

have gained such control when perhaps you really haven't. Try placing cuts where the metronome tells you to place them, right on a steady beat. When you *externalize* the definition of the beat to a machine, you come to see how your own internal sense of the beat can tend to speed up or fluctuate. It's hard for us to maintain a steady beat at an unusually slow speed. We want to speed up, even when we are not ready to. Of course we don't want to play like machines, but machines can help us gain insight into how to play better as a human.

PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR ENERGY

A short period of conscious practice is much more beneficial than a long period of practice when your attention is flagging. It does you little good to practice if you are not focusing well. If you find that your mind is spinning its wheels, take a break and come back later refreshed.

It seems that some part of our mind keeps on practicing, even while we are away from our instruments. Many people have had the experience of working very hard on a particular challenge, not making much headway, and then have come back after hours, or even days, to find that, in the meantime, they have suddenly, somehow, progressed to a higher level.

FIND A PLEASANT PRACTICE SPACE

Since you want to make practicing an experience that you will look forward to, do what you can to find the best practice space. Ideally, you should find a room that is quiet and private, a place free of distractions and away from others if they make you feel self-conscious. It should be well-lit and ventilated and not too cramped. The acoustics are very important. If the room is too dead it may be unflattering and discouraging. If it is too reverberant it may hide your true sound from you, though stairwells and the like can be a lot of fun to play in now and then.

A MIRROR CAN HELP IN SEVERAL WAYS

One of the hazards of practicing flute or whistle is that we tend to stare out into space while we play. Since we don't have our instrument clearly in our view, as, for example, fiddlers do, it is easy for us to become distracted. Closing your eyes can help a great deal.

Or, you might take the opposite approach, and play in front of a mirror. Not only does the reflection engage you visually, but like the metronome, it externalizes an aspect of the experience, allowing you to see what your body is actually doing, not just what it feels like it is doing. Comparing your body's sensation of itself with an objective visual reflection of it can be very enlightening.

The mirror not only reflects your image, it reflects your sound back to you, making it easier to hear the details of what you are doing. When a wind player plays while walking around in a room, you will often notice that she unconsciously gravitates towards a wall. The wall reflects her sound back and she can hear the details of her playing more clearly.

ISOLATE CHALLENGING AREAS

One sign of flagging attention is finding yourself playing through a tune, repeatedly glossing over places that you don't really play very well. When you catch yourself doing this, stop. Take a break if you need to. When you resume, listen for a problem spot and stop when you come to it.

Take a close listen, examine the challenging area and try to isolate the note, notes, or technique that is catching you. Work on a very small group of notes, maybe just two or three, that contains the problem area. Use a metronome to stay at a slow enough tempo to do good work. Perhaps a mirror will help you see what is going on. When you have begun to make some good progress with the challenge, slightly expand the passage you are working on by adding a note or two before, then a note or two after. See how the problem manifests in this slightly larger context. When you are comfortable, expand the passage some more and see what that is like.