

Practice Smarter, Not Harder

by Dennis Winge

In his book, *How Champions Think*, Dr. Bob Rotella, talks about how the perception that sheer hard work is the sole key to success in golf is a myth. He cites Ben Hogan as a golfer who became very successful, and was known for his hard work. But when Dr. Rotella met Ben Hogan, he learned of a strategy that Hogan used to make his practice routine a lot more like a real round of golf. So in the end, Hogan was practicing smarter, not harder.

Rotella then talks about how most modern coaches have embraced this idea in managing their teams, and the chapter ends with, "Work very hard at reaching your goals, especially when you're young. But as you get older, keep in mind that to continue to rise, you have to work smarter, more efficiently, more strategically. And when it's time to go home, leave your work at the office."

This may be all well and good for work and for sports, but how does it apply to practicing music? There are many answers, and here are four possibilities:

I Practice the hardest parts only

When I used to play off-Broadway shows, I would circle the passages that gave me the most trouble, and the day before the show, rather than go through the whole book, I would only flip through and practice the hardest parts. Too many musicians, when they reach a hard part, will simply sigh, and start over. The danger of this is that you are strengthening the beginning part of the song, and not really strengthening the hard part that trips you up.

If you've ever heard a classical orchestra warming up in the ten minutes that precede a concert, it sounds like cacophony. What those musicians are actually doing is practicing the hardest parts of the scroll they are about to read. There are even times where practicing a difficult passage, which is technically demanding, can serve as both a technical warm-up and a rehearsal for the reading of the passage. That is smart practice indeed.

II Simulate a real performance situation

If you are practicing for a gig, consider doing things like standing up while you play, or playing to a recording of the music. If it's a gig that features original music from your band, for example, you could record a rehearsal where there are no mistakes, and practice to it at home. You could simply pretend there is an audience when you practice, or you could turn on the video camera, which will force you to treat it like a performance. Then you can watch your performance later (not immediately), evaluate

where your mistakes were, and then go back to step one of practicing only those parts. It may also be possible for you to do an open mic, or perform just for a few friends or family members, to get you ready for the live performance that you are rehearsing for. If you are not yet a gigging musician, you can still use many of these techniques, and simply pretend that you will be performing this in front of people. It will help you iron out the kinks a lot faster.

III Manage your time

Decide ahead of time how much time you will practice for any given section. Shoot for consistency rather than duration. Twenty minutes per day, 6 days per week, is a lot more effective than two hours in one day per week, even though it's the same amount of time. Suppose you decide that you are going to practice for one hour. You can set a kitchen timer, and if you do get interrupted for any reason, you simply pause the timer, so you make sure you get 60 solid minutes on your instrument. You can also do a 45 minute on, 15 minute off cycle. Taking breaks is good, especially when you are concentrating. During the 15 minutes, you may allow yourself to goof-off on the instrument, or simply step away and do something different, but limit it to 15 minutes.

IV Divide what you are working on into categories

An easy way to divide music practice is into harmony, rhythm, and melody. Harmony can be things such as chord vocabulary, switching between certain chords, adding extensions to chords, triads, voice leading, re-harmonization, transposition, etc. Melody practice could be sight reading, playing riffs (either famous ones, or ones you write yourself), guitar soloing, or use of melodic motives, etc. Rhythm, of course, involves harmony and melody, but is a study in and of itself. This could include playing with a metronome, playing the rhythm of the piece without worrying about the notes (as in, for example just muting the fretting hand on guitar and only concentrating on the picking hand), and many more possibilities.

Ultimately, the point about practicing smarter, not harder, means to know exactly what you are practicing at any given moment, and to only practice *one thing at a time*. Even if it's the same song that you are practicing for all three categories, alternate your focus to the aspects of harmony, rhythm and melody, on its own.

For example, you could play the chords and switch between the chords of the song for 20 minutes, then do only the notes or riffs in the song for 20 minutes, slowly and accurately without concern for rhythm. Finally, you could use the remaining 20 minutes of your one-hour practice time to do everything in the song, in time, either at the desired tempo, or a slower tempo that is appropriate for you in that particular moment. Stick to that tempo no matter what happens, even if your performance is far from perfect. You can always go back and work on the transitions later.

These are examples of practicing smarter, not harder. Just by asking yourself, "How can I practice smarter, not harder," you will come up with answers virtually every time. Good luck, and have fun.