

Practice Makes Perfect? Nah

(But it does a heck of a lot of other things)

TOPIC 1:

Goal-Oriented Practice

Last year I addressed my Facebook friends:

"I'm teaching a workshop on practicing in a few weeks. Any tips from your experience?"

Within 24 hours I received 83 heartfelt and passionate replies from some of the best musicians I know, and every single person said something different. Some practiced slowly; others never did. Some made sure to have a plan; a vocal minority found that distracting. A few practiced at the same time every day to build consistency; an equally opinionated group varied the time to encourage spontaneity; etc.

A little desperate to find some pattern, I separated the advice into these **seven basic approaches to practicing**, which I call models. Here they are, illustrated with representative comments culled from the 83.

I. **INSPIRATIONAL MODEL: JUST DO IT**

- Just do it—Don't ever give up—Practice early and often, every day
- The hardest thing is to get the instrument out of its case—once you do that you're home free
- *Believe* you can change some aspect of your playing or can overcome a musical difficulty

II. **PHILOSOPHICAL MODEL: KEEP THINKING**

- Never practice a mistake
- Don't forget to be musical
- Once you get it right the repetition begins, but not mindless repetition
- Only take advice from good musicians

III. **PSYCHOLOGICAL/ANTI-ANXIETY MODEL: ACCEPTANCE**

- Mistakes are friends that tell you things you need to know
- Learn to observe without judging
- Embrace your wrong notes
- Talk to yourself with kindness, like a good kindergarten teacher (*my favorite*)

By Tina Chancey

Tina Chancey is the 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 American Recorder and Early Music America magazines.

Recent artist residencies have taken her to Geneva, Switzerland; Melbourne, Australia; Hamburg and Berlin, Germany; Oberlin College Conservatory; and the Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts. She has received an Early Music America Special Education Achievement Award, and four Wammies for best classical instrumentalist by the Washington Area Music Association.

This article is an adaptation of a series of How to Practice workshops Chancey led for classical and traditional musicians in the Washington, D.C., area in 2017.



IV. MENTAL MODEL: TAKE CONTROL

- Teach yourself what you're trying to learn by making it an exercise
- Decide what your focal points are—have a plan, organize your practice to help you get started
- Keep a practice diary
- Practice when you get up, when your brain is fresh and not distracted, particularly when memorizing
- Be your own best teacher

V. ZEN—BODY/MIND MODEL: BREATHE

- Meditate for 5-10 minutes before and after a practice session
- Stay physically relaxed, and never practice longer than you are able to stay relaxed
- Focus—Stay grounded—Don't be distracted—Breathe

VI. BEHAVIORAL MODEL: UNDERSTAND YOURSELF

- Make it easy to practice/have your space set up/ have extra pencils, paper, food
- Avoid distractions, put your phone in airplane mode
- Practice with a timer
- Limited time: six minutes each of yoga stretches, meditation, vocalizing, technique; finally, play a piece of music

VII. ATHLETE/PHYSICAL MODEL: INNER GAME

- Include a proper warmup, then start with easy pieces, then go on to hard ones
- Have some cool-down pieces and stretch at the end
- Take regular breaks to integrate the music into your body

Well, that was amusing, even illuminating—but it still didn't explain the variety of responses. It was as if everyone were talking about a different activity.

Then I realized that they were.

Different people have different goals for their practice sessions. Heck, the same person will have different goals for any two of their own practice sessions. And I can't help you learn to practice better without getting specific.

So, pick up a pencil and check all of the practice goals (*listed in the box at right*) that have applied to you in the past six months or so.

Different people have different goals for their practice sessions.

At various times, I have practiced to:

- ☐ Have fun
- ☐ Work
- ☐ Have fun working
- ☐ Learn something scary hard
- ☐ Enjoy playing something easy
- ☐ Kill 10 minutes until it's time to leave
- ☐ For no particular reason
- ☐ Other _____
- _____
- ☐ Spend some time with my instruments
- ☐ Familiarize myself with a new instrument
- ☐ Try to tune the high notes of an instrument
- ☐ Drill a fingering, a trill, or some hard octaves
- ☐ Work on double-tonguing
- ☐ Work on breath pressure
- ☐ Improve my endurance
- ☐ Use a metronome on a tricky passage
- ☐ Revisit some favorite music
- ☐ Discover some new works by a favorite composer
- ☐ Psych out the rhythm of a complicated piece
- ☐ Choose a new solo to work up
- ☐ Read through an entire repertoire, like *Playford's Country Dances* or the *Odecaton*
- ☐ Get to know the character of a piece, how it breathes
- ☐ Write in 1 + 2 + ... above a phrase
- ☐ Check the ranges of a vocal piece for recorders
- ☐ Plan a program for my group
- ☐ Prepare for a rehearsal
- ☐ Prepare for a concert
- ☐ Prepare for a recording
- ☐ Prepare for a master class
- ☐ Prepare for a competition
- ☐ Prepare to teach a specific piece
- ☐ Amuse my cat
- ☐ Because there was nothing else I would rather have done
- ☐ Other _____
- _____
- ☐ More? _____
- _____

Count them up. How many different practice goals have you had lately? _____

**PLEASE BE ADVISED:
YOU ARE ENTERING
A NO BLAME ZONE.**

***By reading these articles
and participating in these
explorations, all regrets,
recriminations, self-flagellation,
and feelings of guilt and shame
experienced during the
practicing of your
instrument(s) are hereby
declared null and void.
That is all.***

It makes sense that different practice goals require different practice techniques. How can I teach them all? Ah, but I don't have to teach them all—I just have to teach what you need to learn.

How do I know that? You tell me.

I propose that, over this coming season, we spend some time together exploring and refining the concept of “practicing” so you can develop your own practice plan that's efficient, targeted to your own weaknesses and strengths, and works with your schedule. We need to be partners in this; I've got the questions, but you have the answers.

I'm going to write three more articles for *AR* in the next year; if you'll answer my questions and experiment with the musical examples, by the end I bet you'll have a pretty good idea of what you want to do.

One good thing about an extended time period is that, over the year, you can send me questions and comments to make sure that you get exactly what you need. I could really use your feedback when I'm creating online exercises—meet me at https://americanrecorder.org/practice_project.php.

Periodically, new material will appear on the [Practice Project](#). There will be exercises and quizzes, a discussion board, related articles, and suggestions from professional recorder players and teachers who have been devising their own exercises and practice techniques for decades.

LOOKING FORWARD

These four articles are designed to give an overview of the many issues connected to good practicing. We're talking here about setting practice goals and self-motivation. Upcoming topics include:

- Making self-evaluation less painful
- SHMRG: a fun and functional way to analyze music
- Three crafty ways to use a metronome
- Creative Problem Solving 101
- Anxiety is your friend. Yes, it is.
- How the Alexander Technique helps you trill faster
- Cooling out with meditation before you go on stage

... and these *Practice Hacks* (partial sample):

- How to get a passage up to speed
- Shortcuts to faster music reading
- Drilling with superimposed rhythms: you know you need it
- Rephrasing? Why?
- Scoping out the form on the fly
- Halloween special: Separating the skeleton of a tune from the flesh

By the third article, we'll be using the **Practice Project** forum as a chance for everyone to bring in problem spots, and we'll workshop them together.

TOPIC 2: What's my Motivation?

CLEAR GOALS + MOTIVATION = A GOOD PRACTICE SESSION,

I think. Whatever your goal(s), a clear intention will start your engine, but what puts you into gear is motivation. The combination helps you concentrate and enter the zone—that altered state of mind where learning takes place. But how do you get motivated?

For some, getting started is the hardest thing; once they pick up the instrument, they're fine. Others work for 10-15 minutes, and then they're sidelined by a technical snag and lose momentum. My problem is that I can't seem to distance myself from the world; I get distracted by a text or phone call or a troubled housemate, and my energy and concentration just seep away. What kinds of things happen to you?

How about those times when you're successful? How do you motivate yourself to exercise? To do other tasks that take effort and focus? Some players weigh in:

Jean K: *"Anytime I play the recorder I have fun, so it's easy for me to set aside 45 minutes after dinner to play. I treat the exercises as games and always end up playing my favorite piece."*

Arthur P: *"I make a daily to-do list and it feels good to cross things off; practicing is just one more item on the list. Not a biggie."*

Martha M: *"I schedule my practice times for afternoon, when my practice room is sunny and warm in the winter. I made it into a place that's colorful and*

comfortable and just for music, so I really like being there. Once I go in the door, I can focus."

Fred J: *It's like pulling teeth, but once I'm playing I enjoy it. So I keep my recorders and music out on the sideboard in the dining room and every time I pass I toot a little, ten minutes here, fifteen there."*

What works for you? Let's find out.

BY THE WAY, some might say, "When I have a concert it's easier to practice." Anxiety is certainly a potent motivator—but procrastination also happens when you're anxious, so I think the Challenge activity (at right) is still good to try.

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

Tina Chancey

*I don't want to practice!
I want to skip ahead to the part
where I'm awesome like you.*

*(Transcribed and
arranged for recorders
from Savage Chickens)
photo: William Stickney*



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CHALLENGE 1: For the next seven days, commit to picking up your recorder **with the simple goal of playing for 30 minutes a day.** It doesn't matter what you play: play old favorites, sight-read, play tunes by ear, work on concert pieces, just make music.

DETAILS: Those 30 minutes can be in any configuration; three 10' segments, two 15' segments or one 30' segment, etc.

IF YOU MISS A DAY OR TWO, PICK IT UP AGAIN:

NO PROBLEM. You'll learn more if you do it for more days, but you'll learn something even if you just do it once.

Once some patterns start emerging, **keep a practice log**; you could even **write it down here.** Tell me:

- What's the easiest time configuration for you?
3 x 10'? 2 x 15'? 1 x 30'?
- Best time of day?
- What's harder—to get started or to keep going?
- Did you lose concentration? At what point in the process? How often?
- Was the experience different on different days?
- Was it fun to play just for the sake of playing?

Comments: _____

I'd like to know how this worked for you. Would you write a summary and post it on the [Practice Project](https://americanrecorder.org/practice_project.php) community forum link from https://americanrecorder.org/practice_project.php?