

Musical Creativity and the Art of Practicing

BY MICHAEL SMOLENS

Many musicians find themselves in a paradox: they want to practice, but are easily frustrated when they try to practice consistently. This frustration reflects not so much an absence of "will power," but a lack of knowledge of how to create a supportive practicing environment. When music making mysteriously stalls, however, you can usually trace the problem to some pattern of avoidance which is itself due to unfamiliarity with how to create a supportive practice environment.

Unfortunately, many teachers do not routinely discuss such issues with their students. There seems to be an assumption that adult students can easily structure their time and priorities to make music a regular part of their lives. In this article, Michael Smolens, music instructor, addresses the gap between people's desire to make music and the techniques that will allow them to do so consistently and with joy.

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Mention the word "practicing" to any musician or music student and you'll probably hear reactions like: "work," "struggle," "why bother,"

Medium Swing
♩ = 132

1st x: pn.
2nd x: horns

(bass)

Change Of Mind

Bob Mintzer
(As played by Peter Erskine)

Here is a sample of Michael Smolens' original hand drawn musical notation. © 1986 Mintzer Music.

"nothing I play sounds good," "I'll never be as good as..." and "everyone can hear me practicing." Contrary to popular belief, these messages don't automatically disappear when your skills and confidence increase. In fact, professional musicians and music teachers readily confess to falling prey to the same thought patterns. And they, like so many amateurs, simply stop practicing after reaching a certain skill level.

This article is geared towards people renewing their relationship with music, or just beginning the adventure of practicing. I also have in mind those who are already practicing music and wish to reach a higher skill level. Moreover, you can use the concepts offered here to unleash your creativity in any area of your life! Whether you are working on a long-range project, like writing a

book, or a more day-to-day concern, such as cutting down on your overtime hours, you'll find the techniques suggested here empowering.

Admired Professional or Apologetic Amateur

Many people's vision of a successful artist is polarized between two extreme pictures—Child Prodigy (or, at the very least, someone who is obviously gifted) or Incessant Practicer. Neither of these pictures truly represents a healthy, or, for that matter, typical model.

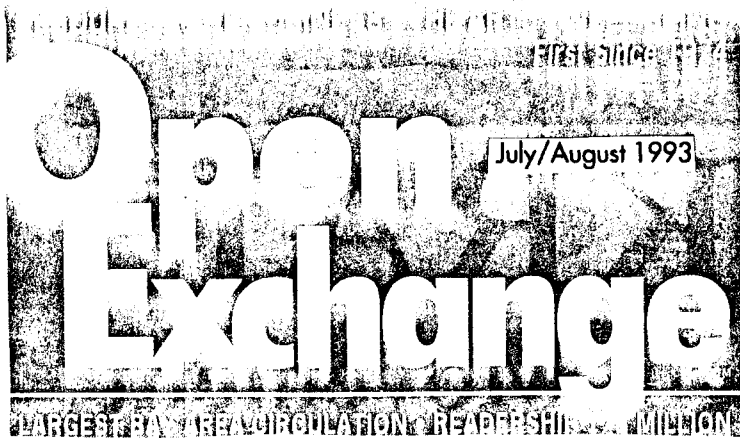
What's more, our culture seems to have only two labels for artists—the Admired Professional (the musician who seemingly has it "all together"), and the Apologetic Amateur (the kind of person who feels uncomfortable even calling him or herself a "musician").

Why do we find ourselves resistant to carrying out even the most well-intended plans for our musical development? Mind you, we're not talking about practicing for just a couple days or weeks in a row when you feel "inspired." But, rather, practicing consistently over a period of months and years. There are many possible sources of this intermittent practicing, ranging from our past history with music teachers to self-expression in general. Over-commitment in our daily lives is a frequent factor, while others feel plagued by poor concentration. Instead of spending lots of time discussing these weighty, though very pertinent topics, let's start with some basic questions that will help clarify your relationship with practicing. (For an excellent description of this phenomenon, please consult W. A. Mathieu's *The Listening Book*, Shambala Press, 1991.)

Now we will examine this issue—not through a set of ready-made prescriptions or answers, but through the process of posing particular questions and generating new possibilities for your practicing. We will also look at setting yourself up to win at practicing and recognizing your optimal practice times.

Drunken Monkeys and Practicing Distractions

Let's get right to the point. Human beings are very distractible animals. Buddhists describe our behavior as that of "drunken monkeys"—moving from activity to



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activity, without a clear, sustained focus. Once we really lock into an activity, however, the *activity itself* often creates enough momentum to generate real results. But, like drunken monkeys, we are easily distracted from what we want to accomplish—like making music!

Take a moment to breathe and recall all of your small and not-so-small interruptions. Some are as regular as clockwork, others appear briefly and mysteriously.

On a sheet of blank paper list the ten things that tend to distract you from your daily practicing. *Be specific!* Students have recounted all sorts of distractions, ranging from answering the phone and watching TV to impulsively re-arranging a closet or inappropriately volunteering time to someone else's project.

Pay particular attention to those things that come up **just as you are about to begin practicing**. Most (honest) people's lists have at least ten items. This exercise is of fundamental importance. In fact, it is the first step to understanding your entire relationship to practicing.

Next, list the non-musical activities which you always seem to have the time or energy for. By this, we mean behavior or habits you find yourself indulging in even when you are physically or emotionally drained. Students are often surprised that they, in fact, have energy to balance their checkbook, but not for an artistic activity that requires consistency and intention.

The goal of this exercise is not to try to "stamp out" these distractions, but simply to become more aware of how pervasive they are and to find ways for your music making to coexist peacefully with them. You might find it useful to review your list of practice distractions periodically and notice if they occur as frequently as they once did. And don't be alarmed if your new-found awareness leads you to notice how distractible you can be during non-music activities.

Something else to consider—does practicing at any particular time have an influence on your music-making and your ability to stay focused?

Finding Your Optimal Practice Time(s)

Despite what your childhood music teachers or parents might have told you, there is no "right time" to practice. Some people are simply more creative at midnight, while others find practicing in the early morning to be most fruitful. Education experts (and teachers who specialize in spiritual practice) generally agree that it is not *when* you practice that is the issue, but rather *how consistently* you keep a particular practice time(s). It is this very consistency in your practice schedule that creates a sense of momentum and ease.

To clarify this issue, let's start by listing, in order of preference, your three Optimal Practice Times—those times that you genuinely feel are the most productive and satisfying. Do not hurry this process, for most of us have allowed others to dictate our schedules in the realms of work, school, family, etc. Even if your first-choice practice time happens to fall, for example, during your current work day (or night), do not hesitate to write it down. Although it may feel daring at first, such an act reflects real

commitment to your art and builds your time-management skills, which can be applied to everything you do.

Next, consider which of your non-musical activities could be shifted or re-vamped to accommodate your Optimal Practice Times. Write down some possible changes in your schedule that might allow you to practice at these times. Such changes could be as minor as shifting your aerobics class, or as major as changing careers or living situations. Again, these are only possibilities. The success of this exercise depends on your willingness to generate new possibilities without self-censorship. And again, don't feel obligated to act on any of these schedule shifts.

Now review your practice distraction and optimal practice time lists. You will probably notice that these distractions have been a part of your life for a long time. And most likely, your optimal practice times might have been dormant for just as long. But take heart! When you acknowledge the nature of your distractions and the importance of choosing your Optimal Practice Times, you take the first step to practicing with more consistency and joy. The second step is to create a Pre-Practice Routine.

Creating a Pre-Practice Routine

A Pre-Practice Routine is your key to practicing more creatively and with less effort! You will now create your own Pre-Practice Routine, which is nothing more than a simple, yet effective list of activities that will set you up to practice consistently and creatively.

Maybe, just maybe, having a nurturing relationship with your practicing is very much like going to the gym to workout. To practice effectively, we must do the same kinds of things that you would do with an athletic trainer—namely, goal-setting, receiving coaching, and designing a realistic schedule for *actually getting yourself to the gym*. And like any good workout, the benefits are cumulative in nature and not immediately apparent.

Let's start by brainstorming different activities you could do *before you start playing* that would make your practicing more productive. On the same sheet as your distractions list, write down any pre-practice activity that could aid and enhance your daily practicing. Consider your practice environment, your body, your state of mind, your instrument, etc. Remember, these are only possibilities. Do not feel obligated to do any of these activities just because you've written them down. Just let your imagination roam.

Frequently-mentioned activities include: "clear area around my piano," "turn on my answering machine," "stretch," "meditate," "review goals for the week," and "listen to inspirational music." Among the more unusual responses: "pet my cat," "look at a photo of my guru," "imagine that I am playing for my lover."

After you have created at least a dozen possibilities, narrow your list down to those three to six items that you feel would make the greatest impact on your daily practice. And *Voilà!*—your Pre-Practice Routine is born! To get the most out of your list, try ordering your items by priority, or in the order they will be done. And hold on to your original list. You may want to experiment with different combinations of items for your Pre-Practice Routine as the weeks and months (and practice hours) go by.

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