

POWER PRACTICING

by Eli Epstein

“The quieter you become, the more you can hear.” -Baba Ram Dass

When we practice *we become our own teachers*. Each of us needs to become the kind of teacher we would most like to have: *positive, helpful, challenging but gentle (not overly critical, dull, and repetitive.)* Since most music schools provide a one hour lesson per week, the manner in which we apply what we’ve learned in lessons will have the **greatest** impact on our progress.

Most of us have been practicing the horn from an early age but have never really considered the issue of **work habits and attitudes**. Yet our work habits are what shape us as musicians. Without getting too intellectual, I think it helps to think of practicing as programming computer software. Every time we play anything we’re telling our brains, *“This is how I want to do this every time.”* Have you ever noticed, if you hit the wrong harmonic in a passage once, it has a tendency to happen again, if you play it through without correcting it first? When we correct in an immediate and effective way, our brains think, *“Oh, that’s how s/he wants it, I’ll do that from now on.”*

When we practice we’re developing **muscular memory**, much like when we learn to drive a stick-shift car. At first driving a stick-shift seems impossible, but after a couple of weeks our feet, legs, hands and arms seem to know what to do without us consciously thinking about every motion. **Muscular memory** gives us the ability to let go in a performance, let our bodies do what we have taught them so well, and enjoy the ride.

Our minds constantly need new angles to stay interested and attentive. The traditional idea of practice is to repeat and repeat until you get it right. The mind hates this method. When we practice the same passage over and over again the same way, our minds turn off after a few repetitions and we start making mistakes. When we continuously provide our minds with new angles to look at a difficult passage, the mind is forced to pay close attention. It thinks, *“S/he is doing something different here, I better watch carefully.”* So, the more we can mix things up while practicing, the more focused our mind is and the more effective and efficient our practicing becomes. The following are some **good techniques** to achieve high quality work:

Take a few minutes to unwind before a practice session. Here is a relaxation technique that works for me. Use this as a starting point. *Experiment and develop your own process to achieve a relaxed state before practice.*

- Place your feet flat on the floor, get comfortable in your chair, and close your eyes.
- Breathe in through your nose for three counts and out through your mouth for four long counts.

- Notice the difference between the sound of the breath coming in and the sound going out.
- Repeat this several times.
- Open your eyes slowly.
- Leave the day's distractions behind you, and begin your practice session with a fresh mind.

Play passages in s l o w m o t i o n the first time through. This is much more efficient than running through a passage at tempo and then having to go back and correct many things. *It's the first impression of a new passage that is the most lasting one to our brains.* Use a metronome at a slow tempo to provide structure.

Sing (out loud) passages with vowel syllables and expression before you play them. This gives your face a break, and helps focus your mind quickly.

Focus on where your tongue is striking. Many wrong harmonics are played because the tongue is not in the right place. (See "The Vowels and Approximate Points of Contact for the Tongue" chart.) Go through a difficult passage (like the opening of Till Eulenspiegel) and slowly review where your tongue needs to go. Then try it slowly on your instrument.

Analyze what happened. When mistakes are made, we need to go back and solve the problem. We need to ask ourselves a series of questions: *Was I tonguing in the right place? Was I singing the right pitch in my mind? Was I using the right air speed? Did I breathe deeply enough? Am I leading with the air? Am I using the right liquid or vowel? Etc.*

Use a **metronome** (and really pay attention to it!) at least 70% of the time to **develop a strong inner pulse**, and maintain a demanding practice atmosphere.

Change rhythmic patterns while using a metronome. This is one of the most effective techniques for getting the brain to pay attention. For example:

change  or  to  or .

change  to  or  or .

Stop on the note that feels unsure. This helps our minds become sure about an awkward leap or an unusual turn of phrase.

Play loud passages quietly. For example, quietly play the first theme of Beethoven Symphony #7, first movement. Produce a clear and steady rhythm; make sure the tongue is touching the right spots; air speed is correct; then, when all other aspects are in place, add the volume.

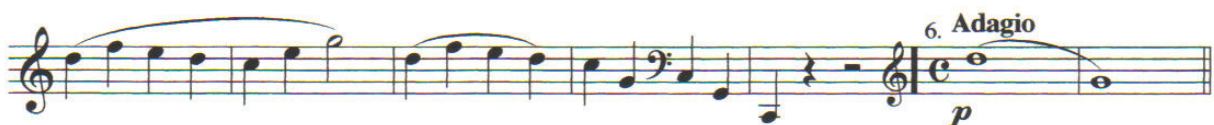
Practice with eyes open, then eyes closed. When we close our eyes, we hear more keenly. Also, *the passages or notes our minds are less sure of become clearer.* We can go to those specific places and practice them slowly and carefully. We then close our eyes again and see how we do. Every passage is very deeply learned when we go through this process. It's an excellent way to prepare for auditions.

Work *sdrawkcab*. Most people start practicing at the beginning of the first movement of a given piece. Try starting at the last section of the last movement and work backwards in sections. *This keeps the mind interested and helps us learn each piece thoroughly.* Our concentration is best at the beginning of practice, so working backwards or from the middle ensures that all passages will be given equal concentration.

We can do this with excerpts as well. Look at the Beethoven *Fidelio* example. Break the excerpt into short segments. Start with the last segment and work backwards. The openings of Strauss's *Ein Heldenleben* and *Till Eulenspiegel* lend themselves well to this method.

Beethoven: *Fidelio* Overture

Horn in E



Use a tuner regularly. Tuners give us objective feedback about intonation just as metronomes give us feedback about tempo and rhythm. Many of the professionals I work with are always checking their pitch on a tuner. *Intonation can be elusive and tricky.* When playing long tones in our warm-up, check on the intonation tendency each pitch has. Does the pitch go up or down when you get louder or softer? How can it be adjusted? Try hearing the correct pitch in your mind before you play it into the tuner. How does it line up? Often we need to recalibrate our inner hearing with a good standard. If you don't have a tuner, try checking your pitch with a well-tuned piano.

Record Thyself. Since our ears, nose and mouth are connected to the horn, *we don't really hear ourselves the same way the audience does.* It's the same phenomenon that happens when we hear a recording of our own voice. The usual reaction is, "I don't sound like that!" The process of learning how our playing sounds to a listener takes time, patience, and good feedback. We want to make sure that our sound is projected and clearly articulated to the audience. *Staccato articulation sounds much shorter to the player than it does to the listener.* A decent recording device can give us objective feedback about many aspects of our playing that we can't always hear in practice. It's like having a second set of ears. But like everything, *use moderation* in recording.

Practice the opposites. *We need to always keep our playing in balance.* Sometimes this is difficult when we have to play repertoire chosen by others (in an orchestral job or at school). When we find ourselves playing soft and sensitive Mozart Symphonies one week, we need to balance our practice with powerful Mahler parts or Strauss Concerti. When we are playing Mahler Symphonies, we can balance by practicing Mozart concerti at home. When we are playing high all the time, we need to balance with Bach Cello Suites, for example. When playing low all the time, we can balance with high repertoire, such as Bach Cantata #79 or Brandenburg Concerto #1. This is a tried and true principle espoused by many **legendary brass players.**

Exercise! The best professional horn players I know do regular aerobic exercise. *Being physically fit and toned in the abdominal area makes deep breathing and breath support much more natural, and leads to stronger sound production and better accuracy.* If you have three hours to practice, it would be more effective to practice for 2 1/2 hours and use the remaining time for exercise.

Always warm-up and cool down. The horn section members in my orchestra are the first to show up at a recording session. The warm-up reminds our bodies about the basics on a daily basis. The best way to **stay injury-free** is to practice a daily routine such as the one in this booklet. The facial muscles are relatively small and need to be finely tuned. **Think of athletes** who stretch and tone their bodies before any practice or event, and then stretch again afterwards, so they're flexible the next day.

Seek out a room that is comfortable to play in. The room should be free from distraction and interruption, and acoustically *not too resonant but not too dry*. We need accurate acoustical feedback from the room in which we regularly play.

Keep a notebook. Enter detailed notes about what you learned in your lesson or class. You can then refer to the journal throughout the week. You may be surprised at what you wrote down.

Regularity of practice is of utmost importance. It's much better to practice 1 1/2 hours every day, than three hours every other day. Daily practice is the path to strength, consistency and enjoyment. The daily warm-up in this book will maintain basic strength and technique over tours and vacations. If you need a light day, just do the warm-up.

Practice when you are physically and mentally rested. Effective practicing takes a surprising amount of mental energy. If we're too tired, the practice session may negatively effect the other good work we've done.

Stop practicing before your face gets overtired. One of my teachers used to say, "*Always do 99% of your physical capacity, never 101%.*" Negative habits tend to crop up and take hold when we practice tired.

Involve the artist side of your brain. Although it's good to be analytical about technical matters, don't lose sight of the fact that *we are artists, not machines*. Sometimes a technical problem can be overcome by singing a phrase out loud. ***When our brain knows what the musical goal is, it finds a way to reach that goal.*** This is very important.

Emulate great singers and string players. Listen to lots of recordings; go to lots of concerts. When working on Mozart Concerti, listen to Mozart opera arias for examples of his vocal style. When working on Strauss Concerti, listen to Wagner and Strauss operas. See how artists, other than brass players, convey the moods in those great works.

Develop a vision of how you ultimately want to sound. *What does your dream horn player sound like? What words would you use to describe the ideal horn sound? Articulation? Classical expression? Romantic expression? Low register? High register? Legato? Etc.* Now, go for it!

Perform the impossible. The way we improve as players is by stretching ourselves beyond what may seem possible on the horn. *How can I make this legato as smooth as a clarinetist? How can I slur up to a high note and diminuendo like that great singer I heard? How can I sound as powerful and warm as Fischer-Dieskau, when I play this Brahms solo? How can I make my lip trills sound like a great soprano singing Mozart? How can I sing through my instrument?*

Let's be encouraging and positive with ourselves.

When your teacher or conductor is saying, "That sounded terrible, you had better shape up," it tends to make one feel anxious and uptight, and negatively affects our playing and attitude. What if your teacher said, "*Okay, you're doing very well, there's just a couple things we need to address. First of all...*" This method allows the player to make the necessary adjustments from a positive foundation, and those are adjustments that permanently take hold. Yet many of us talk to ourselves in a negative way when we practice. I think it's very important to learn to be gentle, encouraging, challenging teachers to ourselves. *This is what empowers us as players.*

Build the foundation brick by brick. Every time we practice well we build on every other effective practice session. *Before we know it we've had hundreds of good, positive practice sessions.* Our brain retains this excellent work and we develop a solid, reliable, focused, positive approach that leaves us free to express ourselves and sing on the horn.

Aristotle said, "**Whatever we repeat, that is what we become.**" If we *regularly infuse quality, artistry, and gentleness* in our daily practice, our playing becomes full of consistency, beauty, and confidence.

"Mistakes are your best friends. They bring a message. They tell you what to do next and light the way. They come about because you have not understood something, or have learned something incompletely. They tell you that you are moving too fast, or looking in the wrong direction.

Mistakes might be detailed instructions on how to take apart and rewire physical motions, muscle by muscle. Or they might show you where you have not heard clearly, where you have to open up the music and listen again in a new way.

Examine a mistake as if you had found a rare stone. Run over the edges of it with your tongue. Peer inside the cracks of it. Hold it up to the sun, turning it this way and that. When you have learned what you can from it, toss it away casually, as if you didn't expect to see it again. If it shows up later, be patient and polite, and make a new accommodation. A mistake knows when it isn't needed, and eventually will leave for good.

The goal is not to make music free of mistakes. The goal is to be complete in learning, and to grow well."

- W.A. Mathieu. *The Listening Book*. Boston and London: Shambhala, 1991.