

How to Practice, or What the Heck Should I DO in the Practice Room?

Did you ever consider how ridiculous it would be to try to cram on a farm—to forget to plant in the spring, relax all summer and then cram in the fall to bring in the harvest? The farm is a natural system. The price must be paid and the process followed. You always reap what you sow; there is no shortcut.¹

I once had a school colleague who had a grueling practice routine: she would arrive at her practice room, take her music out and place it on the music rack of the piano, and vocalize for about 5-10 minutes. At this point she would leave the practice room and walk about the music building, popping in on other students in practice rooms and carrying on long conversations in the student lounge. After 1-2 hours of exercising her voice in this fashion, she would collect her things and exit the building (taking care to pass faculty members on the way out), proclaiming loudly, “that practice session just did me in!” This became known in the music department as the “Danielle method.”

Danielle faced two problems common to voice students. First, there were things that were more interesting to her than developing her voice (her downfall was socializing). Real singers put their singing at the top of the priority list. Danielle’s second problem was that she didn’t know what to do once she was **in** the practice room.

Most of us do remarkably well in an ensemble rehearsal when the conductor is putting us through our paces. Singers must be able to be their own rehearsal supervisor in the practice room. A major goal of voice study is to **develop a highly structured practice routine** that includes full body warm-up, vocal warm-up, conditioning exercises (building in frequency, duration, and intensity), exercises or vocalizes that target vocal skills, repertoire study, and cool-down. Practice sessions should be followed by blocks of time in which you rest your voice and allow your voice and mind to recover and recharge.

Daily practice will enable you to condition your body and your mind for the rigors of singing. It will enable you to learn increasingly longer and more complex pieces and sing with confidence! The worst feeling in the world is to go into a performance underprepared. In fact, many singers have nightmares about this very scenario. Furthermore, **how** you practice is just as important as **how much**

¹Covey, Stephen, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1989), 22.

or **how long** you practice. “You will perform as you have practiced—therefore, **practice correctly!**”

The 6 Basic Mistakes Students Make, or, Faulty Thinking 101

1. **“The Myth of Later,”** or “I’ll do it later.” “Later” could mean later in the day, week, month, or semester. “Later” is unspecified and often goes unobserved by the individual—in other words, **later never arrives until it’s too late.** How do you know when it’s too late? When you find yourself making statements like, “I’m singing on tomorrow’s recital and I totally don’t know my music!” or “my voice lesson is this afternoon and I’m completely unprepared!”

The first basic mistake that students make is not to schedule their practicing. I recommend that you make up a daily schedule grid, with slots on the half-hour. When you see your classes and rehearsals in the schedule grid, it is relatively easy to see when you could study and practice.

Another type of scheduling that voice students must do is long-range scheduling. Do you have a recital jury scheduled on a particular date? Voice juries the last week of classes? A role to perform? An audition or competition? Look at a calendar. You should be in what is called “performance mode practice” (everything is securely learned and memorized, is singing “easily” in your voice, and you are working toward an artistic performance) a **minimum of two weeks before the event.** Mark the event on your calendar, and look back two weeks. Put a star or mark on that date to designate it as “performance mode day.” Now, look at the music you have to learn. How many songs? What are the technical challenges? How long will each song take to learn? How long will it take to memorize?

2. **“The Myth of Fun,”** or “practicing takes the fun out of it for me.” To discuss this, we need to make two assumptions. First, when **artistic singing** takes place, ample preparatory time has gone into that performance. The performance may seem spontaneous, but skilled performers are able to transcend the mere details of the piece to give inspired, expressive performances. An artistic performance is usually a culmination of a lot of study and practice.

Does the Chicago Symphony Orchestra just show up on concert day and play? Does University Choir just assemble at concert time and whatever happens, fine? If your goal is **to just sing** (whatever comes out, comes out, if the singing is good, that’s a happy accident), then I agree, you don’t need to practice. You probably also don’t need to be studying voice. If your goal is to **be a singer** who gives expressive, skilled performances, then you understand why you must have frequent and high-quality rehearsals.

The second assumption of the “myth of fun” has to do with the word “fun.” This assumption means that practice is work, and work is, of course, not fun. “Fun” is an interesting word choice because it comes loaded with different implications. How can something done in a solitary, stuffy, smelly, poorly lit room be fun? Practicing can be an isolating activity, and if you are a social creature (as many singers are), then the sheer solitude of a practice room may be jarring. You may need to work at balancing your social time with practice time, and not allow, as Danielle did, opportunities to socialize and make important emotional connections to completely undermine practice time.

“Fun” may imply mindless or passive enjoyment. For me, going to the movies is fun. Practicing is fun for me, but in a different way. Working on music engages different parts of my brain. I think on a higher and more active level when I’m practicing than when I’m sitting in a movie theater, being entertained. When you are fully engaged in what you are doing, practicing can indeed be productive, confidence-building, and enjoyable.

“Fun” can also mean “spontaneous.” There is a great need for spontaneity in performance, but it does not mean that spontaneity is a byproduct of underpreparation. Performing in public is already unpredictable. If you do not prepare for a performance, you are training yourself to “wing it.” You are not training yourself to perform artistically. It is important that you do not confuse the two situations.

Being prepared does not mean over-planning or controlling every minute detail. As singer Gérard Souzay once wrote, “I believe in leaving something to the inspiration of the moment.”² Souzay **did not mean that he never rehearsed.** On the contrary, he remarked, “I work on something as long as it works on me. I must sow and plant; then things will begin to grow naturally. To master Schubert’s *Winterreise* took me ten years, and then I discovered twenty wouldn’t be enough.”³

More Good News About “Fun”

In *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi suggests that work can be made pleasurable if the worker orders the activity in conscious awareness. When order is achieved in consciousness, and the information that comes into consciousness is aligned with goals, the individual can achieve optimal experience, or “**flow**.” He further maintains that flow is not a random experience,

²Souzay, Gérard, “The Mystery of Performing,” *Opera News* November 25, 1967: 8.

³Ibid.

but can be deliberately created. Normally boring or tedious routines become purposeful and enjoyable. This could be applied to anything from housework to repetitive jobs (e.g., assembly lines), sports activities (e.g., workout routines), and, for the musician, practice!

The elements of flow include:

1. A challenging activity that requires skills.
2. The merging of action and awareness.
3. Clear goals and feedback.
4. Concentration on the task at hand.
5. The paradox of control (i.e., a sense of being in control and feeling free coexist in the “flow experience.”).
6. The loss of self-consciousness.
7. The transformation of time (i.e., “time flies when you're having fun!”).⁴

3. **“The Myth of Hours,”** or “I’ll practice next Friday when I have two-four-six hours totally free to devote to my voice music.” This type of schedule fails on two levels, the vocal level and the mental level.

Daily conditioning builds your voice, your skills, and your stamina a little bit at a time. Remember that a voice is made from muscle, cartilage, and tendon, and other human tissue. We utilize both large muscles (abdominals, intercostals, postural muscles) and small muscles (articulatory muscles, laryngeal muscles) in singing, but the process for building it is the same. How is muscle built? By alternately working it (which literally breaks down the muscle, making micro-tears in the muscle fiber) and then resting it (the time during which the body repairs the damage and deposits material to fill up the gaps—“bulking”). The workouts gradually increase in frequency and intensity until higher and higher levels of stamina and endurance are met. We also work our muscles for flexibility and agility through vocal exercises (scales, arpeggios). When you work on vocal skills, for example, abdominal breathing, every day, you will build that skill and be able to go on to the next level of the skill or the next skill necessary in the sequence. It is extremely doubtful, based on current research, that one long practice session a week could help you master the stamina and physical skill necessary to improve. Oversinging in a 24-hour period is also considered a vocally abusive behavior.

Mentally, this schedule is similarly doomed. If you have average concentration skills you would typically reach mental overload anywhere from 10-20 minutes into the practice session. The mind wanders and needs to rest and regroup. Until you build your concentration skills, it would be better for you to

⁴Czikszentmihalyi, Mihaly, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), 43-67.

learn how to concentrate for 10-15 minutes and then build to longer periods of time. Furthermore, daily work on memorization moves music from short-term to long-term memory. Until a piece is in long-term memory, it “decays” or fades from memory on a daily basis. When too much time elapses between memory recall, the material can fade completely. It is doubtful that one long practice session per week builds dependable memory skills.

4. **“The Myth of Showing Up,”** or “I’ll sing for an hour and whatever happens, happens.” One 15-60 minute session of correct practicing is extremely beneficial. One 15-60 minute session of bad practicing means you are wasting time reinforcing bad habits rather than changing them or replacing them with new healthy habits. Elite athletes never go into a workout or practice without a plan. This is sometimes referred to as “goal-setting.” Elite musicians similarly practice with a plan. As Stephen Covey counsels, “Begin with the end in mind.”⁵

What do you hope to accomplish in one 15-60 minute practice session?
What is your **Practice Focus?** Here are some examples:

Musical Focus: practicing notes, rhythms, words, musical expression

Mental Focus: confidence, concentration

Memorization Focus

Technical/Physical Focus: posture, breathing, resonance, diction

Performance Mode Focus: practicing under performing conditions

5. **“The Myth of Easy,”** or “my music is easy and shouldn’t take me much time to learn or memorize.” This is topically linked to “The Myth of Later.” The most basic mistake I have seen students make over and over, in 10 years of teaching, is that they habitually **underestimate** the amount of time it takes to learn and memorize music. When they make their schedules early in the semester, a sort of reverse prioritizing occurs. The student believes, mistakenly, that music can be learned and memorized quickly, therefore he or she does not schedule enough practice time. If a song is practiced often enough, many layers of technical and musical material can be mastered at higher and higher levels of skill.

Remember that the goal is **artistic singing!** If all performing was a memorization test, we would all be famous!

6. **“The Myth of Mental Practice,”** or “I’ll learn my music without actually singing.” Mental practice is utilized by elite athletes, dancers, actors, and singers. There is much evidence that mental practice contributes to high-level performing. In sports psychology alone, research studies have confirmed the benefits of mental practice when linked with physical practice. However, when athletes practice only physically or only mentally, performance levels typically decrease. Mental practice

⁵Covey, 22.

is best utilized in conjunction with physical practice. Higher-level performers use both techniques. As Stephen Covey wrote in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, “*all things are created twice*. There’s a mental or first creation, and a physical or second creation to all things.”⁶

The practice room is where you physically practice. Get comfortable with that environment. Sitting in your dorm room, with poor posture and support, listening to your accompaniment tape and humming through your songs, is not physical practice.

Mental practice is also done in a controlled environment. Sitting in your dorm room and mentally going through your songs is a form of mental practice—**if** your roommate is not present and you are not distracted by the phone, television, or computer. If you are sitting on the couches in the music lounge where noise and interruptions are highly likely, it is doubtful you are getting a lot of benefit from this type of mental practice. Mentally practice in a social setting is a modified version of the “Danielle method!”

Types of Practice

A. Random: taking it as it comes; letting one random event lead to another. Useful at some times throughout the semester but shouldn’t be the dominant mode of practice because specific goals are often neglected.

B. Distributed Practice: One skill or excerpt is practiced but in short bursts. Rest intervals between practice periods are as frequent or more frequent than the practice itself. This method is particularly useful in memorization and the mastery of technical skills and facilitates longer-term learning and retention.

C. Variable Practice: The individual varies the execution of a skill. For example, when practicing high notes, the singer uses 2-3 different exercises to “**routine**” the skill. Some variation techniques:

1. **Toggle:** moving from one extreme to the other. For example, if you are working on sound quality or resonance, you might first sing a passage in an overly bright, pinched way. To toggle would mean switching to another extreme on the next repetition, so you would sing the same passage in an overly dark, bottled-up voice. Compare the two extremes—there are useful building blocks in each. How can we keep the projection of the overly bright sound while leaving the tension behind? How can we use the depth and openness of the overly dark sound?

⁶Covey, 99

2. **Benchmark:** a benchmark or “target” sound” is something that has been achieved and demonstrated in a lesson. When you work on a particular skill, like a free and open high C, what did you do to get that to work? When singers recreate those conditions sound, they are referencing that benchmark.

3. **Skill Accelerando:** practicing the way your first piano teacher always said you should practice: slow to fast!

4. **Variable Focus:**

Musical Focus

Technical Focus

Physical Focus (example, relaxation)

Expressive Focus

Mental (example, “confidence formula” or “distraction” practice)

Performance Mode

D. Blocked Practice: repeated practice of one skill or item before moving on to another. An example of this may be mastering the approach to a high note in a difficult phrase before or learning to sing melismatic passages before attempting the entire aria. This type of practice works to “**routine**” the skill; another term for this is **neuro-patterning**.

E. Massed Practice: doing all the practice of a particular skill in one long unit where the rest interval between practice is short or non-existent. Massed practice produces rapid gains, but be careful! This is the vocal equivalent of “cramming,” where quick results replace retention! Would you give up long-term results for short-term results? Remember the principles of muscular conditioning apply as well. This type of practicing could turn into vocally abusive behaviors if used too soon and too frequently.

Massed practice is most effective at the end of a preparatory sequence (for example, a school semester in which you have to sing a recital at the end of the semester). You begin with distributed practice. As you master skills, you begin to use variable practice. As your skills continue to improve, you move to blocked practice. As you get your pieces memorized and vocally under control, you begin to “mass” your practice sessions to link phrases into songs, songs into groups and groups into sections of the recital, and eventually into one long performance. You keep massing your practice sessions and are then able to incorporate a technique called “**overlearning**.” Overlearning is continued practice of a skill after it has been learned.

F. Structured Practice: practicing a skill or passage in a controlled and identical way.

Each practice session, no matter how long or short, should have some kind of structure. A sample **Practice Routine** follows:

Practice Routine

A. Preparation and Training

1. Physical

- “Your body is your instrument!” Take a moment to assess what condition your instrument is in today. How is your general health/vocal health today? Are you adequately hydrated? Have you been getting adequate fuel (food, vitamins)? How much sleep have you gotten lately? These factors will affect your practice session.
- The singer must learn not only to use his or her resources wisely, but also to utilize those resources in a healthy way. Physical warm-up and training, including stretches, warm-ups, vocal conditioning exercises, and other exercises help a singer learn how to “sing on the interest and not the principle.”
- To understand the overall concepts of and vocal conditioning and exercise physiology, see Training handout. Understanding these concepts will help you schedule and sequence your practice sessions.
- Check body alignment (see Alexander Technique handouts)
- Stretches (see Physical Warm-ups and Stretches handouts)
 - entire body
 - head/neck, facial muscles)
- Breathing exercises (See Breathing Worksheet)
 - sets and reps of:
 - sustained breathing
 - pulsed breathing

2. Vocal

- Warm-up=“bring up the temperature” in your muscles gradually and easily. Never sing full voice on “cold muscle.” In general, warm up first in a medium dynamic range on descending patterns and descending repetitions in a middle to low comfortable range. Continue descending patterns in mid-register. Add some ascending patterns. Continue descending and ascending patterns in higher register. Dynamics increase gradually throughout the warm-up.
 - the full warm-up: first warm-up of the day

- the abbreviated warm-up: if you are distributing your practice routine, you rarely have to do the full warm-up more than once a day.
- the emergency warm-up: the bare minimum that can get you warmed up on extremely short notice (for example, when you arrive at a competition or audition and have been switched to an earlier performance time than originally expected).
- Conditioning exercises (15-20 minutes/7 days a week)
sets and reps
see Conditioning Exercises and Vocalises, Vocal Conditioning Exercises handouts
- Vocalises and exercises (put conditioning in a musical context, using scales and arpeggios)
 - onset, offset
 - flexibility and agility
 - legato
 - phrasing
 - resonance
 - dynamics
 - registration
 - articulation
- Repertoire excerpts or passages: make them your vocalises (“music teaches music”).

B. Repertoire Study

1. Work-Through (taking a song or songs from the learning stages to performance)
 - see How to Learn a Song, How to Memorize a Song
 - “Homework”—what has your teacher asked you to work on?
What do you need to revisit from the previous practice session?
This could be:
Technical issues
Musical issues (rhythm, dynamics, phrasing, etc.)
Text/Diction
Memorization
 - The practice room is where mistakes are inevitable and even beneficial. You don’t have to sing perfectly in the practice room. “What is a mistake? **Useful Information**”—Leon Thurman.
 - Confused or frustrated? That’s only natural! Learn to expect it. “Confusion is the first sign of learning”—Leon Thurman. If you

are confused, you have a problem to solve or a question to be answered. Who can help you with this question? Is this something you can work through on your own. This condition is sometimes known as the “teachable moment.” What can you learn from this? What does this situation have to teach you?

2. Spot-Check
3. Run-Through
 - Maintenance/Overlearning: maintaining your improvement from one practice session to the next
 - Refine/Polish/Finesse
 - Memorization
 - Interpretation
 - Performance Mode Practice

C. Physical Cool-Down

- an abbreviated (shortened) and retrograde (reversed) version of the warm-up

D. Assessment

1. Progress made? What? How?
2. Problems encountered/conquered?
3. What to concentrate on next time?
4. Is the skill/song “unshakeable” yet? (Can you sing it under any conditions?)
5. Questions for your teacher?

In a famous profile of internationally renowned violinist and master teacher Isaac Stern on *CBS News Sunday Morning*, Stern was shown working with young violinists in a master class. Stern was straightforward with the students and clear about his expectations for them, which were high. He tempered his remarks with a clear love of music and of teaching, and the students responded by playing better. In a voice-over, Stern stated that his most cherished goal of teaching was to show his students musicians that the journey of studying music would be the most challenging and yet ultimately rewarding and uplifting path that they could choose. He wished to impart to his students “how unending is the road to beauty, how lucky you are to walk on that road.”

I am lucky to be on this journey with you. I cannot imagine a more rewarding career. When you have questions about practicing, I will be happy to assist you. We are on the road—bon voyage (literally, have a wonderful journey)!