

Practicing Regimen

By Alfredo Guerrieri

I've had student's young and old ask me about my practice techniques and methods. I didn't have any sort of serious practice regimen until I started music school when I was 21. When I first started playing bass at age 13 I tried to practice for 30 minutes a day. My practicing mostly consisted of learning songs. I never had any passion or understanding for learning scales, theory, or reading. It wasn't until I decided to take music seriously that I decided to take my practice methods seriously.

I had always followed sports and had heard the saying by the great football coach Vince Lombardi that said, "Practice does not make perfect. Only perfect practice makes perfect." My first teacher at Musician's Institute was named Christopher Maloney. I asked him about practicing at one of my first lessons. He laid this out for me:

- **Keep a journal.** This serves as a way to keep track of what you are working on as well as track progress. There are times when you don't feel like you are getting anything done. But if you keep a journal you can look back and see that maybe a certain scale or song that you have been working on you can play faster than the week prior.
- **Practicing everything in 15-minute increments.** Sometimes our biggest enemy is our focus. The idea is if you practice 4 different topics for 15 minutes each you will have a fresh mind ready to learn as opposed to practicing the same thing for 1 hour. If you practice the same thing for a long period of time, eventually your brain stops taking in information. If you switch it up every 15 minutes you can constantly be your mind fresh and ready to learn.
- **Pick different aspects of your instrument to work on, specifically your weaknesses.** Isn't that how you get better? One of my teachers told me that if you hear someone practicing and they sound awesome, it means they aren't really practicing. I constantly keep a running list of my musical weaknesses. Ideally, your weaknesses will become your strengths.
- **Keep your practice hours/days consistent.** If you are a serious musician, you should practice 6-7 days a week. Depending on the amount of time you have free daily, you should try to practice 2-6 hours a day. Rumor was that Charlie Parker practiced 8 hours a day at his peak. That is a lot.

I went through a 3 and a half-year stretch from October 2003 to May 2007 where I followed this consistently and religiously. During this time I attended and graduated from Musician's Institute and Berklee College of Music. I had A LOT of time on my

hands, which made improvement much more swift. My list of weaknesses that I focused on normally was between 4-8 topics. On a good day I would go through the list at least 2 times.

When I first tried using this practice technique, I focused on 4 aspects of my playing that I thought was weak: reading, 2 octave major and minor scales, octaves, and slap bass. I made sure I prioritized my practicing by working on my biggest weaknesses first. This also helped the self-analyzing aspect of my learning. It's important to know what you have to work on without someone telling you. It keeps you hungry, egoless, and always chasing the proverbial carrot on a stick.

As I have gotten older and the amount of time I can spend practicing has reduced. I still use this practice regimen, but the list of musical weaknesses that I focus on is small.

The idea that once you reach a certain level of skill you don't have to practice anymore is ludicrous, especially if you consider yourself to be a professional musician. The beauty (and frustration) with being a musician or music educator is that the learning NEVER ends. Ever. Having a regimented and consistent practice schedule helps you keep the wheels turning in your musical brain. The end goal is to improve and grow as a musician, and I have found that using these practice tips is the most efficient and consistent way to improve on your respective instrument.