

HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR PRACTICE SESSION

OR

GETTING RESULTS YOU'LL LOVE OUT OF SOMETHING YOU HATE

Practicing.....a word that can strike fear into the heart of even the most dedicated music student. World-renowned trumpeter Wynton Marsalis calls it "The Monster". Though we all love to play, many of us hate to practice. In order to improve our playing over its current state, we **MUST** practice and practice regularly.

Remember that practicing, like playing in a musical ensemble, throwing a football, or reading a book, is a learned skill. In order for it to be effective, budget your time wisely and have the self-discipline to examine, critique and improve your playing. This involves truly listening to what we play as well as knowing what and how to practice. Without this self-discipline, practice really will become a drudgery and noticeable results will be rare.

I have asked that each member of the band program contribute 20 minutes of their time to practicing their instrument each evening, *including weekends!* Reaching goals is more important than hitting a time target during practice, but 20 minutes is a good start. Below is a breakdown of how to spend that 20 minutes of practice time so that results will be noticeable.

- **WARMING-UP – THE FIRST 5 MINUTES**

The most important part - This is the foundation for everything else you will do.

FOR BEST RESULTS, DO THIS PART STANDING IN FRONT OF A MIRROR!!!!

AIR...It's the basis of your tone.

Think deep and full air flow - Focus on the 'ooh' syllable with each breath.

Clarinets use "eeeeee". Hiss like a cat...your tongue rises. It should feel like that.

Use the mirror to examine jaw, shoulders, stomach as you breathe.

With a deep breath, you will feel your stomach muscles "stretch".

No shoulder movement during breathing!! Stomach muscles ONLY!!!!

Exhaling is an active part of playing. Use the stomach muscles to support the air.

Open your mouth and let the air flow through and far beyond the lips.

The air makes your lips or reed vibrate, not the other way around.

When exhaling your stomach should feel like you're doing a sit-up or crunch.

Activities to improve air flow and focus

Breathe-and-blow = Breathe 4, blow 4 and similar exercises

Mouthpiece buzzing - 'high-octane' buzz = no airy-ness, all buzz

Paper-pusher = Hold a piece of paper against a wall with **ONLY** your airstream

The cold spot = Feel the 'cold spot' on the top/rear of your mouth as you breathe

Build from the center

Start with the middle of your dynamic range and with medium-volume tones.

'Long tones' are a great all-around exercise for building tone and reviewing basics.

Use scales, chromatic exercises **SLOWLY**.

Gradually expand your range up and down as your facial muscles, air, fingers and tongue get coordinated.

Focus on relaxation in all areas...natural and relaxed posture and air flow.

Articulation

Tongue as you speak - what syllable are you using?

Think about the difference between these verbs -

“Touch”

“Strike”

“Hit”

“Smash”

Which describes your tonguing? Try touching your tongue to the top of your mouth or to the reed instead of “striking”, “hitting” or “smashing”.

Tongue in the same place in your mouth each time.

NO TONGUING THROUGH TEETH OR STOPPING THE AIR WITH YOUR TONGUE.

When we stop a note, the air stops moving forward. That’s it!

Above all, LISTEN!! No wobbly or thin sounds. Aim to make each sound your best, each articulation your cleanest. Think about what you WANT to sound like and use your physical skills to help get you there.

Be your own doctor...

A man has a sore throat and visits the doctor for help. The man sits down in the doctor’s office and says, “I don’t feel good. Can you help me?” The doctor says, “Of course! That’s what I’m here for.” He pulls out a saw and cuts off the man’s leg!

This sounds silly, but the doctor failed to make a **diagnosis**. When you practice, ask yourself “What’s wrong?” and think about it. You may be “cutting off your leg” unless you work on the things that are really wrong.

It’s sometimes good to relax for a minute or two after playing the warm-up.

- **TECHNIQUE – THE NEXT 5 MINUTES**

Work scales or challenging technical exercises.

Isolate trouble spots.

Size doesn’t matter - 2 notes or 20, pick out ONLY what needs work.

SPEED KILLS

Practice a section only as quickly as you can perform it correctly.

One time through correctly, even very slowly, is far better than many times poorly.

Great players practice what they do poorly. Most players practice what they do well.

- **FIVE MINUTES IN THE MUSIC – WHERE IT ALL FITS TOGETHER**

LISTEN TO WHAT YOU PLAY.

Isolate larger trouble spots and put together bigger chunks of music

Don’t ignore the TRUE music...dynamics, phrasing, note length, articulations.

Make them happen just as surely as you would the correct fingerings or rhythms.

“Play the ink” - Ask yourself frequently: “Does what I play reflect what’s written on the page?”

A tape recorder is a great tool to answer this question honestly.

You must play AT LEAST what’s written.

- **TAKE FIVE – ENJOY WHAT YOU DO**

Play through something you really like.

Maybe it's a pop tune or a section of the band music that you really enjoy.

Turn on the radio or put on a CD and improvise over the tunes.

DON'T DO THIS UNTIL ALL THE OTHER THINGS ARE DONE.

Enjoy your playing, but feel the sense of accomplishment that comes from having the self-discipline to practice properly and improve the best way each day.

• OTHER THOUGHTS

Though the framework of this practice schedule needs to stay in place, mix up what you do each day. This is particularly true if you do more than 20 minutes in a day.

Scales are always a good exercise.

They're even better if you use your imagination and experiment with how you play them.

Change articulations and rhythms.

Add dynamics - start piano and crescendo to the top. Start forte and decrescendo.

Challenge yourself by trying scales in patterns you've never worked before.

Teach yourself a scale.

Get off the horn.

Sing through a passage. You can think about subtle things like dynamics, phrasing and intonation without worrying about the horn "getting in the way".

Clap and count.

Tizzle.

Write in counting for difficult passages. This is a way of **diagnosing** a rhythm problem.

Look for connections between your technique exercises and your band music.

If you're clever, you will likely find ways to "teach" yourself some of the band music before you ever "work" it in your practice! Use a tough rhythm as part of a scale warm-up.

Look for new music to play.

Write your own.

Make a trip to a local music store and see what's there for your instrument.

Learn a song 'by ear' off the radio.

Ask your band director or other music instructors if they can recommend new music.

Talk a friend into playing duets, trios or other small-group music.

Listen to a pro.

CD recordings of professional players are available in the FVHS Media Center. Check a CD out and listen to it one night while doing your homework. Absorb the tone quality and musicality.

Better yet, go hear a pro in person.

NOTHING replaces knowing what you SHOULD sound like.

PROBLEM-SOLVING 101

IDENTIFY

What is the problem?

DIAGNOSE

How do we solve the problem?

CORRECT

Fix the errors in small pieces.

ASSESSMENT

Is it better than it was before? Is it as good as I want it to be?

CONTEXT

How does this part fit into the bigger picture? (With the ensemble, rest of music)

Consider the BASIC elements of music performance:

PITCH RHYTHM ARTICULATION DYNAMICS TONE COLOR
AIR FLOW EMBOUCHURE TECHNIQUE

Work ONE AT A TIME if necessary. What does this mean?

Rhythm - USE A METRONOME.

Write in counting.

Clap and count.

Tap on chest and "tah" the part.

Pitch - USE A TUNER.

Play one note at a time without rhythm.

Play it down or up an octave so your ear can get used to the pitches.

Brass can buzz pitches on mouthpiece.

Articulation

"Speak" the syllables off the instrument. "Dah-dah-dah".

"Tactile" exercises - Scrape the tip of your tongue. Tongue touch thumb.

Dynamics

Play the first note of the phrase and hold it out. Play the dynamics as written while holding out the single note.

Technique

Finger the exercise slowly to “feel” the passage in your hands.

Air Flow

Tizzle. Is the hiss intense and supported by firm stomach muscles?

Breathing exercises = “In and outs”. Lie on floor and place a book on your stomach. It will rise and fall if you breathe deeply. Roll a piece of paper, place it between your teeth and breathe deeply. Blow up a balloon.

The cold spot - Notice the cool spot on the top of your mouth when you breathe deeply.

Paper pusher - Hold a piece of paper in one spot on the wall using your airstream.

Embouchure

Use a mirror. Sometimes what you can see is different than what you can feel.

Mentally “explain” the job of each part of the embouchure. What’s firm and what’s relaxed?