

The Practice Project

When practicing well still doesn't do it— These extra-musical suggestions may make a difference

By Tina Chancey

This article is the third in a series entitled the **American Recorder Practice Project**—adapting How to Practice workshops that I led for classical and traditional musicians in the Washington, D.C., area in 2017.

- The **first article** outlined about 30 different **practice goals** you might have, and suggested ways you could identify them.
- The **second installment** covered the problem-solving process, then suggested some specific **Practice Hacks*** to solve technical problems, such as applying **SHMRG**.
- In this article, we look at ways that mental and physical **Body Work** approaches, as well as ideas that are not strictly related to “practice,” may help.

Tina Chancey is director of HESPERUS, which performs early music soundtracks for classic silent films. Currently known for her work with early bowed strings, particularly viol and pardessus de viole, she has also played recorders, shawm, krumhorn and rauschpfeife with her late husband Scott Reiss in the Folger Consort at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C., as well as in the New York Renaissance Band, the New York Ensemble for Early Music, and on tour with rocker Ritchie Blackmore in Blackmore's Night.

*A prize-winning composer by the age of 15 at Interlochen National Music Camp, Chancey conducted her own double woodwind quintet at her high school graduation. She subsequently attended Oberlin College and received a Master of Arts in Performance from Queens College; a Master of Arts in Musicology from New York University; and a Ph.D. in Musicology, Music Technology and Women's Studies from the Union Institute. Chancey teaches, performs, improvises, produces recordings, composes and arranges, and directs both the SoundCatcher: Play by Ear and What's That Note: Tune-Up workshops. Her articles on playing by ear and improvisation appear in AR and Early Music America magazines. Her newest CD of Sephardic string music is **La Yave d'Espanya (The Key from Spain)** with Trio Sefardi.*

Recent artist residencies have taken Chancey to Geneva, Switzerland; Melbourne, Australia; Hamburg and Berlin, Germany; Oberlin College Conservatory; and the Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts. She also returned in April from a workshop and performance art/early music concert with singer Emily Lau for the Big Mouth Society in Portland, OR. She has received an Early Music America Special Education Achievement Award, and four Wammies for best classical instrumentalist by the Washington Area Music Association.



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I've practiced, but it just doesn't get better

Sometimes you just can't play it, no matter what you do.

You go through the problem-solving process described in the last article, use all the practice hacks and then some, analyze it up the wazoo, use a metronome, say your prayers, cross your fingers—and it still won't budge. Your coach can't figure it out either. What's up?

I hate to say it, but one possibility is that it's just too hard for you right now at the tempo you've set. If you want to perform it, you may have to compromise, either by slowing down the tempo of the whole piece a notch (sorry, it's tacky to slow down *only* the hard part) or by simplifying the passage in question. You might even put off performing it for a while, until you feel as if you have more control.

As you're deciding how to handle it, keep a few things in mind.

1. **Sometimes hard passages are more effective when they sound hard.** The unspoken assumption behind many articles on "how to practice" is that, with good practice skills, you can learn to play anything with ease and nonchalance. But think about what happens when a creative Baroque composer encounters a development section: it's the chance to provide some dramatic contrast—extreme rhythmic gestures, visits to the relative minor or an even more distant key, gnarly chromatic passages, angular arpeggios, wicked skips and high obbligatos requiring heroic breath support.

If you make this part sound too easy, the recapitulation won't achieve that convincing sense of arrival—of relaxed, but victorious, return. I'm not saying that you should sound like you're going to self-destruct any second, but savoring the dramatic elements of the

development section paves the way for a more satisfying recapitulation.

2. **Sometimes you can master a hard passage by changing something very small—**

for example:

- find alternative phrasing
- de-stress a pivotal note
- use a less aggressive paired-single tonguing instead of a double tonguing (or double-tongue with *ta-da* instead of *tug-ga*)
- insert a catch-breath in the right place
- exploit a single note's slight rhythmic anticipation or delay
- add a *souffçon* of vibrato or *inégale*
- or milk a plain old agogic inflection, to make the note longer.

I've also found that setting text to a problematic musical phrase can help add nuance to the notes. (Confession: when I can't think of something sensible, I mumble unrelated German words for Bach and Telemann, French for Hotteterre and Philidor.)

Since we're talking about small changes, remember: while you want dance movements to sound dancey, that's not the same as making them metronomic (gasp, heresy!). The rhythm needs to be *regular* but not necessarily *even*. (Think of a good Viennese waltz—the second beat in the bar is always early, the third always late. That pattern becomes a kind of Metric Template for the whole piece.)

Have you ever tried dwelling on the first beat in the bar of a Telemann adagio in 3/4 and then rushing the next two beats a bit? Why not, if everyone else agrees to do it? (Everyone does have to agree for it to work.)

Why do it at all? Because it can unlock the poetry of a phrase *and* make it easier to play.

***“I Can’t Move My Fingers That Fast” /
“My Back Hurts When I Practice Too Long”***

Over time, if the impossible passage still won’t budge and you find that:

- certain kinds of figuration aggravate your carpal tunnel, arthritis, gout, or trick thumb;
- holding your tenor or bass for the length of a piece strains a particular muscle in your back;
- you’re frequently out of breath or tired when you play for a while;

then there may be a physical component to your musical problems. You may not necessarily want to go to a doctor, though, because it often leads to unprofitable variations on “Doc, it hurts when I do this”/ “So don’t do that!”

Instead, why not visit someone trained in studying how people use their bodies to help them maximize efficiency and reduce strain? How do methods like the **ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE** help you practice? When you flip the page you can read an interview with more information on Alexander Technique.

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*The patient
says, “Doctor,
it hurts when
I do this.”
“Then don’t
do that!”
—Henny
Youngman*

*Photos of Vicki
Boeckman
(right) and of
color still life
on page 15:
William
Stickney*



THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE

The Alexander Technique is a way of learning how you can get rid of harmful tension in your body and move mindfully through life. It is a simple and practical method for improving ease and freedom of movement, balance, support and coordination. Clients have the opportunity to take charge of their own learning and healing process, because it's not a series of passive treatments but an active exploration that changes the way one thinks and responds in process. Lessons leave one feeling lighter, freer and more grounded. It can be applied to any daily activity.

—Adapted from www.alexandertechnique.com; www.amsatonline.org

I asked **Héloïse Degrugillier**—
an Alexander teacher in Boston (MA), a performer, and a frequent leader of workshops and chapter sessions—how Alexander Technique helps her recorder students play better.

HD: I teach Alexander Technique and I teach recorder, and I try not to talk Alexander in recorder lessons, but I do use it. Alexander Technique helps you notice things; being aware of what you do and catching it before you do it so you can stop it. That's mostly how I use it for practicing. Notice your habits, and if you have a habit, is it a good one or a bad one? Can you do something else? Then you practice your habits, both good and bad. For example, when you do articulation exercises, you need to play the "bad" articulations too, out of sequence, out of pattern, which teaches you how to control them.

TC: So you're looking to give people more control of their choices, because they're making some of them automatically?

HD: Technique is just that, right? Being in conscious control of your choices. We need to be conscious as we practice so that later we can use that perception to get better. It works for anything, really—how you breathe, how you hold yourself; it's all about habit and trying to clean up what you're doing. We all learn by overdoing, it's a normal thing, then you need to go back and clean it up.

TC: What does Alexander teach you as a player?

HD: That usually my problems are not where I think they are. If my fingers don't do what I want, I need to ask, "OK, what is my head doing, where am I tense, can I breathe better?"—so that my fingers will actually have a chance to work better. If I'm tense in my shoulders, then my breathing, my mouth, my fingers aren't going to work. It changes how I identify and then address problems; they're different than I expect.

Last weekend I gave a class on rhythm and half the time we weren't dealing with the recorder—because as soon you have a recorder, then you have habits. I took it away and dealt with rhythm by itself; conducting the rhythm, saying the rhythm, using just the headjoint, then adding the recorder and the fingers, step by step. Without the Alexander Technique it would be, "Oh, your rhythm is bad,



let's practice your rhythm." With Alexander we're multi-tasking at the right time, at the right moment, with the right tools.

It seems so indirect to people. And it's funny because they'll be surprised; they'll say, "As a result of what we just did—oh, look at that, my rhythm is better and so is my sound!"

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A few other Body Work practices that help you to play with more ease and awareness:

BODY MAPPING (also called **Andover Education**) is the brainchild of **Barbara Conable**, an Alexander teacher who felt that musicians would benefit from an increased awareness of how their bodies are involved in music-making. In other words, she wanted to help put music education on a secure somatic (anatomical) foundation. She developed a course called “What Every Musician Needs to Know About the Body,” and began a process of helping musicians learn to teach the material it contains.

Harpist/organist and Pinewoods Workshop regular **Frances Fitch** says, “I have seen striking examples of improvement in ease of playing, beauty of sound and relief from pain and discomfort for many musicians, including myself.” <http://bodymap.org/main>

The **FELDENKRAIS METHOD** was developed by **Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais**, an Israeli physicist and judo master. He created a series of sophisticated self-rehabilitation and awareness techniques to heal a personal knee injury after forgoing surgery in the 1950s.

As a pianist and certified Feldenkrais trainer, **Aliza Stewart** is a practitioner who applies Feldenkrais to musical performance.

“Playing music is movement. Without movement, playing is impossible. Improve your movement and you will improve your playing. As humans, our habitual patterns of movement are unique to each one of us, the result of the particular circumstances in our life at the time these patterns were learned. Since those circumstances were not always optimal, the habits learned were also often not optimal. As the complexity of actions increases—from crawling to sitting to walking to playing the violin—more and more of our behavior becomes habitual and we may think of it as ‘just who we are’, even if it causes discomfort, pain, or difficulty.

“The Feldenkrais Method provides tools to access and adjust these habitual patterns in order to make them more appropriate for our current goals and activities. As a result, we achieve better coordination, comfort, and artistic expression.” www.feldenkraisformusicians.com

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American Orff-Schulwerk Association

"If I could just get myself to practice, I'd get better—but I keep getting distracted"

*If remaining focused is your challenge, young professional **Alexa Raine-Wright** (winner of prizes including an ARS scholarship; currently of Canada's only recorder quartet, *Flute Alors!*) has made a study of how to get organized and stay on track.*

"I feel I've learned the most about myself and how to practice effectively from big projects like a competition or a solo recording. I've always had a hard time making practice a priority—in school, I always finished homework before practicing (probably because I like to feel "done" with things, and you're never really "done" practicing!).

"I realized pretty quickly that I had to figure out how much I wanted to practice daily/weekly in order to feel prepared (keeping in mind not to get fatigued, as I have injured myself in the past from practicing too much with too little stretching/exercise). I actually block off that time in my schedule and stick to it—but having it already scheduled helps me so much, because it means I have to schedule everything else (administration, etc.) around my practicing, rather than only practicing after I finish clearing my inbox, writing this grant, or balancing that budget. The music is a priority finally, and that feels great.

"If I have many projects going on at once and practice time is hard to come by, I'll read through all of the music and identify the places that need work—stuff I can't sight-read my way through (circling it, putting a colorful Post-it next to it, anything works!). The next time I practice, I'll jump straight to those spots, rather than wasting time playing the whole piece and then finding myself out of time to actually practice.

"One of the most effective tricks I use is with the metronome, starting out very slowly, going up a click twice, down a click, up a click twice, down a click, etc. (50-52-54, 52-54-56, 54-56-58, 56 etc.) until I reach my ideal tempo. This makes me practice with the goal of staying in control, not of playing as fast as possible. You start out comfortable, then push it a little by going faster. Then coming down a click feels really nice and in control. Then you push yourself again, and then relax. I'm always amazed at how well this works!

"One helpful thing to do with 16th-note passages is mixing up the rhythms (dotted long-short and short-long, as well as eighth-triplet). I also like to practice from the end—both for learning new pieces and practicing difficult sections. I'll practice the last line, then the second-to-last line, then the third-to-last line, etc. This is especially useful if I don't have much time; once I've learned the third-to-last line, I'm less likely to keep on playing into the second-



"If I have many projects going on at once and practice time is hard to come by, I'll read through all of the music and identify the places that need work.... The next time I practice, I'll jump straight to those spots."

to-last line because it's not new. If I start at the beginning, I'm more likely to keep reading because it's new and exciting, which is less efficient if practice time is limited. For difficult passages, I'll play the last two notes, then the last three, then the last four, then the last five, etc.

"Practicing improvisation, and practicing it often, is also important. For short cadenzas in sonatas or concertos, I like to improvise on stage, but I need to have an idea of what works and what doesn't before I perform. I like to make myself improvise three different cadenzas every practice session, either focusing on a shape (going up and then down, or starting high and dropping, or limited range, etc.), a particular figuration (arpeggios, scales, trills), or a character (playful, mournful). Gradually an idea of what I like best seems to emerge. But because I've practiced that variety, I can feel spontaneous yet prepared on stage.

"If I know I'm going to have to play something by memory, I'll work on memorizing it first rather than practicing it and then memorizing. Once a piece is memorized, I know it so well that I've actually skipped a lot of practicing. When I memorize, it helps me to pick out patterns and sequences that I might have missed if I were just practicing."



Tina Chancey (l) and Deborah Roudebush (ARS member and music director of the Northern Virginia ARS chapter) have two video lessons posted at www.youtube.com/americanrecordermag. How should you approach adding ornaments to a French Baroque piece? Tina points out that, in the Baroque period, music only gives the performer the basic notes—to which you add your own personal touches by improvising ornaments. What should those be, and how should you practice them?

EUTONY is a body awareness practice based on sensory awareness. It was developed by **Gerda Alexander** (1908-94) as a means to balance tensions in the body, move with ease, and become more attuned to one's surroundings. There is great focus on consciousness, on awareness of sensations: contact of fabric on skin, of areas of body parts that feel more or less pressure against the surface they are lying on, of alignment, of efficient ways of using weight and leverage as opposed to muscle strength, and efficient ways of moving, of sitting, of standing.

www.sensoryawareness.org,
<https://eutony.co.uk>

Don't forget about **YOGA**, another active practice that affects how you use your body to perform. While it's generally less targeted to performers, there are innovators such as yoga therapist and early musician **Rachel Cama Nemer**, who works directly with musicians.

Some other modalities that address your body's energy system are **REIKI**, **ESOTERIC HEALING**, **APPLIED KINESIOLOGY**, **TOUCH FOR HEALTH** and **CRANIO-SACRAL** work. All are easy to find online.

Besides paying attention to your body, what if there were some ways you could **organize your practice time** better? At left, read **Alexa Raine-Wright's** approach.

Short Links

- Have you read **Anne Timberlake's** blog, **GROW YOUR PLAYING?** Thoughtful, funny, eclectic, and very, very useful. www.annetimberlake.com/blog. And don't forget her **Technique Tips** in *American Recorder: Spring 2013*, *Summer 2013* and continuing in *Spring 2014* and *Summer 2014*.
- Listen to what **MICHALA PETRI** says about practicing. In January 2019, **Sarah Jeffery** of Team Recorder interviewed **Michala Petri**, and the two of them dish about many aspects of recorder technique, including how to practice. www.youtube.com/watch?v=WcvoXgKuojo
- Want help with **PERFORMANCE ANXIETY**, **PRACTICING TO MEET YOUR GOALS**, and **DOING YOUR BEST ON STAGE** (“...*leaving is not usually an option*”)? **THE BULLET-PROOF MUSICIAN** offers a blog, an online course, free resources, and coaching. <http://bulletproofmusician.com>

NEXT TIME IN THE AMERICAN RECORDER PRACTICE PROJECT:

We'll visit Peabody Institute at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, MD, where the **Peak Performance** initiative brings together specialists in performance health and performance psychology. **Dr. Serap Bastepe-Gray** has developed a course on music and anatomy, “Playing Well,” and Peabody recorder professor **Gwyn Roberts** has some experiences to share.

MORE PRACTICE PROJECT VIDEOS focus on particular practice topics such as: **care and feeding of ornaments**, **sight-reading**, **developing long-term skills**, **articulations**, **how to handle nerves**, **improving rhythm**. www.youtube.com/americanrecordermag

See you in the next edition of AR, or online at the **AR Practice Project**, https://americanrecorder.org/practice_project.php

Tina Chancey