

Common Practice Flaws

“He is verye often drunke and by means there of he hathe by unorderlye playing on the organs putt the quire out of time and disordered them.”

From the archives of Lincoln Cathedral,
relating to Thomas Kingston, organist, 1599-1616

Sample Only: Chapter 3

Sections indicated in RED below are included in this sample.

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The Practice Revolution: Chapter 3

- Chopping Wood with a Spoon • **Shiny object polishers** • **Sheep counters** • Speed Demons • Gluttons • Drifters • Skimmers • Clock-watchers • Autopilots • Pattern Practicers • Always from the Top • Bad Bricklayers • Map ignorers • Red Light Runners

3. Common Practice Flaws

3.1 Introduction

No matter how effectively we communicate what needs to be done, sometimes students arrive at lessons with their pieces in exactly the same tangle they were in the week before. It's easy at that point to start lecturing them about practicing harder, but here's the shock – and it lies at the core of the Practice Revolution:

Often these students *have* been practicing.

It's just that how they have been working *doesn't work*, meaning that extra practice is not going to fix the problem. If I'm trying to start a fire by banging two logs together, working harder at it is not going to get my dinner cooked any sooner. In exactly the same way, it's possible for students to be tremendously busy, and get nothing done, particularly if their practice method was doomed from the start.

Worse still, if these practice flaws go uncorrected, the student will quickly learn that practicing doesn't make any difference anyway – so they might as well not bother. The subsequent lack of practice is not a comment about their dedication to music lessons, but rather an indication of disenchantment with a process at home that was failing them.

The flip side though is exciting for any teacher.

If you can eliminate these flaws from the practice process, practice suddenly becomes more productive, the student gets more done in much less time, lessons are better, and the student is then motivated to do more practice anyway.

So before we launch the Practice Revolution with some new approaches to old problems, we need to know what the old problems are. You have to be able to diagnose practice flaws as surely as a doctor can identify medical maladies.

This chapter outlines the most common practice flaws – what they are, how to spot them, what causes them, and how to get rid of them.

3.3 Shiny Object Polishers

Defining this practice flaw

Students who Polish Shiny Objects may well be practicing regularly and at length, but spend all their practice time working on things that they can already play well, while very little (if any) attention is given to weaker sections. The choice of what to work on is governed entirely by how good the section already sounds, and therefore any overlap between what they did and goals that were set for the week will be purely co-incidental.

We've all heard the joke that banks are only prepared to lend you money once you can prove you don't need it. Well, students who Polish Shiny Objects will only practice sections once they are certain the section doesn't need work in the first place.

Polishing Shiny Objects is one of the most common practice flaws, but here's the shock—it's a monster that *teachers* actually create.

The end result is that the good bits get even better, while the bad bits continue to disappoint, resulting in huge (and growing!) inconsistencies in the quality of the student's performance. Students working this way are often not ready for their lessons, as they will omit any tasks that require a focus on "bad" bits—or at the very least defer them indefinitely.

How to tell if your student may be practicing this way

If the good bits seem to be reaching ever new dizzying heights of perfection, while the bad bits continue to limp, then the student is probably Polishing the Shiny Objects when they practice. To be absolutely certain, have the student *keep a log* of what they actually work on when they practice, together with how long they spend on each section. Even knowing that the whole reasons the log is there to check up on practice imbalances, they'll find it hard not to play favorites.

Why students practice this way, and why it doesn't work

Polishing Shiny Objects is one of the most common practice flaws, but here's the shock—it's a monster that teachers actually create.

Here's how it works, and it all begins with best of intentions.

When we teach, we spend a lot of time establishing *standards* in the minds of our students, so that they will recognize good playing when they hear it. It's a worthwhile aim, but it can have an unintended and devastating impact on practicing.

Students learn from us that a performance that continues without breaks is better than one that needs to stop frequently for directions. They're told that a performance that is clean and precise is better than one that is leaking wrong notes like an old roof in a thunderstorm. They're told that good intonation is preferable to bad intonation. And they're told that a performance that is at the indicated tempo is more satisfying for the audience than one that drags along at half pace.

We usually do a pretty good job explaining all of this—so much so, that our students (hopefully) will come to adopt these values for themselves. After all, we don't want our student recitals being dominated by performances that are filled with wrong notes, bad intonation, and half-tempos that make the student sound as though they are being overwhelmed technically.

Of course, the three values listed above are just a tiny fraction of those that our students end up taking on board. Good posture is better than bad posture. A clear and engaging dynamic plan is better than a flat performance. Even semiquavers are better than uneven ones. Good fingering is preferable to bad fingering. You could fill a page right now with such guidelines (every teacher's list is slightly different), and if your students adhere to your pointers when they perform, there's no doubt that they'll sound much better.

Now the trouble begins.

Given the focus on these values, it makes sense that as a music student, *your playing self-esteem will be linked to how often you get these things right*. So for example, you'll feel better about your playing—and yourself—if you are producing beautifully even semiquavers than if they are lurching around like Addams Family relatives. Why? Because your teacher has instilled in you the value that even playing is superior to uneven playing.

So ask yourself this. If it's time to practice, and you are given the choice between practicing a section that is already beautifully even, and one that is a mess, which one are you likely to spend time with?

The section that makes you feel good about your playing? *Or the section that actively reminds you of your shortcomings?*

And if you then have the choice between practicing a piece that's in C Major that you are already delivering fluently, and another that is brand new, and filled with more accidentals than a Schoenberg arrangement of Flight of the Bumblebee, which one are you more likely to spend time with? The piece that makes you sound fluent and adept? Or the piece that will force you to crawl along at 5 bpm while you squint at the music, trying to figure out which notes to play?

This is the logic behind one of the most common of all practice flaws – the tendency for students to practice things they can already play well, while avoiding the things that they are not good at.

From the student's perspective, practicing only the good bits keeps everyone at home happy. Their parents will be able to hear the required half hour of daily practice taking place...and what's more, the student is sounding great the whole time!

In fact, the student might be sounding *so* good that their parents may even take the time to mention how well their practicing is going – reinforcing the behavior in the process. The student's doom is assured.

So how do you combat this? Obviously you don't want to be teaching without creating a set of values. Those values are a road map for the rest of your student's musical life, and are among the most important things they will learn from you. It *is* important to perform evenly, and perform with compelling dynamics, and perform without the sort of intonation problems that make audiences squirm.

But that's the key word. *Perform*. You want your *performance* to be filled with these qualities, but it's unreasonable to expect them all to be there from the very first time you ever play the piece. In fact, you should assume that things are going to be a little bumpy when the piece is brand new.

This is not a license for the student to abandon all these qualities. Practicing will still be very much about the pursuit of these ends. But their practicing cannot simply be a hunt for sections that are *already* filled with these qualities – otherwise they'll just run up and down on the spot.

Tips for correcting this practice flaw

- Before anything else, there are two things that you have to let your student know.

First of all, *it's ok to sound bad while you're practicing*. It's not an aim, but it is an expected consequence of working with something that's brand new. The world's greatest dancers, when taken through a brand new work, will mess things up while they come to terms with choreography that they have not worked with before.

Taking this a step further, you end up with the second directive, and it's advice so important that your student should probably engrave it on their instrument:

If your practice is sounding great all the time, you're practicing the wrong bits.

Practice is a tool that helps you turn bad bits into good bits more quickly – it's not a device for turning up evidence on how well you are already playing.

In other words, it's a tool for repair, not self-congratulations.

- Make parents aware of this only-practice-the-good-bits syndrome. If they hear the same section delivered flawlessly for twenty minutes, they need to quietly pop in to the practice room, praise the great playing, but suggest that there are other sections that now need more work. More than that, even if the student has been mixing up the sections, but twenty minutes have passed without them sounding like they are really struggling with *something*, then the student is probably cruising through “safe” passages.

- Move from a practice model that is based around *time* to one that is based around *outcomes* (that's something you should be doing anyway!). The student then comes into each practice session knowing that they have a list of specific problems to fix, and that as soon as their list for the day has been taken care of, they can stop practicing. They also know that *until* they have dealt with the problems on that list, they *can't* stop.

As a result, they're unlikely to waste their own time by practicing things that have nothing to do with the task at hand. It would be like being given the chore of mowing the lawn – with the promise of being able to take the

rest of the day off once the job is complete—and them procrastinating by doing some weeding instead. It's not going to happen.

- Have the student break their piece up into sections, and then *rank* those sections from worst to best. The rule then is that they are only allowed to practice whichever section is *worst* on the list. After a while, that section will have improved to the point where it is no longer the worst section, at which point the student will switch to whatever the new worst section is. They continue leapfrogging in this fashion until the “worst” section is really not so bad after all.
- For hard-core serial basket-case no-hope offenders, photocopy their music, and actually cut out the “good bits” from that photocopy. With scissors. I’m serious. The only music you’ll send them home with are the sections that need work—even if they have the work memorized, this is a powerful and tangible reminder of what they really should be focussing on.

3.4 Sheep Counters

Defining this practice flaw

Sheep Counters practice simply by playing targeted sections over and over and over and over again, with the hope that sheer repetition will eventually lead to improvement. All tasks for the week are dealt with in this blunt-instrument fashion, independently of what the unique demands of those tasks might actually be, and practicing takes on all the charm and creativity of working on an assembly line.

How to tell if your student may be practicing this way

Because repetition reinforces behavior without assessing the

...students who rely on repetition *alone* had better plan on doing plenty of practice.

They'll need to, because their chosen practice method is horribly inefficient.

appropriateness of that behavior, Sheep Counters will often have errors in their piece which are heavily resistant to being dislodged. They've been "practiced in" by the repetition.

But the simplest way to confirm that you are in the presence of a Sheep Counter is to ask them to describe to you how they are planning on practicing this week. Most Sheep Counters will limit their replies (just as they limit their practice) to "I'll play it over and over again until I get it".

In fact, most Sheep Counters simply cannot think of any other way of working...

Why students practice this way, and why it doesn't work

This practice flaw is another example of the student's intentions being good, but missing something in the delivery.

Most of us have impressed on students the importance of repetition when practicing—that it's not enough to play something once or twice, and then magically expect mastery to somehow follow. The question then logically follows from the student:

If once or twice is not enough, then how many is sufficient?

"Lots!" is the answer we give. And if lots is good, then lots plus a few more is even better.

As a student, your practice session therefore starts by choosing a section in the piece, and then thinking of a nice big number. You're then supposed to play through the chosen section that many times.

It's a very simple formula, and is not necessarily entirely bad advice, as most teachers are aware of the power of repetition in any skill building process. But if repetition is the *only* practice tool in your student's shed then there's trouble ahead.

There are four problems that will emerge sooner or later for students who rely solely on repetition when they practice.

The first problem is that repetition is a *blunt* tool, particularly if used alone. This means that while repeating a section until you've worn grooves into the keys may eventually deliver a degree of proficiency through sheer brute force, the whole process will take much longer than it needs to. The student who uses repetition *in conjunction* with other more targeted practice techniques will reach the same level of proficiency much sooner. (There are plenty of such techniques outlined later in this book).

In other words, students who rely on repetition alone had better plan

on doing plenty of practice. They'll need to, because their chosen practice method is inefficient.

The second problem is that repetition is *blind*. It does not help the student discover better ways of doing things, nor will it help students detect problems in their playing. Instead, it simply reinforces what they are *already* doing.

So if a student repeats a section and uses bad fingering every time, not only will the repetition fail to detect the problem, *it will actually deeply imbed the incorrect fingering into the piece* – and you'll need a crowbar to dislodge it next lesson. Often, they actually would have been better off not practicing the section at all.

The third problem, often underrated, is just how *boring* a repetition-only approach is. I call these students "Sheep Counters" because playing a section through one hundred times is not enormously different to counting sheep, and we all know what that's used for.

So if the student comes to you complaining that their practice feels like shovelling snow or washing dishes, it might not just be an attitude problem on their part. No amount of positive thinking is going to have a student looking forward to practicing when they know their practice is simply going to consist of the same passage played five hundred times in a row. It's the reason joggers prefer to plan scenic outdoor routes, rather than simply running endless laps of their living room.

The final problem is that repetition directs the student's energies towards *keeping count*, rather than an awareness of how the piece is responding to practice. The student will be highly aware that this is the fifteenth playthrough, but may not be noticing the direction their playing has been heading in since the *seventh* playthrough.

Has this fast section actually been becoming more difficult, simply because the sheer number of repetitions has made relaxation of the hand almost impossible? Is there a fingering half way through the piece that needs some special attention? (Since giving such attention wouldn't count towards the overall repetition total, it can feel to the Sheep Counter like a waste of time. In fact, our repetition-obsessed student probably wouldn't even *consider* stopping to look at a specific trouble spot like that).

At its worst, it means you could ask the student "*So how is your practice going?*", and they'll reply that they have no idea, but that they are up to 85

reps. Problem is, at their next lesson, it won't be the number of reps that is relevant—it will be how the section *sounds*. Which means that “85 reps” doesn't tell them anything about the health of their piece. It just tells you that whatever they have been doing in that section anyway is now much more strongly ingrained than it ever was before.

This may or may not be good news.

And if it's *not* good news—if they've been busy repeating errors all week—then you have the unenviable task of telling them that their practice this week has been worse than a waste of time.

In which case, don't be surprised if they do no practice the following week.

So what can you do to combat this?

Tips for correcting this practice flaw

- The first thing is to make the student aware of the problem by hitting the nerve that they are most likely to respond to:

Tell them that if they are going to practice simply by playing the same thing over and over and over, then they must LOVE practicing.

Why? Because by working this way, they will need to do five times as much practice as they need to to get the result they are after.

Now that you have their full attention (nobody wants to do five times as much practice as they need to!), you can introduce them to some specific techniques that are better suited to solving the problems in their piece. You're not trying to eliminate repetition altogether—in fact some of the techniques outlined later in this book have strong elements of repetition built into them. You're just trying to introduce some healthier variety into their practice diet.

- Having established the possibility that there are faster ways of doing things than simply repeating a bit over and over, set aside some time in a lesson for an illustration.

Choose a short section of music for them to learn—just a couple of lines will be plenty. Using a *mix* of practice techniques from the “Learning the New Piece” section later in this book, issue the student a challenge:

Their job is to learn this section so that they can play it back to you

flawlessly from memory, but with as few playthroughs as possible. (In fact if they use the Tabletop Challenge method from that same chapter, they may be able to do this *without playing it through at all!*).

This will introduce them to two ideas. First of all, that there are alternatives to simply playing things over and over again. And secondly, that these alternatives are more effective than sheer repetition, and will therefore need *less* practice to yield the same result. Most students will regard anything that requires LESS practice as being a very good idea indeed...

...End of sample

The complete third chapter of *The Practice Revolution* looks at a total of 14 different practice flaws - this preview has been but two.

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