

Six Ways to Make Recorder Practice Fail

By Larry L. Burriss

Remember when you were growing up, and one of your biggest complaints was that everyone was always telling you what to do? And you looked forward to the day when you could do what you wanted, without someone else telling you to do something else?

Then you got older, wanted to play the recorder—and, once again, everyone was still telling you what to do. Practice this way! Hold your hands like this! Sit (or stand) this way! Practice every day! Is there ever going to be any relief from being told what to do?

Yes, there is, and surprisingly it comes from the writings of **noted legal theorist Lon L. Fuller**, who back in the 1960s wrote about how *not* to make laws. In his essay, “Eight Ways to Fail to Make Law,” (*The Morality of Law*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), Fuller told a fanciful story of a king who ruined his country because he failed to enact laws in such a way that would lead to success.

So, despite Shakespeare’s admonition that the first thing we should do is kill all the lawyers, here are several ways to help make your practice fail. If, for some reason you’ve taken up the recorder, and you don’t want to be a success, follow these rules:

1. *Make your practice sessions so specific they can’t be generalized to the real world.* You’ve got all of the scales down perfectly. You can run through pages of arpeggios with hardly any errors. Now, ask yourself this: when was the last time you went to a concert, and all that was played were scales and arpeggios? The real music world is made up of songs/pieces/compositions (a former teacher made it very clear I was not to play “songs”; I was to play “pieces”). If you don’t want to improve, just practice scales and arpeggios.

Along the same line, make sure you don’t practice anything except your favorite style or composer. This will insure you don’t have to bother with styles that give you trouble. Go with what you know!

2. *Never ask “why” you practice the way you do.*

If you’re setting up your own practice regimen make sure you don’t have any particular reason for why you do what you do. That will insure there is no real purpose behind your practice schedule, which will help guarantee you won’t get any better.

If you have a teacher, make sure you never ask why you are being asked to do a particular set of exercises. That way you won’t have any understanding of how the teacher is trying to help you, or what the teacher wants you to accomplish.

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3. *Don’t have a pattern to your practice.* Everyone knows that routines are boring and don’t allow you to express yourself. If you are a younger musician, you may have decided that, in order to show your independence and free spirit, you aren’t going to follow the rules. If you are a returning player, your life experiences show you that you always know what’s best.

So, don’t have a pattern. Some days you need to just rush into practice with no warm-up exercises. Those lip/finger exercises are just as good at the end of the practice session as they are at the beginning.

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https://americanrecorder.org/practice_project.php

It's also a good idea to put new pieces at the start of practice so you can get the hard stuff out of the way more quickly. Save the pieces you are familiar with for the end of the session, so you can go out on a positive note.

Those people who want to start with exercises, then go on to the familiar pieces, then work on something new, just don't understand the nature of variety and free thinking!

4. Practice in a way that is known to, and understood by, only you. You need to develop your own practice routine that can only be understood by you. After all, if you have to explain it to your instructor, he or she just doesn't understand you and your creativity. When your instructor looks puzzled and says, "Hmmm, I don't quite understand what you are trying to do here," simply roll your eyes and say, "Well, I just think it's a good idea."

5. Don't plan in advance how and what you are going to practice. Actually, there is no real need to plan for practice. After all, practice isn't "real." It's just pretend. There is no need to have your instrument, scales and scores readily available. Even better is to sit down to practice, arrange your music, take a deep breath, think good practice thoughts—and then get up to go look for your metronome! Yet another way to make sure the practice session doesn't work well is to have to stop in the middle to find a fingering chart.

And make sure there is no consistency to your practice. Practicing at different times every day, skipping practice and doing completely different things at each practice are all guaranteed to minimize the benefits of practice.

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6. Make sure your practice is not up-to-date.

Recorder-like instruments were around in the Middle Ages, and German fingering was developed in the early 20th century. Obviously, the recorder is simply an old mechanical device, so what can be new?

Thus, you can safely ignore new developments in psychology, nutrition, kinesiology or even pharmacology as they relate to practice and performance. Just because, for example, physiologists have found connections between posture and lung performance, it doesn't mean you need to be aware of new developments. After all, playing the recorder is just air, fingers and lips.

Returning to our law professor, Fuller pointed out that the failure of law results in anarchy. He further noted that there is a kind of reciprocity between how the rules are formulated, and how they are followed. Sloppy rule-making for practice leads to sloppy behavior, and sloppy behavior leads to a "don't care" attitude.

A "don't care" attitude is a harmful state of affairs in both Fuller's judicial system and in our daily practice as well.

That old adage about "practice makes perfect," is, in fact, wrong. **Practice doesn't make perfect. Perfect practice makes perfect.**

Larry L. Burriss, Ph.D., J.D., started playing the recorder as an adult, when his dulcimer-player wife wanted him to take up an instrument so they could play together. Although he already plays cornet, there isn't much repertoire for dulcimer and brass. He is a professor in the School of Journalism and Strategic Media at Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, where he teaches Media Law and Mass Media and National Security. He is also a retired Air Force lieutenant colonel.