

CHAPTER 4: on practice

PRACTICE STYLES

The word *practice* appears many times throughout this book. Clearly, practice is essential. What *you* mean by practice depends upon your reasons for playing this 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 skills and deepen your insights. That means “doing your homework,” attentively listening to the older players as well as the new, and honing your own skills so you can play in a conscious and ever-improving way. It also means venturing out of your practice space to play with other people so that you can partake of the entire experience of community music making that is such an essential part of the “practice” of Irish music.

For now let’s turn our thoughts to private, at-home practice.

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.

Throughout this book, I will be hammering away at how important it is to immerse yourself in listening to the fine players of the past and present. Being in their physical presence is the best of all and you should seek out such opportunities as you are able.

Even when your playing is rudimentary, you can be a virtuoso listener. Soak up the sounds of great whistle and flute players. With the help of this book you will be able to understand most of what they are doing.

PRACTICING SLOWLY BRINGS YOU FASTER RESULTS

This is a challenging and encouraging paradox. You will find its truth very 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 fast pace? Playing beautifully at a fast pace is magnificent, but slow practice is the thing that will get you there sooner.

W. A. Mathieu writes beautifully about this in *The Listening Book*.¹ He says,

...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 stonecutter. 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?

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 is one of the finest musicians, and he is deeply insightful and highly articulate about his art. In an interview in *Fiddler Magazine*ⁱⁱ he was asked how he chooses the pace for a particular tune. This was his response.

...I tend to not start out a 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 tune. Use the metronome to help you find a comfortable speed at which you can play your best. Stay and 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 tempo, if it stretches you but doesn't break you, 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.

When doing metronome practice and gradually increasing your speed, you may enjoy trying the following approach. 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. Our muscles learn more slowly than our minds, but muscle memory is very long-lasting and dependable. There are intriguing physiological reasons for this, which will be discussed in Chapter 15, *Practice Revisited, and Some Thoughts on "Muscle Memory"* (see pp. 177-178).

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 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 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 whistle is that we tend to stare out into space while we play. Since we don't have our instrument in the center of our field of vision, 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 and help keep you focused on what you are doing, like 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 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 an exercise or 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 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 some more and see what that is like.

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

Most traditional musicians these days own and 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.

If you have the opportunity to attend a regular session, try learning tunes 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 it or lilt it. Then it is simply a matter of translating it onto your instrument. Even if you do not have contact with other Irish 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.

On a trip to Ireland in 1979, I left my cassette recorder home because I wanted to work on training myself to listen more deeply, as musicians must have done in older times, before the age of tape recorders. I did learn some tunes that way and learned them very well, but I'm afraid many escaped me entirely. My intentions were noble and it was great ear training, but it was also a rash decision, considering the fact that I was not able to visit musicians repeatedly during my fairly brief stay. Moderation in all things is a wise policy.

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 recorders are equipped with a variable speed control. It can be very instructive to slow down the playback of a great player. For the computerized, there are also ways to capture music and manipulate it with software, some of which is free or very inexpensive.

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 serious work of learning a new musical language and how 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 "MUSCLE MEMORY"

Many people find it frustrating that it seems to take so long for them learn to perform unfamiliar physical actions, even though they can quickly understand them conceptually. There are important physiological reasons for this, which we will explore in Chapter 15, *Practice Revisited, and Some Thoughts on "Muscle Memory"*.

For now, just know and take comfort in the fact that learning an unfamiliar physical skill actually requires you to build new neural pathways in your body. No one can quickly make such physical changes to their nervous system. The good news is that once these new pathways are established, they are extremely durable. Once you thoroughly learn a new physical skill, you will not forget how to perform it, even if you lose your clear grasp of the concept.

ⁱ W. A. Mathieu, *The Listening Book* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1991), p. 101.

ⁱⁱ Mary Larsen, "Martin Hayes, A Lilt All His Own," *Fiddler Magazine*, Spring 1994: p. 50.