

What Practicing Should Sound Like

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“It sounded better at home.”

“I practiced this part a lot, it just doesn’t get better.”

These are two common complaints of instrumental students. Often, the problem is lack of practice. Students *play* their flutes at home, but do they *practice*? “Play” is a deceptive verb. It infers effortless fun, while disguising the work behind true mastery. I have come to understand that few students have a concept of what successful practice sounds and feels like, and parents who never studied an instrument have even less of an idea. This article attempts to bridge the gap and answer the parental question, “What should I hear through the door?”

First, you should not hear only pleasing melodies. Run-throughs are necessary, but that is not where the most time should be spent. Good musicians are like good detectives- they play something, notice difficulties, then isolate those sections to improve them. Efficient practice involves the repetition of small sections- as little as two notes at a time- from a slower to faster speed. Intense and deliberate practice of small sections will result in greater overall progress than will simply playing through the entire piece every day.

I liken this deliberate practice to repairing a tear in fabric. To repair a tear you start before the tear and feed the needle past the hole into the other side of the fabric. You repeat that process to strengthen the bond between the two sides. One pass will make it better, but only many passes, carefully executed, will create a strong fabric which will stand the test of time. This type of practice might sound like a record with a scratch in it. The student should only practice the right notes, slowly enough to ingrain muscle memory and build confidence.

Secondly, you should hear a clicking or tapping sound that is being mechanically generated by a metronome. Most students have a metronome or have access to one online.* The metronome is a vital tool in rhythmic accuracy. Fingers must be disciplined to perform an exact action at a precise moment. Approximation is not an option. I compare fingers to puppies. Left to their own devices, they will run wild, doing as they wish. It is only with careful obedience training that they learn to do what YOU want them to do WHEN you want them to do it. Students need to train themselves to play at various speeds with precision and the metronome is the best route.

There is one combination of notes you should hear every day: the scale. A scale is a set of 8 notes, usually played in an ascending then descending order (low to high sounds, then back again). Scales are the fabric of music and necessary to the mastery of an instrument. They serve to strengthen fingers, to practice a variety of fingering combinations, and to prepare students for using different notes as a set—similar to how they will be used in pieces of music. Once scales are mastered, teachers also use them as a way to teach new concepts in rhythm, articulation (tonguing/ pedaling), dynamics (loudness levels), blend, and more. Most teachers require scales to be memorized at some point, and will

increase the playing speed to keep finger skills growing. Scales are so important, that even professional musicians who perform in orchestras use them to warm-up and to stay in shape.

I often call scales the “fabric of music.” Students want to wear cool fashion—that would be the beautiful sounds of melodies. However, you cannot have fashion without the fabric! Students need to weave their own musical fabric by mastering scales and technical exercises so they can create their musical fashion with ease. Incidentally, scales are best practiced with a metronome, as accuracy in scales is heavily based on precise timing.

Scales are so vital to their musical skill, that I often advise students to just play their scales if they have a busy day with lots of homework. Scales should take 5-10 minutes if they do not dawdle. Scales are a skill exercise like practicing free throws; kicking goals; practicing spelling; strength training; or hitting a ball with a bat. All of these activities get easier with practice, and athletes spend a lot of time honing these skills to become good at sports. Scales are comparable. No coach would hold practice by just running through a mock game—they insist on skill building. Scales build essential musical skills, and just playing through the melodies is equivalent to only holding mock games at practice. It might be fun, but it ignores long-term skill building that is necessary for continuing success.

Finally, no groaning! Groaning is a sign that frustration is building and goals are not being reached. Slow and careful practice will help to reduce frustration and the groaning that accompanies it. When a student plays a difficult passage at too fast of a speed, frustration sets in and productivity slows down. If you hear too much groaning, remind your child to slow down their speed, or “tempo.” Tell them you read it somewhere!

Thank you for supporting your child’s musical studies!

*If your child doesn’t have a metronome s/he can find one online at www.metronomeonline.com. They do not have to register to use this online service. I also recommend the Korg TM-40, which retails for about \$25, is both a metronome and a tuner, and can be purchased at your local music store. Call ahead to insure availability.