This can vary from what is commonly called a "boom box" to a full blown state-of-the-art stereo system. Most likely a system with at least a CD player, some kind of recording device (cassette, DAT or mini disk), and a microphone is recommended. Don't forget to leave enough room for an ever growing collection of recordings, as well as a supply of blank cassettes, DATs, or mini disks.

At some point a serious jazz student will need a keyboard (preferably an acoustic piano). A piano or keyboard is the universal instrument and is invaluable when studying and learning jazz ear training, harmony, improvisation, and even tunes. Since the advent of the computer age, even a computer for music notation and sequencing can be an important tool.

The practice area often functions nicely as an integral part of the library or family room. If there isn't space in the main living area, a dedicated space in a basement can be utilized. A practice area setup in the basement away from the hustle and bustle of the rest of the family members, allows for privacy and fewer distractions. Practice spaces can be located almost anywhere, as long as it is a dedicated space that provides a conducive learning environment.

### WHEN

It is also important to establish a consistent and advantageous time to practice. Although there is no one ideal time to practice for everyone the time of day you choose, can in itself, dictate how successful a

practice session will be. The best time or times for you will be determined by your internal clock or schedule for each day. Generally, the best time is when you are rested, alert, and have few distractions. For instance, I have found that my most productive practice sessions are in the morning, and before the evening meal. In the morning my mind is clear and uncluttered of other responsibilities. At that time I concentrate on practicing the technique of my instrument and expanding my repertoire of literature. Before the evening meal I am

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ready to relax and immerse myself in creative endeavors that usually involve writing tunes, and working on improvisational ideas. After some experimentation, you will be able to determine what your most productive practice times are. It should be noted that these basic concepts are not limited to the

practice of jazz, but can be applied to all instruments and styles of music.

### HOW

No matter what equipment you have, and what your practice surroundings are like, how you practice is much more important to your musical development. The key to successful practicing involves three simple concepts: 1. Practice for technical perfection, 2. a thorough intellectual understanding of the material, and probably the most important: 3. practice for musicality and artistry. If you do not maintain a balance of these three elements in your practicing, the result will be evident in your performing. Every musician has a different natural aptitude for one or another of these three elements. An aware musician will objectively evaluate his or her strengths and weakness, and adjust their practicing to concentrate on improving those weaknesses while capitalizing on their strengths when they perform.

If a balanced practice routine is not achieved and consistently maintained, over a period of years deficiencies in your performance ability will become very evident. Most of you can remember performances or performers that have left you thinking, "What technique, but (s)he did not say anything musically. Or, "What emotion in his or her playing, but it was so out of tune." Or even, "What feeling and technique, but (s)he doesn't seem to know the changes of that tune." In each case your impressions of the performer or performance were the result of an unbalanced practice routine.

This is also demonstrated by younger students trying to play fast for the first time. At some point in every musician's development (hopefully only once),



they have come into their lesson anxious to show off the technical passage or lick they have worked up to an extremely fast tempo. The demonstration, although technically fast, usually lacks one or more of the other elements of a good performance. When asked to play it again incorporating even the slightest change in dynamics, articulations, or other missing aspect of the music, they almost always fail. Changing anything about the way they played the lick paralyzes them and they can no longer execute the lick with lightening precision, let alone with even moderate accuracy. After the student must slow the lick down to incorporate the changes, the importance of maintaining a balance of the three elements in their practice is usually clearly demonstrated.

All three elements need to work together in a balanced way to form a pleasing artistic musical statement, while retaining an individual personality or identity. One of these elements can not exist without the other two. It is difficult to explain each of the elements without considering the others. However, a simple explanation of each of these elements will clarify the elements as they exist, or don't exist in your practice routine.

### TECHNICAL PERFECTION

Technical perfection is probably the easiest to explain and understand. Simply put, technical perfection is the accurate execution of the physical and mechanical aspects of playing music on your instrument in a relaxed and natural sounding way. It is like the physical training that an Olympic athlete goes through, or the process that each of us went through when we learned to speak, read, and write. It involves training your muscles through precise (slow) repetition to execute the proper motor skills necessary to carry out the physical aspects of playing music on your instrument. Even at a young age a student can judge their own abilities in this area of playing. The key is to go slow enough that each motion is smooth and accurate with only a minimum amount of awkwardness. Then repeat the action more times right than wrong until each action is comfortable and consistently correct. If you play something wrong three or four times, the odds are that you will play it wrong when performing. So don't be in a hurry. It takes time and a lot of positive reinforcement to learn new motor skills and coordinate them with the proper thought processes. I like to make sure I can play everything correctly five times in a row correct before I leave it for that practice session. If this is not possible within a

reasonable number of tries then the exercise you are working on should be taken at slower rate. Remember, as I discussed in Part I (Aug/Sept *Jazz Player* column), don't try to conquer the world in one practice session, know when to leave the exercise for review tomorrow.

### INTELLECTUAL UNDERSTANDING

Intellectual understanding involves knowing and understanding the construction of music. It is just as

important for a musician to understand how music is constructed, as to practice the mechanical execution of music. This is the key to continued growth and development as a musician. Natural musical talent is of course a plus, but it is intellectual understanding that allows musicians to nurture and actually develop past their natural talents. This encompasses everything from understanding the principles of harmony, melody, and rhythmic constructions to compositional forms, and even how the communicative nature of music comes about. Interestingly, every time I develop a new understanding of some aspect of music, it seems to open a door to many new things that I do not yet understand. So, the process starts all over again. It is clearly a never-ending process.

Lastly, and in my opinion the most often neglected aspect of well-balanced practicing, is incorporating musicality. Musicality, or the expression of emotion and spiritualism in music is completely subjective. Without emotion and feeling music is just organized noise. When a student first starts practicing music the technical and intellectual aspects of music dominate the practice sessions. If a student has a natural gift for musicality and artistry it will be evident from their very first notes.

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This intellectual understanding and growth is achieved through reading and studying quality writings and recordings about music. It is also realized through applying the theories and principles to original exercises and compositions. This helps to define your personal understanding of music. Fortunately, there is an ever growing body of published material, and unpublished material on jazz, for anyone who is the least bit curious.

### MUSICALITY & ARTISTRY

Lastly, and in my opinion the most often neglected aspect of well-balanced practicing, is incorporating musicality. Musicality, or the expression of emotion and spiritualism in music is completely subjective. Without emotion and feeling, music is just organized noise. When a student first starts practicing music the technical and intellectual aspects of music dominate the practice sessions. If a student has a natural gift for musicality and artistry it will be evident from their very first notes. However, even naturally gifted musicians need to practice the specific techniques used to express emotion in music. They need to be encouraged to make judgments and form opinions as to the different feelings, impressions, or even images that

various musical devices create.

Practicing musical devices such as vibrato, tonal color changes, dynamic contrast, even scoops, turns and flips, as well as good phrasing techniques, are vital for expressive playing. Visualization techniques can be incorporated in practice sessions to encourage musicality. However, simply asking yourself, "What am I trying to communicate," or "What emotion am I expressing," or even "What picture am I trying to paint?" encourages the creative application of musical devices and techniques which will make your playing more expressive.

### **MASTERING PHRASING TO COMMUNICATE MUSICALLY**

Mastering the techniques of good phrasing is also essential to communicating musically. After acquiring a basic understanding of the theoretical principles of phrasing, exercises should be practiced that incorporate musical devices that express your feelings or emotion. These exercises will challenge you to create meaningful motion between the notes in a phrase. In essence, you make a determination where the intensity of each note is going, and express that with musical devices. Through experimentation you will develop a musical

vocabulary for expressing your feelings and emotion in the music. This is much the way we communicate our feelings in verbal communications. When we speak the variations of tone, pitch,

accents, volume changes, etc., express the feelings of the words we are speaking.

The creative use of musical devices as applied to the theoretical principles of good phrasing is perceived by the listener as musicality. Practicing these simple concepts will produce a very natural and personal way of playing, which are the first steps in developing a personal playing style.

### **THE EVALUATION PROCESS**

As mentioned earlier, periodic evaluation of your playing is vital to continued success and growth as a musician. Utilizing several simple evaluation vehicles will insure an honest assessment of your playing. Objectively analyzing all the information received from the different evaluation sources will reveal strengths and weaknesses in your practicing. This information should be used to make adjustments to your practice routine that will emphasize improvements in your weak areas.

The most obvious form of evaluation can come from other musicians. The opinions of colleagues can be an extremely valuable evaluation tool, but there is no

substitute for the guidance of a qualified private instructor or professional, on your instrument. Under the direct supervision of a teacher a student will get regular evaluations and direction for continued development.

Even the most dedicated teacher will not normally hear a student more than once a week. It is therefore necessary to maintain a regular routine of self-evaluation. A practice journal is the perfect tool for both of these purposes. Making an accurate log of what and how you practice and study music will provide information for both teacher and student. Even personal thoughts recorded in your journal about your frustrations and successes can be very helpful with the evaluation process. Practice journals not only reveal what you practiced, but as important, it shows what you have neglected to practice. A periodic review and evaluation of the practice journal can go a long way to making practice routines more efficient and effective.

A tape recorder is also an invaluable evaluation tool. Tapes don't lie! Listening to a recording of yourself, whether in a practice session or a performance, allows you to listen more objectively. You listen like you are listening to someone else, and hear the strengths and

weaknesses in your performance. When we are participating in the process of playing we do not hear all the details of our playing. Additionally, leaving a recorded history of the music you prepare and perform provides an aural

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record of personal growth and development. Whenever my students get discouraged about their progress, I suggest they go listen to the tape they made six months earlier. More than likely their confidence will be boosted when they hear the progress they have made.

Do not discount the observations of non-musicians either. Quite often the most astute and honest evaluations of your performances come from individuals who are not at all musicians, but are sensitive and artistically aware. General observations, voiced in lay person's terms, can offer invaluable insights into the overall success of your musical communication skills.

Finally, remember there is no one right way to practice. There are as many well-balanced practice routines as there are students of music. Maintaining and adjusting a practice routine that contributes to the continued growth of both personal and professional goals is a constant challenge that requires continued evaluation and adjustment.

Stay flexible, open minded, and most important enjoy the process. §