

**VMS FORUM**  
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### **The Art of Practising**

**‘Practise, practise, practise!’ doesn’t sound fun, and is unrealistic in this day and age when young people have a plethora of entertainment to choose from. How can we help our pupils to enjoy their practice, experiencing more excitement, creativity and progress?**

**Tau Wey, Head of Keyboard at Sevenoaks School**

‘Practise, practise, practise!’ What do these words evoke in you? Could it be the endless hours of labour spent in practice rooms when you were still in music college, or might it be Isaac Stern’s anecdote about playing at Carnegie Hall? For me, it was the horror of trying to spell the word correctly! Having thought I had mastered the English language, the word ‘practice’, with its variants of ‘to practise’, ‘the practice’, ‘the practising’, as well as its British and American ways of spelling, thoroughly threw me into a linguistic hotspot. Fortunately today, rather than discussing English grammar and spelling, we shall be exploring what the practice of music in its widest sense means to us and our pupils.

In my teaching, I often reflect on these questions: What is motivating a child to learn a particular instrument? How can I uphold the importance of music education in the face of competing demands on the pupil, such as academic pressures, sports commitments and school trips? With a digital world that gives instant entertainment and instant results, how can I encourage my pupils to make the solitary hours of practice rewarding, exciting and creative?

In my search for the answers, I encountered a book called ‘The Art of Practicing’, by pianist and teacher Madeline Bruser, which I shall be drawing upon in my talk. She describes in fascinating detail how we can practise our instruments with productivity, efficiency, ease and enjoyment. She explores a way of practising that transforms the sometimes frustrating, monotonous, and overly strenuous labour into an exhilarating and rewarding experience. Using physiological and meditative principles, she leads us in eliminating physical and mental tensions, to unleash our capacity to move freely, enjoy sounds and sensations, and to make music without inhibition from the heart.

We will look at how to prepare the body and mind for practice, what the effect of a good posture is, how to improve our ability to listen, and how to make practice an enjoyable and creative activity.

The word ‘practice’ comes with a variety of nuances. I often find myself avoiding the word when I set homework for my pupils, because it can carry connotations of tiring, repetitive labour. How often does a child get told ‘If you don’t behave, I’m going to make you practise’, or ‘That’s not good enough, you’d better practise more’.

And, what's the difference between practising and playing an instrument? Apart from the very musical and industrious pupils, who are willing to really practise in order to reach a concert standard, how many see practise as a genuinely mind-absorbing creative process?

Let's see how Madeline Bruser's ideas can help us inspire our pupils to enjoy practice as a wholly absorbing creative process, full of discoveries about themselves and the music.

### **Self-expression and human vulnerability**

Everyone who learns to play an instrument or sing wants to be able to express themselves through their heart. This is the starting point. At first a pupil may feel vulnerable and block their feelings, for example if they are unfamiliar with a new teacher. A child may feel unaccomplished next to their teachers, amateurs struggle with the belief that their musical sense is undeveloped compared to that of professionals. When a pupil goes to a teacher, they hope that the teacher will appreciate their sincerity of heart, and that the lessons will enable them to express themselves. Being aware of our vulnerability is the starting point to opening our hearts.

### **Struggle and Freedom during practising**

Even a pupil who loves music and is well-motivated may start out inspired to practise, but sooner or later feel frustrated. He can't get the results he wants, and doesn't know why. Much frustration is caused by an inefficient use of the body. It is well-known that all the child prodigies, such as Rachmaninoff and Ashkenazy, had a superb posture from a very young age. This benefitted their ability to learn and absorb music. Do you also find that you often have to correct a pupil's posture, again and again? Those who don't progress well often play in lessons with a bad posture. I can only imagine to my horror that they sit in the same way when playing at home, which can't do their physical, mental and musical advancement any good.

Tension can come from poor posture and poor technique. More frequently, however, tension and inefficient technique stem from mental and emotional attitudes towards ourselves and our practising.

Many people, including teachers, pupils and parents, may hold the opinion that practice is supposed to be repetitious and regimented. The pupil will soon fall into an habitual and unsatisfying way of practising. Rigidity and result-driven-ness can destroy inspiration, making it difficult to develop the joy and spontaneity needed for performing. I'm conveying Madeline Bruser's words, mindful that a pupil of mine called Damien, who had been self-taught up to the age of 14, had only a few lessons with me before deciding to quit. He was sure that the lessons destroyed his creativity. His technique was appalling, however he did have musical imagination. Getting him to play with the right technique and following the composer's notation just put him off. Whilst this is an

extreme example, perhaps there is a way of encouraging, and not confining, the innate musician in every pupil.

The Art of Practicing is about art, about creating something fresh and genuine. In this approach, practising is not so different from performing. Instead of practising in a mechanical or programmed way, we practise being spontaneous. The spontaneity that marks a strong, communicative performance is actually cultivated during practice sessions. The qualities of openness, uncertainty, freedom, and aliveness that characterise performing should permeate practising. This makes each practice session exciting, leads to more pleasure, and produces creative results. This kind of approach may have helped Damien to find piano practice more meaningful.

Rather than being focussed on the 'doing', the physical side of playing an instrument, we can encourage our pupils to really listen to the sounds and vibrations coming out of their instrument. This goes beyond simply listening to our playing, checking whether the notes sound together or whether the dynamics are correct. It is about enjoying the sensory experience of the instrument, and it can help the pupil to be more amazed and enjoy hearing the music more.

Alex, another pupil of mine, was struggling to get to grips with Grade 5 piano, becoming disinterested in the pieces and scales, and well, piano playing in general. I decided to challenge him with a jazz piano piece which requires improvisation. I asked him to improvise by following his emotions, and by listening to what the notes are telling him. Above all, he had to create instantly his own ideas through sound. I noticed how he could not but be fully engaged when attempting to improvise. It was the complete opposite of trying to play the notes correctly in a disinterested way. Such an approach makes playing music as instantly entertaining and challenging as playing on a Nintendo DS. Through this way of music making, Alex rediscovered his enthusiasm for piano practice.

The value of any exercise depends on your state of mind. If the pupil doesn't find it interesting, she is unlikely to learn from it. Bruser would like to see pupils relax and work naturally and comfortably. It is about cultivating the heightened awareness that we normally have in a performance situation, and use it at every moment of our practising. This makes every time we play our instrument a thrilling experience. We let go of struggle and dwell in the new-found freedom.

### **Settling down to practise**

Bruser indicates the need to be fully present in body, mind and heart, with the sense perceptions being completely engaged with the activity of the present moment. When practising, this means being at ease in your surroundings and being aware of each movement and each sound that you make. Practising should begin with a mind that is wide awake.

An upright posture along with fluent breathing is an important starting point to playing an instrument. Before delving into the music, scan your body and consciously relax any tense muscles. Good breathing is a pre-requisite to enjoyable and efficient practising. Bruser gives the example of a student who arrives at a lesson in a very distracted way, and discovers that something that she played well the day before now sounds edgy and rough. After doing breathing exercises for a few minutes, she feels refreshed, and her playing becomes freer and smoother. Good breathing improves our state of mind and our ability to work well.

Being settled to practise means that you are relaxed and alert, and your energy is unfettered and ready to move at your command. Letting yourself breathe enables you to breathe life into the music. Relaxing into your surroundings allows you to approach practising with ease and joy. When practising after a busy day at school, for example, just take a minute to enjoy being at ease in your surroundings, and see what kind of music you are able to make when you feel comfortable and settled in your own body. This is a good point for pupils who have been rushing around all day. They can learn to appreciate the privilege of a quiet musical session just for themselves.

Bruser considers it important that we tune into our hearts whenever we play our instrument. Feelings and expressions are after all what music is about. When we practise, the heart is often obscured under multiple layers of mental and emotional preoccupations. We are distracted by countless judgements of ourselves and by random thoughts. We may resent having to practise, or we may be overly excited about practising and dive in with insufficient sensitivity. These habitual mental and emotional states keep us from noticing the raw, sweet, unbearably tender feeling we have for music. We don't need these habitual states of mind. In the author's words, 'we need access to the throbbing heart beneath them.'

Summoning your heart's power is the final preparatory step before practising. We need to enter the world of intense warmth and vitality. Usually, this opening of the heart happens automatically when we are in a performance situation, to the extent that we actually feel our heart beating.

Bruser offers a few charming accounts of why we should treasure every minute of our practice session- would our pupils be moved by these?

'Try reflecting for a few minutes on the opportunity you have to practice. Not everyone has this opportunity, yet we take it for granted. We want to get it over with. But we need to wake up to the fact that we are not just practising. We are connecting to the heart and mind of a great composer, and to the extent that we are able to do that, we connect with and nourish ourselves.'

She goes on to talk about a documentary film From Mao to Mozart. 'A Chinese man speaks about how he was imprisoned in a dark cell for fourteen months because he had committed the crime of playing Western music. As I watched the film, I tried to imagine the depth of this man's suffering in being denied the joy of making music. I realised how much we take for granted the opportunity to live with music everyday.'

In a place as privileged as Sevenoaks School, with superb new facilities, we should perhaps remind our pupils and ourselves that the very essence of being able to make music is such a wonderful gift. We should grasp it and enjoy the sheer beauty and wonders of it.

By telling stories, I was able to spark the interest of Hugo, a pupil in the sixth form whose parents had so far pushed him through the grades like a robot. As he learnt Beethoven's Pathétique Sonata, I shared with him the story of Beethoven's deafness, failed relationships, and defiance against society as it was. I also explained to him how the sonata form mirrors western philosophy, and that the philosopher Hegel referred frequently to Beethoven's music. Hugo became absorbed by and addicted to piano playing.

And how about the environment of the practice studio? Preparing the surroundings for an activity helps to ready us psychologically for what will take place. Pupils often take practising casually, thinking 'what difference does it make if I play in an offhand way when nobody is listening? So what if the room is full of junk?' When teaching at my pupils' houses, I am often disparaged by the messiness of their pianos, and rooms where not a piece of music I need can be found! A simple, elegant practice environment prepares the pupil to work well, and accustoms them to the wide open space of performance, where the spotlight is on and the heart is exposed. We should not underestimate the benefits of having a new performing arts centre with excellent facilities and lots of natural light.

In summary, when the surroundings are conducive to work, the pupil is alert, and the relationship to the teacher is good, the heart can open and the pupil can learn at her best.

### **How to practise-Follow your curiosity as you practice**

You can cultivate spontaneity by paying attention to what you want to practice at any one moment, and by working in a way that interests you. Practising can proceed without a rigid plan. Listen to the voice of creative intelligence. Listen to that voice, and see where it leads you. Perhaps we can encourage our pupils not just to practise what we have instructed them, but to get them to ask themselves, 'What do I want to do now? What interest me at the moment?' The pupil's intuition will begin to develop and take them on a creative journey. Bruser remarks that one of her students found that by doing so, he stumbled across many more exciting details in music than he ever discovered by sticking to a plan.

### **Where do scales fit in?**

Scales can be fun. They have an energising quality, and playing them in octaves, thirds and sixths can be an enjoyable exercise. When a young child sees her teacher play a scale, she usually gets excited about trying it herself. Practising scales can help you ease into

your work gently. Instead of charging into a practice session without warming up, which strains the body, you can amble through a few scales to loosen up. Unfortunately, many pupils view scales as a form of torture, and instead of loosening up, they tighten up in resistance to them.

As regards whether pupils should practise scales first or last, I think that most importantly they should feed the musical appetite. It doesn't matter whether scales are played as a warm-up, or after the pieces, as long as the pupil takes an interest and learns from it.

When practising scales, do so in a musical way. Change the dynamics, or even vary the phrasing or the timing. Most importantly, listen to each note. Each note has a different psychological value, a tendency to settle or to lead to another note. Take the time to appreciate the effect of each sound. Notice how it feels in the context of the entire scale. You can discover endless possibilities by enjoying scales this way.

### **When and how much to practise?**

Quality is more important than quantity. Practise at a time of day when you feel relatively fresh and can focus easily. This is something we could communicate to pupils, and especially parents. I often find that children do too many after-school activities. The little practice that is done is squeezed in between supper and going to ballet class, for example.

However long you choose to practise, feel free to take frequent breaks. Within a session, feel free to stop and do nothing for a moment. This will help to clear the mind and relax your body. If you get stiff, you can get up and stretch for a few minutes. This applies particularly to advanced pupils working on more difficult repertoire. I've noticed that many don't do that, and just charge through the music, playing it fortissimo over and over again with no genuine improvement of technique or hearing.

I think it is important for us to discuss how we can make practice as enjoyable an activity as possible for our pupils, as music is only one of many competing past-times. Furthermore, we can only spend half-an-hour a week with a pupil. The rest of the time they are on their own, and need to know how to make the best of their own time. Enjoyable hours spent at the instrument on their own, rather than just in lessons, will finally also ensure that pupils keep up the their instrument as a life-long hobby and love.

Now you may ask: This is all very well for the talented and serious students. But how can we apply these ideas in our teaching, when there are so many challenges- unmotivated pupils, shy pupils, pupils with lack of initiative and creativity? I believe that we should always hold up high standards and aim for the ideal, and balance it with the realities of day-to-day teaching. This Forum is an opportunity to remind ourselves of the power of music, a time to think outside the box and explore both practicalities and ideals. It is better not to become lost in the mundaneness of teaching pupil after pupil, five days a week, and get used to and accept the problems that inhibit ideal development. We can and should remember what is so special about music, and instil our belief in our pupils.

**In summary, this is my four-step guide for encouraging young people to practise their instrument:**

1. As teachers we need to educate our pupils to see the larger purpose and power of music. Music is about life, music is about self-expression. Playing music is a privilege and a gift, and when we make music we let go of ourselves to the power of life and music. We can show that music is exciting and relevant by introducing our pupils to the mechanism and science of their instrument, by sharing youtube videos of star performers and great pieces of the repertoire, and by showing how music is used in films or on important occasions like the royal wedding.
2. We need to ensure that the pupil feels comfortable with the teaching studio and with us, so that they can be mentally and physically relaxed. When the pupil is fully aware and mentally prepared she will be able to practise at the height of her creativity. When doing so the sounds and emotions of the music are as instant as something on an MP3.
3. When it comes to practising the instrument itself, choose pieces and exercises that require the pupil to be creative, to listen, and to feel.
4. Whenever we play our instruments, whether in a practice room or in a concert, we are opening our vulnerable hearts for giving and receiving. The pupil, although at first they may be cautious, will find it fulfilling to be able to create their own music and express themselves from the heart.

Teaching music in school makes us very aware of the pupils' time constraints and academic pressures. Often musical progress has to give in to impending exams or coursework deadlines.

Today is a day when we can float around idealistic thoughts. So just for a moment, imagine that there were no public exams and no syllabuses. Yes, I mean no GCSEs, no A-levels or IBs. Music would no longer come second place to academic subjects. The co-curricular music education we provide would stand equal to any other school subject, and we would have to re-evaluate our purpose and set standards and state values. Well, this is not just a dream, as Sevenoaks School as a whole is considering a move away from GCSEs, replaced by a middle-school curriculum that is to offer an education that is based on the interests of the pupils and teachers, and that has no syllabus as it limits. The possibilities are both endless and daunting. No longer will we hear 'I couldn't do my practise this week as I have a GCSE exam.' Instead we might hear, 'Sorry I can't do my maths homework as I have school concert'. When such a time comes, we need to be clear in stating our educational vision of music, and be successful in inspiring our pupils to achieve their best through practising.

**Further Reading:**

**The Art of Practicing**  
**A guide to making music from the heart**  
**Madeline Bruser**

**Three Rivers Press, New York**  
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