

DEVELOPING GOOD PRACTICE SKILLS

PRACTICE...

WHAT IS IT

HOW DO WE DO IT

HOW TO APPROACH A TOUGH MUSICAL PASSAGE

THOUGHTS:

- Practice makes permanent, not perfect! If you start out by practicing wrong, you will permanently play it wrong!!
- Good practice is hard work.
- Practice is not always fun (sometimes it is - especially when you can feel the improvement!).
- Practice is working on small sections until you can play them; then add the small sections together to make slightly larger sections, etc.
- Practice and run-through are different procedures (both useful).
- Putting the horn to your face and blowing (or grabbing the sticks & banging) is not practice. Think before you play. Think before you play. Think before you play.
- Don't quit as soon as you "get it". Do it three more times!! If you really want to make it permanent, make yourself do it correctly three times in a row. If you mess up the 3rd time, you have to start counting all over again.
- "Great! I got it!!" Tomorrow you probably will have lost it... But the good news is that it won't take as long to get it back as it took to learn it the first time!
- It may take many days or weeks to get it right and be able to play it correctly every time!!
- Practice is more than just notes and rhythms. Go for the details. Get a beautiful tone. Make sure the notes speak clearly. Get the dynamics & accents... DETAILS!
- If you start making more mistakes or getting really frustrated, take a break. Come back to the spot later in your practice, or even tomorrow.
- Do not practice until it hurts! If a body part hurts, stop. If it continues to hurt every time you play, see a doctor!

THE TOUGH STUFF:

How you approach a tough lick depends on what is difficult about it!!!

A - Rhythm difficulties

- Rule number 1-- Never play until you understand the rhythm. (If it is an easy rhythm, it is a good challenge to see if you can play it through right the first time, but then go back and make sure you were correct by doing little chunks & thinking about the rhythm.)
- Intellectualize about the rhythm. Write in the counting if you need to, or write in where the beats fall.
- Feel the rhythm in your body. Count through it, or speak through it while tapping your foot or being your own metronome.
- Work slowly until you understand the rhythm. Be your own metronome. Work with a metronome. Figure out how tapping your foot helps. Gradually speed up.
- ALWAYS work in small chunks - one or two measures at the most. Sometime you will need to work on 3 or 4 notes at a time!! Don't bite off more than you can chew or you will choke!

B - Nasty note combinations (nasty rudiment combinations)

- Again, as always, work in small chunks. Here you will need even smaller numbers of notes - sometimes only 2 at a time!!!
- When you have the small section you are working on learned, add more to it. Add the pickups or the measure before. Take it into the next measure.
- Be sure to practice the "links". If you practice measure 4, then measure 5, and never practice linking 4 & 5 together, you will stumble every time you cross the measure. Practice measure 4 into the first note of measure 5.
- Go over offending notes in many different ways - forwards, backwards, different rhythms, staccato, legato.
- Start slowly & gradually work faster. If you are thinking, "I can play it best fast", you haven't really got it learned yet! If you can only play it fast, you are missing notes. Play it at all tempos.
- Do you know your alternate fingerings (standard sticking patterns) that help make the tough spots easier?

C - "It's too high!" (or too low) (or too fast to stick evenly)

- Be sure you have practiced your basic skills. Brass players, are you working on lip slurs every day?? Those are your push-ups; they strengthen your chops so that you can slur more easily, but also so you can be more flexible on the low notes and have the strength to do the high notes! Woodwinds & brass, are you playing long tones? They strengthen muscles, too! Boring, but important!! Percussionists, are you practicing your long rolls and even single strokes??
- Do you warm up before every practice? You must warm up the muscles slowly or you will injure something and never have the strength to conquer the extremes.
- Work up to (down to) the note gradually. Play the notes around it and be sure they are solid and gradually add the next one.
- Is your embouchure/position correct for this note?? You may need to tighten your lips or open your jaw more or take more mouthpiece in your mouth or angle the instrument differently.
- Practice every day. That is a must for a good tone and a good range. You and your instrument need to work together every day so that the muscles are in good condition. You cannot expect to play high/low notes if you don't practice. Percussionists cannot expect to play smooth sounding rolls and fast patterns if you don't practice.

D - Dynamics

- Exaggerate. Play the "louds" really loud and the "softs" really soft. Yes, you will miss & splat notes, the tone will be gross, and you may not be able to get the notes to come out, but it's OK - you are strengthening muscles by pushing them beyond what they can do.
- If you always play in the levels where you know you can play well and get the note to speak and have a good tone, you never get better. When you practice, "back up" a bit. Let the note splat because you are playing too loudly, let the sound not come out because you are trying to play too softly. Your muscles will learn how to hit it every time and then you back up a little more! Exaggerate the "louds" & "softs" in your practice. When you get to rehearsal or concert time, stay within the range you know you can do well!