

Practice is so important as a musician and as a student musician and sadly most do not make the most of their practice time. I know we have all heard the axiom “Practice makes perfect”, the sad truth is that it’s a LIE. “**Perfect** practice make perfect”. If you don’t practice the right notes EVERY time you are practicing your mistakes. I know you are thinking that its impossible to practice perfect, I mean, that’s what we are practicing to achieve? It seems like a paradox. The trick is to play small amounts of music VERY slowly. This is how you build **kinetic memory**. Kinetic memory is the memory of motion. You don’t think about how to walk anymore, you just do it. Your muscles “remember”. It is important to approach music practice the same way athletes approach sport practice. Musicians are small muscle athletes. Learning something new requires physical skill training or another way to say it is building kinetic memory. Remember the body learns slowly but remembers well.

Unfortunately, most approach practice as a play-through which doesn’t build kinetic memory. You’ll keep getting better at what you are already good at and the parts you aren’t as good at will take forever to get right! There is a better way to do this.

I recommend starting on the macro level (or broader) and working down to micro (smaller and more precise).

You need to do the following:

**Pre-practice:** “Chunk-out” the music. Practicing a WHOLE solo is too much. You need to “chunk-out” the music by marking your phrases or sub-phrases. You need to focus on small manageable sections. Look at the example of Scherzino by Anderson to see what that might look like. This is a good opportunity to mark your “desired” breath marks (your actual breath marks may change as you practice and change your speed or find what is most musical.) For an example of how to do this take a look at the Scherzino by Anderson on [page 4](#).

### **How to approach your practice and practice efficiently and effectively: The AAIRRR approach.**

Once your music is “Chunked-out” you can apply the **AAIRRR** approach.

**Attempt:** Attempt to play either the whole piece or a page, section or chunk.

**Analyze:** Where did you experience the most difficulty? Mark those places in the music.

**Isolate:** Practice that section by itself.

**Repeat, Repeat, Repeat:** What in particular is the most difficult? Isolate that and practice by repeating. Then repeat the section. Then repeat the process.

Here is an example of the process:

1. You have a new song and you are completely unfamiliar with it. You should already have the piece “Chunked-Out”. Play through each chunk individually. This is your **Attempt** phase. While you play you need to listen critically to yourself. This critical listening is the **Analyze** part of the approach. Mark the “chunks” that cause you the most difficulty. These are the “chunks” you will need to **Isolate** to work on more than the others. Finally, while applying several different practice techniques that I outline in the following pages, you repeat the section over and over again until you can achieve 100% perfection multiple times in a row. The “in a row” is important. A good number is 5x in a row. Sometimes

this can be frustrating, you find yourself making a mistake the fourth time through and you have to start over. Don't cheat this. Usually when you get to the fourth time you are a *little* nervous. This is a *little* like the actual performance, just a little, because you will probably be much more nervous. You need to be able to play that "chunk" when you ARE nervous.

2. Now you are practicing the "chunks." Every time you play the chunk you are having a hard time in the same place. Its time to start the AAIRRR process again. Analyze where exactly in the chunk are you having a hard time. Isolate that measure, or 2 notes, or 3 notes. Can you isolate the problem down to 2 notes at a time? Repeat the isolated area employing some of the practice patterns that are explained in the following few pages. Once you feel you have perfected the isolated area, go back and practice the chunk. Do you still have a problem with a part of the chunk? Isolate some more if you need to. Once all of these "micro" isolations are complete, go back and apply the AAIRRR approach to the chunk. When you are confident with that chunk go on to the next one.

### **How exactly to practice the parts that you isolate:**

When you are doing the repeats: the actual practice should be approached from several different angles. Whatever is giving you technical difficulties should be isolated first then played extremely slowly. Practice with a fermata on every note, then play it like you do long tones connecting two notes together musically. Then you can practice it using different rhythms and groupings. Look at the following examples on **pages 5 and 6** to see what this would look like. You can see additional patterns that you can use on **page 13-16**.

Another way to practice a difficult passage is by elimination. That doesn't mean eliminate the passage and hope you never have to play it again! It means that you remove notes or notes from each group or measure and practice first with the notes missing. Then you remove different notes, etc... until you've played through several possible combinations. This is a useful practice tool when you have to practice with the music faster than you can handle, like a difficult section in band or orchestra. You have to keep up with the orchestra but you can't play/practice it with a whole bunch of wrong notes. Check out **Pages 7-10** for an examples of this.

### **How to organize your practice:**

You need to set goals. Big ones, middle sized ones and little ones.

Lets start BIG. Why are you playing the flute? Where do you want to be in 5 years or 10 years. What is your overall goal besides just learning the flute. Statements like: I want to be able to play the Mozart Concerto in DM by the time I've been playing the flute for 3 years. Or: I want to be a professional flutist. Or: I want to get a scholarship for my flute playing when I go to college.

Middle sized goals: These are the goals that are what you want to accomplish by a certain audition. Slightly smaller goals in the mid-sized range are your weekly lesson goals. What do you want to accomplish before your next lesson?

Small goals or practice targets are something like: I will be able to play 4 chunks perfectly 10 times in a row by the end of today's practice.

Try filling out the Goal sheets on pages 17-19, you can also copy them so that you can do them on a weekly basis.

**When to practice and how long:**

Instead of setting a time when you want to practice everyday think of an event in your day and build practice around that. Many students find that if they miss the time they set aside they don't practice at all! Think of something like I will practice after dinner, or 30 minutes after I wake up in the morning. In this way when things change (life) you will still be able to practice.

How long to practice? You should practice to reach your practice target not to reach a certain number of hours or minutes. Hopefully that will make your practice more productive and when you are done each day you will really feel like you have accomplished something.

***The most important day and time to practice is directly after your lesson.*** Everything you just learned is still fresh in your mind. This is the best time to review what you learned and start building new goals for the week and each day.

**Review before and after:**

Review by playing through what you worked on in your last practice session before you start working towards your new goals for the day. Save 5 to 10 minutes at the end of the practice session to review what you worked on that day. Play everything you practiced 1 time through. Studies have shown that reviewing your work in this way increases by A LOT the amount that you will actually retain. If you work this way at first it seems that you are using valuable practice time for review. The actuality is that in the long run you will not have to practice as much and you are being more efficient.

**Building blocks to good playing:**

What we don't want to practice but have to. Not just learning the piece. Why we practice scales, arpeggios, and all those technical fundamentals.

Scale practice is VERY important for a variety of reasons. Scales help you with playing fluently, sight-reading and improvisation.

You can think of scales and technical exercises as the words that build language. You can't write a great short story or even a paragraph if you don't know enough vocabulary to express yourself. Remember kinetic memory? You need to commit these scales and exercises to *kinetic* memory. That way when you are sight-reading or playing your audition piece or improvising, those scales and exercises are there without much practice or thought. So you can really concentrate on playing musically and expressively.

Scales also help you to think in a certain key so it is easier to focus on the actual music instead of constantly reminding yourself about the sharps and/or flats.

Scales are also a great way to practice other techniques too. Phrasing, dynamics, expressions, articulations etc.... If your scales are committed to kinetic memory, then it frees you to work on other techniques.