



Folly Quarter Middle School Band Program

Andrew B. Spang, Director of Bands

Successful Practicing

Presented by Andrew B. Spang & Friends of Folly Quarter Musicians

1) What is Practicing?

a) “Doing it over and over until you get it right” vs. “Forming of [correct] habits”

b) Music and **metacognition**

2) The Practice Area

a) Musicians will have more focused and effective practice with the creation of a specific Practice Area. An exemplary Practice Area includes

i) A chair that aids in good playing posture

(1) Comfortable, but flat, keeping the legs straight and the body seated upright.

(2) Knees should never be higher than hips.

(3) Students should avoid utilizing the back of the chair whenever possible.

ii) Good lighting. (Sunlight is best.)

iii) A music stand. *All* students should own a quality music stand that can be adjusted (height and desk angle).

iv) Music and accessories should be within easy reach.

v) Practice Log can be hung on wall or kept in the music folder.

b) The Practice Area should be out of the “high traffic” zones of the house.

c) Quite often best if the seat faces out a window or into a corner.

d) Should be kept neat and orderly, just like one’s practice routine.

3) Practicing Time (How Long? When?)

a) 12 minutes a day is better than 90 minutes once a week. Really.

b) “Just go do 5 minutes...”

c) Try to set a standard time to practice, whatever works best for the child.

Everyday “right after school,” or “15 minutes before dinner,” or “at 7:40 before 8:00 TV.” The main thing is to try and be consistent.

4) What to Practice?

a) At any time, students should be reviewing scales that they already know.

b) Drummers/Percussionists: Rudiments, Long Roles

c) Scale Pattern #1 for all scales they already know.

i) Ask “What is your slowest scale pattern? Can you get it up to speed with the other key signatures?”

d) Scale Pattern #2...

e) Long Tones

i) With a tuner to keep pitch (sharp/flat) steady.

ii) To develop a clear and beautiful sound.

iii) Add in dynamics while keeping the pitch steady.

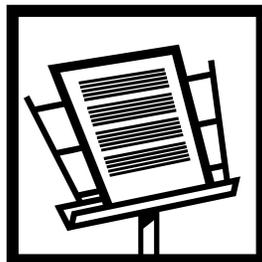
iv) Vibrato

- f) Band Music (Obviously, but ask “What piece can you not play perfectly? Why? Start there.”)
- g) Private Lesson Music
 - i) *Of course* Private Lesson music “counts” on the Practice Log.
- h) Sight-Reading
- i) Song Books, Hymnals, etc.
 - i) Really? Disney counts? Yes, up to a point.
- j) Songs *by ear*
 - i) If your child already does this, then great! It counts. If not, be aware that it is very frustrating at first. Don’t let them quit! Make them learn at least one more complete phrase (line).
 - ii) Serious jazz players: transcribe a solo.
- k) Improvisation
 - i) Jamey Abersold
 - ii) SmartMusic
 - iii) Drummers: playing with recordings on headphones.
- l) Old Favorites? Old Band Music? **No.**
- m) Range expansion – higher and lower. (This can get ugly and that’s okay!)
- n) Mendez Tonguing Exercise
 - i) Set a metronome to  ≈ 69 , tongue four sixteenth notes per click for exactly one minute; never take a “break” longer than one beat to breath. Use middle range bite, and practice at medium-loud dynamics.

5) Practicing Tools

- a) **A Pencil**
- b) **The Tuner**
 - i) Korg CA-30
 - ii) Sabine MetroTune MT9000
 - iii) Desirable qualities
 - (1) Digital over “the needle”
 - (2) Tone generation
 - (3) Input jack (even for non-electric instruments)
- c) **The Metronome**
 - i) Sabine MetroTune MT9000
 - ii) Boss Dr. Beats (DB-88, DB-66, and the DB-12)
 - iii) Desirable qualities
 - (1) Audible beat patterns (2/4, 3/4, 4/4, 5/4, 6/4)
 - (2) Pleasing sound
 - iv) Percussionists: can use portable CD Players as metronomes at times.
- d) Journal
 - i) A truly advanced student should begin to track their practicing, writing down
- e) Audio Recorder/Playback Equipment
 - i) Recording practice is a *great* way to hear mistakes you normally miss. Why? Because you can focus your *whole* brain on listening, not on performing, counting, tuning, *etc.*
- f) The “Musicians’ Friend”

- g) Proper accessories for your instrument. (See Band Handbook/Website.)
- 6) What Should You Hear?**
- a) Repetition.
 - b) Shorter and shorter phrases, or snippets of music.
 - c) Music being played slower and slower, then faster and faster.
 - d) Few or no mistakes.
 - e) As a performance approaches, longer and longer pieces of music.
- 7) Binary Thinking and Playing “Perfectly”**
- a) I expect young musicians to play “perfectly,” so should you.
 - b) The “Door Speech” and Binary (zero or one) Thinking.
 - c) Don’t move on when practicing until that measure is “perfect.”
 - d) The Perfect Practice Method – see handout.
- 8) Practicing Hints, Tricks and Games**
- a) The Bookmark Philosophy (or, don’t always start at the beginning.)
 - b) The Game of Five
 - c) Add-A-Note
 - d) Play it backwards. Seriously. (Where do think the phrase “knowing it backwards and forwards” came from, anyways?)
- 9) Recordings & Listening**
- a) Every birthday, every holiday, every Thursday: buy a recording of a top flight professional playing your child’s instrument and expose your child to great playing.
 - b) Check the B.S.O. Schedule, or Concerts on the Lawn, for soloists who play your child’s instrument. Go to hear them live! Support music and help your child at the same time! Many of these events are free!
 - i) **BSO:** http://www.baltimoresymphony.org/season_tickets/season_calendar.asp
 - ii) **Marine Band:** http://www.marineband.usmc.mil/pgm_perform.html
 - iii) **Navy Band:** <http://www.navyband.navy.mil/>
 - iv) **Army Band:** <http://www.army.mil/armyband/>
 - v) **Air Force Band:** <http://www.bolling.af.mil/main.htm>
 - vi) **Columbia Orchestra:** <http://www.columbiaorchestra.org/>
 - vii) **Columbia Concert Band:** <http://www.angelfire.com/md/ccb/calendar.html>
 - viii) **Peabody Conservatory:** <http://www.peabody.jhu.edu/home.php>
 - ix) **Towson University:** <http://wwwnew.towson.edu/music/calendar/current.htm>



Perfect Practice Method

by Scott Speck, Conductor of the Chesapeake Youth Symphony Orchestra and the 1996 All State Senior Orchestra

Your brain is like a computer. It can learn almost anything you put into it, and repeat it back almost flawlessly. Why, then, should it be so tricky to learn a difficult piece of music? Simple — because we constantly enter the wrong data into our computer. Think about it. When most musicians practice a difficult passage, what do they do? They play it at full speed, and get it wrong. Then they play it at full speed again, and get it wrong again. And again and again. Then, *finally*, almost by chance, they get it right once. Satisfied, they go on to the next passage.

So what has the brain (and fingers and bow arm and embouchure) learned from this practice? It has stored the data that was input the *first time, and the greatest number of times*—the incorrect data, that is. Just like a perfect computer, when called upon in performance, the brain can then retrieve this incorrect data *flawlessly*. And the result is a replica of all the mistakes in practice—a very messy performance.

The key to effective practice, then, is *never to input the incorrect data in the first place*. The amazing truth is this: if you never make a mistake in practice, then you will actually be *incapable* of making a mistake in performance.

Never make a mistake in practice? How is that possible? Let me show you how.

For any passage within the realm of your technique, there exists a tempo at which you could play it flawlessly *right now*. Once you find that tempo, you are on the way to playing it quickly and fluently.

Let's take an example. Say you want to learn an incredibly fast passage made up of thirty-second notes, at the tempo of quarter note = 100. When you look at it, it's overwhelming. When you try to play it with the metronome set on 100, not only do you miss notes constantly, but you are seized by a very uneasy feeling.

Your stomach tightens up. Your jaw tightens. Your breathing becomes shallow and inefficient. In short, you panic.

But wait. What if, instead of thirty-second notes, this passage were made up completely of *whole* notes? If every one of those notes were a whole note, could you play the passage right now? *Of course* you could. You could play it in tune, in perfect rhythm, and with beautiful tone.

“Never make a mistake in practice? How is that possible? Let me show you how.”

What's more, you would feel no panic whatsoever. In its place, there would be a beautiful feeling of ease and grace.

So try it. Put the metronome on 100 as before, but this time, each note gets *four* beats of the metronome. In other words, treat each note as a whole note.

Once you have done this, put the metronome up a notch or two and play the passage again. Still incredibly easy, right? Now keep increasing the speed, going up a notch or two with each repetition. When the beats get fast enough, lower the metronome again and start playing each note as if it were a half note—*two*

beats to each note. Then later, *one* beat to a note, as the beats get even faster.

Keep repeating the passage, one or two notches faster each time, until you feel just the slightest feeling of unease when playing. At this point, *stop*. You have reached the limit of easy playing for today.

Tomorrow, start the metronome a few notches lower than where you ended today. You will find that you can get the passage even faster before you have to stop. By the day after tomorrow, you will be flying.

It is extremely important here to stop whenever you begin to lose that feeling of ease. In this method, we always want to bring that feeling with us as we increase the tempo. The reason is simple. If the brain always senses ease in connection with this passage in practice, it can only sense ease in performance.

With this method, you can master almost any difficult passage in three or four daily sessions of five minutes each. I guarantee that when you learn this way, your results will be much more effective and reliable than before. And the beauty is, your computer will always retrieve the data correctly. Every single time.

Try this method with each of the tricky passages in your music. You will be surprised and thrilled to see what happens.

Good luck!