

# Some Thoughts on Practicing

By Grey Larsen

## Practice Styles

We all need to practice if we want to make progress.

What you mean by “practice” depends upon your reasons for playing music and your goals. Some people enjoy a very relaxed approach and are content with slow or sporadic progress, while others are driven to learn voraciously and progress quickly. Most of us find ourselves somewhere in between.

Whatever your learning style and your drive, no doubt you hope to continually improve your playing and deepen your insights. That means honing your musical skills so you can play in a conscious and ever-improving way.

## Above All, Listen

Though it may appear that practicing is a process of repeating the physical movements involved in playing, in fact, effective practice is at least 90% attention, mental focus, and listening. It may sound obvious, but listening, *truly attentive, inquisitive listening*, is the cornerstone of effective practice. Physical repetition will not do you much good if you are not listening well and paying attention to yourself. In fact, it may serve to reinforce bad habits instead.

Even if your playing is rudimentary, you can be a virtuoso listener. Soak up the sounds of great musicians and performances and store them in a memory bank. These sounds will feed your inspiration and even help you master technical challenges. (There’s more on this on p. 5.)

## Practicing Slowly Will Bring You Faster Results

This is a challenging and encouraging paradox. You will find its truth liberating if you can muster the discipline to follow it. We all want to be able to play fast, but it is far more important to play well and beautifully. What is the point of playing poorly at a brisk pace? Playing swiftly and beautifully is magnificent, but slow practice is the thing that will get you there sooner.

W. A. Mathieu expounds on this in *The Listening Book*<sup>1</sup>. He writes,

... you cannot achieve speed by speedy practice. The only way to get fast is to be deep, wide awake, and slow. When you habitually zip through your music, your ears are crystallizing in sloppiness. It is OK to check your progress with an occasional sprint. But it is better to let speed simply come on as a result of methodical nurturing, as with a lovingly built racing car.

Yet almost everyone practices too fast ... We want to be the person who is brilliant. This desire is compelling, and it can become what our music is about ...

Pray for the patience of a stonemason. Pray to understand that speed is one of those things you have to give up — like love — before it comes flying to you through the back window.

When you play slowly you can much more easily notice and pay attention to the sounds you are making and the physical movements and positions that you are using to make them. How can you change and improve if you are not aware of these things?

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<sup>1</sup> W. A. Mathieu, *The Listening Book* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1991), p. 101.

To the extent that you can, you should practice playing well instead of playing poorly. This may sound ridiculously obvious. But the repetition of playing well is what builds the desired skills. Repetition of poor playing reinforces itself.

### **Some Words of Wisdom from Martin Hayes**

Martin Hayes, a superb Irish fiddler, is deeply insightful and highly articulate about his art. In an interview in *Fiddler Magazine*<sup>2</sup> he was asked how he chooses the pace for a particular tune. This was his response.

... I tend to not start out at maximum speed and maximum volume, but somewhere at a medium to slow speed and volume. When I want to heighten the expression into excitement or vigor, I can do that. I can strive upwards and outwards ... I think it's foolish to start out at full speed and at full volume. You're eliminating all sorts of possibilities ... Playing a tune at full speed would be like driving through a country road at full speed. You may get the excitement of driving fast through a country road, but there's a lot of little gaps and avenues and trees and houses and such that you miss along the way. And it's like that with a tune. There's all these little dips and hollows in the tune that are self-explanatory, but time should be taken to go through them slowly. They explain themselves, they interpret themselves. They almost show what should be done.

### **The Metronome: A Great Tool**

A metronome can be a great aid to slow, conscious practice. By keeping a steady beat for you, it frees up part of your mind which you can then devote to deeper listening and observation.

Let's say you are sitting down to practice a phrase of a melody. Use the metronome to help you find a comfortable speed at which you can play your best. Play at that tempo for a while, listening to and reinforcing your best playing. When you are ready, increase the speed just a notch or two and see how that feels. If the new tempo is too challenging, return to the slower tempo. If you can do fairly well at the new speed, if it stretches you but doesn't cause you to stumble, stick with it until it feels quite comfortable. Then stay there for a while before moving on to try a faster tempo. And so on.

Here's another way you might enjoy using a metronome. Start with a very slow tempo. Then adjust the metronome faster by three notches and play there for a while if you comfortably can. Then adjust the metronome slower by two notches. Play there for a while and notice the differences in your playing and sound. Then increase by three notches, decrease by two, increase by three, decrease by two, and so on.

Don't be in a rush. Although our muscles learn more slowly than our minds, muscle memory is long-lasting and dependable. There are intriguing physiological reasons for this. See "Take Comfort in the Physiology of Muscle Memory" on p. 4.

A metronome provides a rigid time reference, and that can be extremely revealing. When you externalize the definition of the beat to a machine, you come to see how your 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 humans.

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<sup>2</sup> Mary Larsen, "Martin Hayes, A Lilt All His Own," *Fiddler Magazine*, Spring 1994: p. 50.

## **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 instrument. 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 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 (too absorbent of sound) it may be unflattering and discouraging. If it is too reverberant it may hide your true sound from you, though reverberant 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 drawbacks of practicing certain wind instruments, such as the flute, is that we tend to stare out into space while we play. Since we often don't have our instrument clearly in view while we're playing, it's 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 and help keep you focused on what you are doing, but, as with the metronome, it externalizes an aspect of the experience, allowing you to see what your body is actually doing, not just feel what you think it is doing. Comparing your body's sensation of itself with an objective visual reflection can be quite 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 repeatedly glossing over notes or phrases that you don't really play very well. When you catch yourself doing this, stop. Take a break if you want 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 even more and reevaluate your progress.

## **Listen to Your Body**

Watch out for physical pain. This is a signal telling you to take a break, check for undue muscle tension, poor posture, etc. Get up and move around; shake out your arms, hands, legs. Stretch. Maybe it's time to stop practicing for the day. There are a lot of resources available that

can help musicians prevent or deal with stress-related injuries and problems. Hopefully you can prevent such trouble from occurring.

### **Another Useful Tool: An Audio Recorder**

Many musicians these days use some type of audio recorder. Such devices are certainly very handy for capturing music that you wish to learn later. Beware, however, of becoming over-dependent on them. It's all too easy to record someone playing a tune and then not really listen to it as it *happens*, since you know you can listen to your recording later. In your archiving zeal, don't forget to live in the moment.

Try learning melodies gradually by simply soaking them in through repeated exposure. One day you will realize that you have already learned the tune in your head. You will realize that you can hum or lilt it. Then it is simply a matter of translating it onto your instrument. Even if you do not have contact with other musicians, you can learn this way by listening repeatedly to favorite recordings, letting the music wash over and through you until you have absorbed it.

It can be very revealing to record yourself. As you listen back you will no doubt hear things that you didn't notice while you were actually playing.

Some audio recorders or applications are equipped with a variable speed control. When you slow down the playback of a fine performance, you may gain more understanding and insight into what makes it so beautiful.

### **Give Yourself Positive Messages**

A musician always has more to learn, no matter how many years she has been practicing her art. Everyone is a beginner in some sense.

Even if your playing skills are rudimentary, your listening abilities are not. If you didn't have wide-open ears you wouldn't have been drawn to embark on the voyage of learning to play a musical instrument.

Be encouraging to yourself. One can always find fault if one wants to, but one can also find progress, commitment, and devotion. Give yourself positive messages.

### **Take Comfort in the Physiology of Muscle Memory**

Many people find it frustrating that it seems to take so long to learn to perform unfamiliar physical actions, even though they can quickly understand them conceptually. There are important physiological reasons for this.

Research in biology, anatomy, and neurology has begun to address this. It is intriguing and reassuring to know that during that long learning period you are literally building new nerve pathways that are very persistent and reliable. For his help in writing the following rather scientific discussion I wish to thank my friend Lawrence Washington, a musician, instrument builder, and molecular biologist.

In this material, which also appears in two of my books, *The Essential Tin Whistle Toolbox* and *The Essential Guide to Irish Flute and Tin Whistle*, Lawrence Washington and I make reference to techniques of Irish tin whistle and flute ornamentation called cuts, strike and long rolls. I think you'll benefit from this discussion even if you're unfamiliar with these techniques. (If you're curious about them, I recommend consulting one of the two books mentioned above.)

As we first start learning a new group of movements, such as the fingering motions used to execute a G long roll on a tin whistle or Irish flute, we have to think consciously about each component of the group and command the muscles to move. The part of the brain responsible for conscious thought (the cerebral cortex) sends impulses through the muscle-control part of the brain (the cerebellum) and onward to the finger muscles. Since there are so many different, very precise muscle movements in a long roll, its execution is at first slow and tedious, requiring great

concentration. The thought process may go something like this: “Do a G long roll: (1) place the top hand’s index, middle and ring fingers upon their respective holes, (2) blow, and keep blowing, (3) lift the top hand middle finger, (4) replace it quickly, (5) raise the bottom hand index finger high, (6) bring it down sharply ...” and so on, all the while keeping the proper timing, breathing, and a raft of other elements in mind. There is so much to think about that it’s no wonder we can feel overwhelmed and frustrated.

But there is comfort to be found in the biology of learning. When we repeat a complex set of muscle motions, specific patterns of nerve pathways are assigned to repeat them. This is a physical process, an actual structural change at the microscopic level of our neurons. Gradually the muscle commands, which originate from the thinking part of the brain, the cerebral cortex, are taken over directly by the muscle-control centers of the cerebellum, which previously had only mediated them. All that remains at the conscious level is the initiating command: “Do a G roll.” With that, the cerebellum takes over and commands all the individual movements, which we had to think about one by one when we were first learning. It’s as though we have gradually built a very specific machine and now only have to flip a switch for that machine to do its job.

Naturally, once we no longer have to think about each movement of the long roll it becomes possible to perform it quickly and with fluidity. It literally becomes “second nature.” In fact, it may be that the movement of a proper cut, for example, is so very quick that most people cannot do it until it becomes established in the cerebellum and we no longer have to “think” about it.

The more times the pattern of movements is repeated, the more strongly the neuronal pattern is established. With the right microscope you would be able to see an increase in the density of the synapses and dendrite branches. The nerve connections become physically stronger, as a path through the woods becomes better defined the more times a family of deer walks along it.

One implication of this fact is that we should take care to practice and repeat *only what we want our muscles to learn*. If we are early with the timing of a strike as we practice it, and remain inattentive to that fact, our muscles will become expert at playing strikes early.

Of course, in the early stages of learning the cut, for instance, we cannot do them quickly enough. By necessity we practice them “too slow,” making them as crisp as we can at that time. But if we remember the sound of the ideal cut, and constantly strive for it in our playing, we continually and gradually revise the pattern of nerve pathways that controls how we execute the cut. Once we finally learn to perform cuts well, the new, improved nerve pathways are well established.

When we keep our ideal sounds well in mind, we establish a feedback loop that continually compares the sensations with the ideal. For instance, when the cerebral cortex tells the cerebellum to execute a long roll, you listen carefully to how it sounds, “think” about it, compare it to the ideal roll, and instruct the cerebellum how to modify the roll toward the ideal. You see how very important it is to listen well to ourselves, and to our models.

Fortunately for the beginner, it’s just fine that we execute movement patterns slowly as we learn them, even if we eventually want to play them faster. After the neuronal pathways have established their circuits, we can go as fast as our muscles can move. The family of deer walking many times the same way through the woods clear a nice trace. Later they can run as fast as they like down the smooth trail, gracefully as a perfectly timed roll. And the established neural pathway is amazingly persistent. Once made, the additional synapses and increased density of nerve branches stay. We may easily forget how to describe the details of a roll, but the nerves in our brain and fingers have made very strong connections that can be activated anytime we “flip the switch.”

## **For Tin Whistle and Irish Flute Players: Exercises for Finger Coordination**

Learning to move various combinations of fingers with precise coordination and synchronization takes time and attention. I have created a collection of 38 exercises to help you develop these skills on tin whistle and Irish flute. It's called *Exercises for Finger Coordination for Tin Whistle and Irish Flute* and you'll find it at [greylarsen.com/tw](http://greylarsen.com/tw). All exercises are shown in standard music notation and a staff-based tablature system. Instructions and explanatory text are included, as well as audio files for all the exercises.

I offer this collection in several versions, each using a different note-naming convention: two different letter systems (including the German "H" system), several solfège systems (fixed "do," moveable "do" and the *sargam* system used in India and other south Asian countries), and the *jianpu* numerical system popular in China and some other countries.

Regarding the staff-based tablature system mentioned about, you may download the explanatory document "A Staff-Based Tablature System for Tin Whistle and Irish Flute" at [greylarsen.com/tw](http://greylarsen.com/tw).