

Pizza, Batting Averages, and the “Ten Times Rule!”

More Practice Tools for Musical Preparation and Building Self-Confidence



Instrument lessons and orchestra practices provide opportunities for the music teacher to impart a few “tricks of the trade” in reading and then practicing music. I call these my “Craftsmen Tools” for successful musical construction... one note or one line of music at a time.

Take it from a world-famous maestro! According to Itzhak Perlman, practicing effectively “comes down to listening. What are you listening for when you practice?” He advises, “Just reduce it to small increments, two or three bars, and try to get a hold of everything at the same time... You can accomplish a lot more in less time. Practicing slowly is extremely important. Then you can figure out what’s going on. Nothing escapes you.”

You may have heard my reference to “**cutting pizza**” for the focus on a specific section, passage or “slice” in the music in order to repetitively drill to learn the notes. I suggest to my students that they should “take it *small* and take it *slow*,” and then gradually speed up the excerpt. Psychologists and education experts know that humans cannot absorb/retain/recite huge amounts of data at one time. (That is one of the reasons, for example, we separate long numbers with hyphens, like phone numbers, zip codes, and the social security identification. We CAN remember two, three and four digits at a glance, but most of us feel a little overwhelmed to memorize five or more numbers or places!)

In learning a new piece of music, the recommendation is to divide the work into segments. Our fast-paced life-style and hectic schedules do not usually allow for “gulping the whole thing” at one sitting (or playing through the entire folder of music, every note including the easy whole notes and rests). It is equally important to prioritize the “hard spots” in the music, and use slowed-down echo practice to our advantage. Labeling each section, and even going as far to marking the date each time it is practiced, will help our instrumentalists to focus on things that seem hard, logically plan (at first out-of-sequence), problem-solve, learn the day’s “goal,” and eventually put the pieces back together.

At lessons, some music teachers refer to batting averages, and point out how a .333 baseball hitting average is outstanding in the Major Leagues (when big-league pitchers are throwing 90-mile hour balls at you), but terrible for a musician who plays one note right to two notes wrong. Since each practice session builds neural-connections across brain cells (physical “memory” to do the skill again), in order to “play it right” consistently, we have to repeat it accurately over and over again, thus “the Ten Times Rule.” Musicians have to achieve a .950 or better average, and practicing their challenging musical “slice” ten times in a row will do the most good. Cumulative effort over different sessions or days is also the key to success! If a hard passage is played 10-20 times today, repeated 10-20 times tomorrow, another set of 10-20 drills the next day, etc. until the part can be played perfectly “in a row” every time, the player will have NO WORRIES when it comes time to perform it at the concert.

Several months prior to my senior viola recital at Carnegie-Mellon University, I told my professor I was a bit nervous. He said I was not practicing enough (on the hard sections). What I did not understand at the time was I lacked this drill-method of practicing to build my self-confidence and improve my “batting average.” If nothing but perfect sounding or “reruns” of music comes from your practice session, you are not properly focusing on “one slice at a time” nor winning with “the ten times rule!”

See our other SHJO enrichment resources and “Fox Firesides” at <http://www.shjo.org/foxs-fireside/>.

