

# ...To the barricades

*“Time has no divisions to mark its passage, there is never a thunderstorm or blare of trumpets to announce the beginning of a new month or year. Even when a new century begins it is only we mortals who ring bells and fire off pistols.”*

Thomas Mann (1875–1955), German author and critic

**Sample Only: Chapter 1**

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## ***The Practice Revolution: Chapter 1***

- The Quantity Myth
- The Revolution Begins

# 1. ...To the barricades

## 1.1 The Quantity Myth

For too long, music teachers have been obsessed with *how much* practice students do. Seminars and online newsgroups around the world are filled with suggestions for getting students to do more, and lamentations about students who never seem to do enough. It then often becomes the first question asked at each lesson – usually couched in terms of “How did your practice go this week?” – but we’re not really fishing for a report on the success of the practice when we ask this. We want know how much *time* they spent, and how regularly that practice took place. As the teacher, give me a big number, tell me it happened seven times in the week, and I’ll be smiling already.

In this way, practice has been regarded simply as a barometer of *dedication* – a tangible way for students to demonstrate how serious they are about their music lessons. They tithe time, not money, as a regular gesture of good faith to the institution that is their teaching studio, and to the parents who make those lessons possible.

And once the number of minutes spent practicing has been noted, there’s not usually much attention paid to how productive that time actually was.

Following this logic, many parents and teachers will assume that a student who is spending thirty minutes every day is twice as dedicated as one who spends fifteen. And if they’re not practicing at all...gee...then lessons are obviously a complete waste of time. They better quit.

If you ever have doubts about the prevalence of this perception, try asking a parent how they think their child’s music lessons are going. The answer will usually be in two parts – first a subjective assessment of progress:

*“They seem to be going really well”*

*“Struggling at the moment”*

*“Enjoying it!”*

*"Second half of this year has been better than the first"*

And then they'll reinforce their conclusion with evidence expressed in terms of how much practice their child is doing:

*"They're practicing every day! I don't even have to ask"*

*"It doesn't matter how much I nag, they won't even open their instrument case"*

*"They practice most days, but rarely for more than twenty minutes"*

So how are lessons going? Sounds as though you can answer that with a simple number. They're going *20 minutes of practice, three times a week*. (not going so well) They're going *practice every day, from four to half past four*. (Good lessons!) They're going *no practice at all, apart from a ten minute panic session on the day of the lesson* (Baaad lessons!)

It's madness. There are two fatal flaws in this approach, and together, they have been wrecking music lessons since before your favorite composers were born.

First of all, this time-obsession approach has the student (and their family!) focussing on the minute hand of the clock, rather than outcomes. Students shouldn't practice just to pass time, students practice so that they can master certain skills by next lesson—skills that otherwise may have taken many weeks or months to acquire. Practice is a means to an end, and not an end in itself. And most alarming of all, as the "Common Practice Flaws" section of this book illustrates, if time is the only consideration, it's possible for a student to spend a lot of time practicing, and actually make their playing *worse*. So it's not a given that just because they are telling you Big Numbers when they answer "How did your practice go this week?" that they have been helping their playing any.

Secondly, an obsession with how much practice is being done sets up as the Most Important Issue the one part of music lessons that is often in trouble. Problems with practice is the single biggest reason that lessons fail. You might have a student who is progressing well, looking forward to lessons, performing well at recitals and exams, improving with both their reading and rhythmic skills, excited about the future and engaged in the present—but has an on-again-off-again attitude to practicing at home. In fact some weeks they don't do any. Despite the profile which clearly paints a picture of a student who is getting a lot from their lessons, because their practice is not so good, they are told regularly that what they are doing is

“just not good enough”. Even if we temper that by acknowledging how well they are playing, they are still left in no doubt that according to the most important yardstick, they are failing.

A month or two of that, and you can watch everything else dry up. As a student, it’s very hard to be enthusiastic about music lessons when you know that the focus of the lessons themselves is going to be on the one thing that is *not* going well. And suddenly, an exciting and excited music student has been struck down, consigned to the great Graveyard of lessons that didn’t quite work out.

Shame on us. It’s like taking a car to the wreckers just because the glove box doesn’t close properly.

This is particularly destructive if there is no understanding as to *why* practice is sometimes missing. In the absence of any genuine analysis of what causes the lack of practice, it’s all too easy to declare that the student is “not dedicated”. *Dedication often has nothing to do with it.* As we’ll see later in the book, there are many reasons students avoid practice, from reading difficulties, to an impossible environment at home, to inadequate project management skills...each of which is completely independent of dedication, and each of which needs to be handled uniquely.

Not only that, but if you can maintain the fundamentals that are going so well in lessons, and combine that with an understanding of what is genuinely preventing practice, you’ll eventually end up with a student who practices of their own accord anyway – without the need for constant intervention from the adults in their life. And one of the great battlegrounds surrounding music lessons is removed.

We don’t get this wrong because we’re bad people. In fact it’s usually an indicator that we take what we do very seriously, and that we believe the student should too. We also know as experienced teachers that it is a very rare student indeed who can progress to anyone’s satisfaction if they are doing no practice at all. The understanding is that Time is the most valuable asset the student has, and that they should be spending plenty of it in the practice room – otherwise they are selling themselves and their lessons short.

It’s precisely *because* Time is the most valuable asset that students have that we should be focussing instead on how we can help them get more done in *less* time. Instead of thinking up ever more creative ways to get our students to do more practice, we should be thinking up ever more efficient methods of practice, so that whatever practice they do actually *works*. The irony is that in shifting the obsession away from how much

practice students do, and towards how we can help them practice better, students end up spending more time practicing anyway – because they get more out of it.

## 1.2 The Revolution Begins

Of course it's not quite as simple as that. Even if practicing were reframed so that outcomes become more important than time spent, without time spent, there are no outcomes. This means that there will still exist the basic ages-old tension between teacher and student – the desire on the teacher's part for the student to always come to lessons prepared, colliding head on with the desire on the student's part to do as little practice as they can get away with.

The beauty of the Practice Revolution is that it defuses this tension. And it does so in a way that has the student concentrating harder and practicing more efficiently than ever before. Not because it's magic, but simply because it restructures the institution of practice to allow human nature to work *for* you, instead of constantly fighting against it.

Here's how it works.

Your students are interested in doing less practice, if at all possible. You want them to be ready for their next lesson. But because of the attitude shift at the core of the Practice Revolution, you don't need to be particularly interested in how *long* it actually takes them to get the job done each week. As long as the outcomes are satisfactory, it's actually their business – and only their business – how long they spent doing it. Just as if we worked in a conventional office job, and we are to submit a report by Friday, our boss doesn't care whether it takes us twenty minutes or twenty hours, as long as it's a good report, and it is delivered on time. In fact, if your boss were to ask you "how is your report coming along", he or she would look at you very oddly indeed if you answered "Great! I've been spending half an hour on it every day".

Because *time spent* is now seen as a separate issue from *outcomes achieved*, you can direct your energies towards helping your students get more done in less time.

In other words, you're on their side. They want to do less practice, and you're going to help show them how to do exactly that.

The secret is in *how* they practice. Your job is to help your students become so efficient when they practice that they can get more done in ten

minutes than they used to be able to in two hours. To help you with this, this book will take a fresh look at the institution of practicing, regarding it not as a single entity, *but as a set of tools*. Each tool is designed to solve a particular problem—some are great for learning brand new pieces, others are designed for helping nervous students through the few days before a major recital, others are designed to help students create compelling dynamics for a previously bland performance. And like any tools, you need to use the right tools for the right job. It's no good trying to hammer in a nail with a screwdriver, and it's a waste of time trying to speed a piece up with a practice technique that was designed for *memorizing* pieces.

So why would your students be excited about this?

Look at it from their point of view. After years of being chained to a clock, as they complete the daily chore that is their practice, you are coming to them with a new model.

*"Here's what I need you to do this week. I don't care how long it takes you, which means that if you can practice so effectively and efficiently that you can knock it all off in two days, great. Enjoy the five days off.*

*The only thing is that if you genuinely want to get it all done in the shortest time possible, you'll need to be smart about **how** you work. I have some suggestions if you're interested."*

If they're interested? Of course they're interested—you're about to teach them some tactics that will enable them to spend *less* time practicing. And so we end up with a student who is motivated by the idea of more free time if they work well, is now very interested in learning how to work efficiently in the pursuit of that end, and no longer watches the clock while they work. All because they're not done until the job's done...but they are as soon as it is.

Sounds like a good outcome all round.

But there's one more benefit to all this, although you have to keep it a secret from your students:

Students who are practicing efficiently and without watching the clock *end up doing more practice anyway*. It's just that they don't notice, and more importantly, they don't mind.

We should probably start at the very beginning.