



How To Develop Your Music Away From Your Instrument - Practicing On The Road - Part III

article by Michael Smolens ©2010

I've often directed students to the Part II of this series when they are about to go away for a trip. They found the article interesting, but I have almost always needed to describe how to harness those specific concepts and items to create a bigger impact. Let's face it, keeping up the momentum of your practicing is often a challenge under normal circumstances. Students generally find this even more the case when they're away, whether it be for a couple days, or couple of weeks.

To make these student conversations more vivid, I'm going to first describe several situations for making music away from home that are highly specialized and *don't represent what you're likely to encounter on your next business trip or visit to your home town.*

My Dream Vacation!

If you talk with anyone who's been to a music retreat or workshop, you'll likely see their face change immediately when you bring up the topic. It will become very bright, with a big smile, and a sense of enchantment will emerge:

"I had so much fun playing penny whistle and fiddle everyday. My dream vacation!"

"My God, the first time I sang with a jazz trio backing me up I felt the spirit of both my mother and *her mother* coming through me."

"Last year's piano conference showed me how many of my technique issues were never addressed by my old teachers."

When we go to an artistic retreat of any kind, we give ourselves more than just a vacation—we give ourselves the gifts of new perspectives, challenges, validation, and most importantly, the *time to sink into our art without the everyday concerns of our jobs, families, chores, etc.* Because of the wide variety of backgrounds and skill levels of the participants, every effort is made to create activities that can be accessed by nearly everyone. But let's go back to the vacation aspect. Think about it—no phones, meetings, childcare, or emergencies to contend with. Your meals are all handled, as is the schedule of a variety of activities and free time—a real opportunity to reflect upon your passion for music. These workshops have even created lasting musical, business, and personal relationships. Sounds enticing, right? Those with unlimited time and financial resources could attend workshops indefinitely...

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Private or Group Retreat

Another wonderful but atypical instance of making music away from home is when a musician creates an individual retreat. This can be a fabulous opportunity to renew one's sense of purpose and inspiration, and frequently results in a rich treasure trove of new work. Private retreats do, however, present challenges that would otherwise be well-handled in a group retreat. The first one is logistical. As an individual you'll be booking your own locale, getting yourself there, possibly bringing and preparing your own food, and arranging for the rest of your life to be handled while you're away. Another challenge is artistic in nature. This involves collecting and preparing your materials, making sure your instrument(s) is appropriate for the site, and setting up a schedule or series of daily goals. The final aspect to consider is financial. Unlike workshops that often offer a work exchange or scholarship (partial or full), you'll likely be covering the cost of a private retreat yourself, including a last-minute cancellation on your part.

Foundations and governments have long since acknowledged the importance of such retreats. Even during World War II, the Russian government still sponsored retreats for its significant musicians in small groups that included world-renowned composers such as Prokofiev and Shostakovich. They would work by themselves throughout the day and at night share what they had composed. Talk about inspiring! Contemporary foundations have brought together selected artists to create entirely new works that may never have existed without that specific support or initiative, such as the annual retreats sponsored by the Other Minds Festival (a different group of composers every year) and the San Francisco Jazz Festival (their San Francisco Jazz Collective).

A different kind of musical retreat is available to groups when they go away for a weekend. Choirs use this to help their members not only learn material more in depth, but to also help deepen the bond between its members. Also, bands of every stripe (pop, rock, fusion, folk, etc.) also use this approach of seclusion to either break new artistic ground, or prepare for a tour or recording. While choral retreats tend to be very highly organized, bands often have more of a challenge to keep things moving and well-paced. Long-standing ensembles often have already evolved systems and techniques for structuring retreats, leaving the participants free to focus on more creative concerns.

And Now, *Your Trip*

OK, you're leaving in two weeks for a business or family trip and might be thinking, "How do I know what's going to happen—it's just going to be a crapshoot!" There certainly are many variables that appear to be completely random, yet with any learned skill, becoming observant will increasingly tip the odds in your favor. Fundamentally, I believe there is one overarching variable that affects any trip in terms of creating and managing practice time on the road—autonomy. By this I mean *the ability to design and carry out free time for practicing*.

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Try recalling your last several trips away from home and focus on this aspect of your personal autonomy. What do you recall? Which situations felt unmanageable, and which felt like victories? Consider that there is a very strong parallel between practicing music and maintaining an exercise routine on the road—both depend on your ability to access personal autonomy. The benefits of the latter are numerous and well documented: managing stress, hypertension, and high blood pressure; maintaining muscle tone and injury prevention; and enhancing concentration and productivity. The fact that someone exercises during a trip is also an important statement about their well-being; to themselves, as well as their guests or hosts.

When I've talked to students about their trip, I've described a *'risk continuum' regarding how much effort it takes to create free time*. I've observed three basic types of trips that my students report. I'll list them in order of the likelihood of personal autonomy, though your experience might be quite different:

- 1) Vacation with Friends (some autonomy)
- 2) Family Trip (less autonomy)
- 3) Business Trip (least autonomy)

The Three Biggies...

1) Communication

This is an essential element for your music to thrive while away from home. Try making requests from those who are organizing the trip (or members of the group) and see what happens. Often our past experiences with either a group, person, or type of situation were frustrating and created a sense of resignation. We might have become convinced that our needs may never be accommodated. For trips involving friends or family you might try something like, "I'm working on a couple of projects on this trip and I'd like to carve out some times for them. I just want to mention that in case I don't make it to everything this time around." Although many business trips can be quite packed, there is usually some free time scheduled. You can say something similar to a co-worker to excuse yourself at the thought of yet another mixer.

If you find the thought of expressing your needs in situations like these intimidating, you're not alone. Rehearsing this through a role playing exercise with a close friend or therapist can be quite useful. There's also the option of using a role reversal exercise in order to gain a broader understanding of the forces at work.

2) Boundaries & Families

Going Home

It's not only the ability to state your needs and desires that expresses your boundaries, but also how well you stay on-target when an interruption occurs. Even under ideal conditions, maintaining concentration can be a challenge. Let's say a family member knocks on your door because they *just have to talk with you* while you're practicing. Part of the challenge of visiting one's family resides in situations just like this. You may very well want to stay completely available during your stay, and yes, sometimes family members do need to communicate or connect at unpredictable times. Yet, this kind of interruption

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may be part of a long-standing pattern in your family representing a potentially unhealthy lack of boundaries.

My impression after speaking with many students over the decades is that only a small minority of them felt truly supported in their self-expression. Most students describe their family's response to being involved in music as either one of:

- * Indifference—virtually no exposure to music in the home nor modeling of self-expression
- * Hostility—an environment where any self-expression is threatening, or there is an atmosphere of disapproval for being involved with the 'wrong' or 'inferior' kind of music
- * Domination—compulsory lessons and/or recitals

Any of these environments can be very problematic to return to and feel safe in to do any music at all, no matter how private the activities may be.

The Family Systems Model

Let's face it—families are complicated. One system that sheds light on how different members of a family often react to someone's musical self-expression can be seen in John Bradshaw's Family Systems model. Here, each member of the family unconsciously adopts a particular role within the family unit—The Peacemaker, The Rebel, The Lost Child, The Hero, The Scapegoat, etc. Even though there is often conflict between these archetypal roles, Bradshaw likens this arrangement to that of a mobile, constantly seeking equilibrium and stability.

And here you are, decades later, coming home to a family system that likely has that same unresolved competition and anxiety, if not outright hostility around artistic self-expression. Judgements about you often resurface, and family members' frustrations about their own musical abilities and desires are often also projected onto you. One of my students recently told me about their upcoming trip, "Going home is still pretty touchy for me, especially around anything creative. I feel that it's safer for me to just 'stay in the closet,' if you know what I mean."

Now consider what the effect would be if circumstances *have* changed since your last visit. For example, you've started lessons for the first time or switched instruments or styles, another family member has started or stopped their music, or a family instrument like a piano has been sold. Or it could be something more subtle, like your band that you've put years of work into developing has just broken up, or a friend of the family suddenly achieved significant media attention and success. That precariously balanced mobile is now been thrown out of balance, leaving some or all of the family members feeling adrift.

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Taking Space

One of the more awkward aspects of visiting one's home is the unspoken feeling that every *available moment* should be spent with one's family. I've heard time and again how a student felt that they were only at home for a limited amount of time and felt guilty about even the thought of taking some time alone to do anything. Even under the best of circumstances, I believe that most people need some private time when they're away to regroup and feel balanced. It's also why some people find that staying at a hotel or a friend's house when visiting their family can be a very sane alternative to constant proximity. One of my students described going home as "being on-camera for two full days." If people valued more the benefits of taking private time—either by taking a long walk, working out, or practicing their music—they would be better able to relate to their family in a more present and aware fashion, and less susceptible to unhealthy family patterns of communication and behavior.

Your Music Menu When Away

The previous article in this series describes five broad categories for practicing on the road. Why five? Because you might not have access to your primary instrument away from home. Here they are:

- 1) Listening / Ear-Training / Analysis—listening to new artists, clapping new rhythms, comparing the structure of two similar pieces
- 2) Instrumental—working out fingerings, exploring a new distribution of parts, memorizing part of a piece
- 3) Composition—creating lyrics on a new theme, setting up a melody purely based on rhythm, creating the foundation of a new piece on a laptop computer
- 4) General—reviewing notes & recordings of earlier lessons, inventorying the gains from a recent performance / recording / workshop, constructing a performance setlist that reflects some major change in your approach

And you might be asking yourself, "what is the fifth area?" The voice, of course. And yes, there are plenty of things that can be done without making much sound, like self-massage, stretching, breathing exercises, analyzing the vowels and breathing points in a song, exploring the motivation of a character in a musical, etc. Not surprisingly, many vocal students would find the thought of not being able to vocalize very frustrating, especially when you consider that nearly every instrumentalist can play very quietly and still experience the physicality of playing with a mute (horn, string, wind) or with headphones (electric guitar, bass, keyboard, percussion). *Yet, the voice is the instrument that is the most vulnerable and in need of privacy and safety.* In an ideal setting, there would be a room that you could use at any time that is absolutely sound proof, though this is very rarely the case. I generally recommend that you gently ask your hosts and other guests when the house will be at its lowest occupancy. This can be a gentle way of breaking the ice around your request for privacy.

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Even if your hosts are happy to give you the physical space to practice for an hour or so, they often need reminding that practicing is *not* performing, or even running through a piece in its entirety. It's really more like a combination of creating a very particular 'flow' experience, alternating with very technical work. Comments like, "That sounds very nice," during your session can be well-meaning, though they still frequently trigger feelings of comparison, judgment, and general non-safety.

It's for those very reasons that I often recommend that students find some alternative spaces, especially for voice, to practice if the home environment doesn't feel appropriate. Doing some research on alternative practice spots well before your trip will help you to feel proactive and more in control of your trip. Here are some alternative locations to consider:

- * school practice room or classroom
- * hourly rented practice space
- * church
- * friend's house or studio
- * park tunnel space

Opening-Up Dialogue/Opening-Up To Fun

One way to open the door and come out of your 'musical closet' would be to gently bring up what you've been up to musically in a phone call before you arrive. Your ability to gauge how much detail to reveal is a highly useful skill, albeit one that develops over time. If you come to the conversation in a state of neutrality—*without trying to prove anything or make someone wrong*—just your tone alone can do wonders to create a new opening in your relationship with that person. What this advance phone call really does is allow the other person to notice their reactions and adjust to their new position in the family mobile. This can be followed up at the time of your visit with a non-threatening (and brief) sharing of recordings of a currently inspiring vocalist / soloist, band / style of music / performance venue, or even a favorite poet.

Now, if you have a positive relationship with your family, then the sky is the limit. Not only can your conversations be more in-depth, but all kinds of activities are possible, including:

- * sharing a new original or non-original / cover piece you're working on
- * playing or singing with one or more of your family members
- * creating a piece together as a gift for someone who is enduring some sort of challenge or life crisis
- * shopping for recordings together
- * attending a concert or theater show

Lastly, there are some families that actually look forward to a member returning and practicing in a public (or semi-public) space. They make every effort to keep the guest's session undisturbed and feel inspired by their practicing. It might remind them of where they grew up, an instrument that they used to play, or just what a good job they did of supporting or encouraging that person's musical pursuits!

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3) Flexibility & Strategies

You don't need to be a best-selling fiction writer to imagine the range of things that can go wrong on a trip. Ask any person who has traveled much and they can tell you about how their flight got seriously delayed, or a key collaborator at a conference suddenly fell ill, or how several meetings were extended or re-scheduled. Maybe they forgot some important well-being item, like their asthma medication, special pillow, or ear plugs that interfered with their sleep. Or how half of the tickets that their friends bought turned out to be for the wrong show, only to be followed by the adventure of getting back home on public transportation...

Any and all of these events can cause your practice time to rapidly shrink, or unpredictably expand. Clearly, you will need strategies to allow your music to come to life and flourish. Here are some suggestions:

1) Not every trip will feel equally problematic. If your trip feels especially challenging, just try working on projects *only during your travel to and from your destination*. This can be a very effective way of 'bookending' your trip as an expression of your commitment to your music while honestly evaluating what is feasible. Sometimes it is not only a question of balancing any emotional work that might arise, but also the sheer physicality of taking certain instruments and related items through airports, on buses, etc. (See Part II of this series for the discussion on Portability, Flexibility, and Affordability regarding instruments).

2) Each day of your trip will have varying amounts of free time, from none to quite a bit. To keep yourself from getting too rigid about practicing, consider alternating between practicing your music one day and doing something that is physically rejuvenating, such as taking a long walk or hike, getting a massage, swimming, or working out. *The goal is to become better at monitoring your energy on trips so that you can match the right project with your energy level.*

3) Reflect on "what's hot" and "what's not" for you musically right now. As you approach your trip, ask yourself if you need more of a sense of Continuity from your current projects or a sense of Adventure by starting a brand new project, especially composing. Often I encourage students to bring different kinds of projects from both the Continuity and Adventure categories just in case their needs change during your trip. (See Part II of this series for its closing section geared toward songwriters and composers).

4) When you finally sit down to practice, you still have the job of balancing the time you have with your mood and energy. Here's a format that will help. Create a list of activities that you enjoy doing. Don't worry about any kind of order, just begin writing. Then, underneath those create three columns that and entitle them, "**Ease of Starting Activity:**"

Column 1—very easy to start

Column 2—takes a bit to start

Column 3—takes a longer while to start

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This set of columns addresses your mood and energy, as beginning one's practicing can often be challenging, especially when away from home.

Now, take these same activities and create a different set of three columns and entitle those, **"Ideal Length of Activity"**:

Column 1—brief (10-30 min.)

Column 2—moderate (30-50 min.)

Column 3—long (50 min. or more)

This set of columns addresses your sense of time and need for privacy, considering the unpredictability of being away from home, and the possibility of interruptions.

When you take a look at the items in both lists, trust your intuition and *just begin your first activity!* There's no need to second guess yourself because as soon as you start you'll know whether you've made a good choice. After you've completed your first activity you'll be in a better position to know what to do next. Try not to indulge in any commentary about your two different lists. They're just valuable observation tools for your music today. Maybe you feel like doing a series of shorter projects, one long project, or maybe a combination of short ones and long ones. There's no right way to practice! But you will feel the rewards of nurturing your music even when in an unfamiliar or challenging environment.

Probably the most fundamental consideration about practicing while away is this:

"How will I balance my need for self-expression with the unique limitations and circumstances available?"

Each trip will reveal its own set of answers...