

## **Trumpet Tips: Keys to Efficient Practice Habits**

*Dr. Kyle Millsap, Assistant Professor of Trumpet & Jazz*

*Texas A&M University-Kingsville*

*February 10, 2019*

Music teachers constantly tell their students to “go practice.” Students, typically, take this instruction and nod their heads in the affirmative, indicating comprehension of what that means, whether or not they really do. “Go practice” is a vague instruction. What is the student practicing for? How should the student practice to accomplish their goal? Where should they spend their time to be most effective? What is needed is some amount of self-analysis to learn strengths and weaknesses, and a good deal of patience to learn the music correctly the first time.

### **Slow down**

This is the hardest one. There can sometimes be a sense of anxiety for students trying to prepare material each week for a lesson. Because of this, the majority of students do not take the time necessary to learn music correctly the first time. Frequently, students interpret “practice slowly” as starting 20 bpm below the goal tempo. Instead of achieving a quality product, they end up having to relearn a piece multiple times because of the mistakes that are made. This is an even bigger waste of practice time. While in a few cases, 20 bpm slower might be enough, many times, that is closer to where they should be mid-week. In order to have full command over the notes, rhythms, and musical elements, what is needed is to start closer to 1/3<sup>rd</sup>, or 1/4<sup>th</sup> the intended tempo and spend as much time there as needed. It is easy to fall into the mentality of “close enough,” approximating the music, but not really mastering it. A triplet is not a dotted-eighth-sixteenth. Slow practice exposes this inconsistency and allows a player to really get into the details of a composition.

The expression “measure twice, cut once” applies here as well. When everything can be played at the slow tempo (measure), then speed up to the performance tempo (cut). What is discovered when this happens, is that the tempo increases happen at a much faster rate. That time spent at the slow tempo coordinates the technique needed to successfully reach the faster goal. Players have to give themselves the opportunity to learn the material to the point of mastery (notes, rhythms, and most of all, musical expression) and that only comes with slow, patient practice.

### **Awkward practice**

There are times in a practice sequence that everyone hits a wall. The technical considerations exceed the performer’s current ability. One way to help with this is to change the focus. The road block in this case is usually a matter of finger coordination. Utilizing different rhythms tricks the brain into focusing less on the fingers and concentrate on the rhythm change the player is trying to remember. The two easiest ones to apply to a run of straight eighth notes, for example, are to change the rhythm to dotted-eighth-sixteenth and sixteenth-dotted-eighth. One’s imagination is the only limitation on the rhythmic alterations. When the player is successful to the point that they cannot make a mistake (instead of only working until the first

correct time), increase the tempo, and/or change the rhythm. Eventually, return to the original tempo. This is not only easier, but also will undoubtedly feel like a slower tempo, even though there has been no metronomic change.

### **Practice duration**

This is a matter for personal awareness of how long the player can concentrate and absorb information. Practicing is a difficult skill because of the player filling the dual roles of both teacher and student. Utilizing a recording device helps alleviate some of this by separating out the roles - perform for the recording, then listen back and evaluate. Rather than trying to fit all of the day's practicing into one block of time, it needs to be spread out throughout the day so that the player can be engaged and concentrating the entire time.

Avoid asking "How long do I have to practice?" That question is asking what minimum amount of work or time is needed. Just like how asking how long an essay has to be is really asking how little work is needed, approaching practice time this way is a recipe for selling oneself short of their full potential. Frequently, the teacher answers the essay question with, "long enough to answer the topic." The answer to how long to practice is the same - however long it takes.

### **Practice what you don't know**

There is an expression, "you shouldn't sound good in the practice room." What this means is if you can already play something and sound good, you are practicing the wrong things. When a section or entire piece of music is mastered, move on to something else as the primary focus of practice. Practicing is not about showing off in the practice room. Little is gained by that. Practicing is about finding weaknesses and developing them into strengths.

### **Perfect practice**

How does someone learn to go out and perform perfectly? Practice perfection. In order to learn to do this, play one thing perfectly everyday. This can be as basic as a C Major scale. The point is to both develop the confidence that perfection in performance can be achieved and the skills necessary to always get there. That means going slow (see above), and demanding a high level of focus. Accuracy in practice is essential to mastery. Correct pitches and rhythms, consistent sound and pitch center, and developing mature musical lines every time indicates a thorough command of the performance. In order to know this will happen in the studio or on stage, the practice must reflect this goal.

Without a plan for development, and a dedicated, focused approach, practice sessions will likely be inefficient and have mixed results. Mapping out a plan, with specific expectations for each practice session leads to a much more efficient use of time, effort, and produces tangible, positive results.