

The Fly on the Wall in Your Practice Room

by Dennis Winge

Have you ever wondered what your teacher, or former teacher, would say if they were a fly on the wall while you practiced? There have been many articles on how to practice that I've seen, and yet every time I have asked a student to practice in front of me during a lesson for five minutes, I almost invariably come up with the exact same advice, no matter who it is. So it seems that yet another article on practicing is in order, because I keep saying the same things day after day, week after week, year after year.

1. Discipline yourself to practice in time. In other words, slow it down and make yourself play it slow enough that you can do the whole piece without stopping. It doesn't have to be perfect, but if you're playing the whole piece entirely through with 80 to 90% accuracy, then that is in and of itself a wonderful thing. If the mistakes are made in the same place every time, then we will discuss that in number 2. But if the mistakes are in different areas of the song, and you can play it all the way through without stopping 2 or 3 times, that is good use of your practice time.

(In Kenny Werner's "Effortless Mastery" he talks about playing effortlessly and then choosing 2 out of 3 things at any one time – playing in time, playing perfectly, and playing the whole piece. I am recommending that you play the piece in time the whole way through. Perfection will be addressed later. For now, just note that you play the song you are working on with a metronome so you don't speed up on the easy parts or lose your place during the harder bits. In fact, you would ideally write down the tempo, and try to increase it. We will get to that in the next point.)

2. Zero in on the harder sections first, and get them up to tempo. There will naturally be sections of the song that will be harder than others. According to point 1, you will want to play the whole piece at a single tempo. But you can't play the whole piece any faster than you can play the hardest sections. So rather than dragging the tempo of the whole piece down and making you bored while you play the easy parts, only work on the hard parts first, and get them up to whatever tempo you can that day. Then, go back and play the whole piece at that tempo. In other words, you are catering the overall tempo to your ability to play the hardest sections within that tune.

3. Be creative with harder material. For example, if you are practicing switching between two different chords that is not coming out as cleanly as you would like them to, you could double all the values. In other words, if your song is, let's say, one bar of C and one bar of F minor, you could simply practice it in the same tempo, but make it two bars of C and two bars of F minor. This is just one small example of creativity that can be used to practice harder material. You don't always have to practice the same thing the same way. It would be better if you would try to look at the big picture and ask yourself, what exactly is the nature of the struggle here, and how can I make it more fun to zero in on that? Just by asking the question, you will automatically come up with ideas you haven't thought of before.

4. Concentrate on one specific thing at a time for a short period of time. Let's use our example about the chord switching. The C to F minor is really driving you nuts, and you decide that you are going to make it two beats per chord just to really nail it, but it also makes your hand ache when you do it a lot. So you simply decide to do it for one minute. One minute might actually seem like a long time while you're doing it, but it's not that long in real life. So you set the timer, and you practice it with complete focus, knowing that after that minute, you're done and your hand can rest. During that minute, you practice full-on, and relax as much as possible at the same time. That one minute is potentially more effective than an hour of doing it some other way with less focus and less attention. The kitchen timer is a great tool for practicing. Get one with a magnet on it, and it will stick right on the music stand.

5. Implement with something fun. This means that once you practice a certain concept or technique, then immediately put it to use. Let's say you're doing your C to F minor example, as above. How about creating a backing track with C and F minor on a program like Band in a Box? We will talk about technology in the next point, but for now, it's time to have some fun, maybe use something like a Digitech Trio, where you will play the chords, and then make the base and drum line to accompany you, and now you're rocking out in Madison Square Garden, at least in your imagination, rather than slaving over two chords in your bedroom.

6. Use technology wisely. Yes, technology is great, and you can really use it to your advantage in practicing. See my other article in this topic. But also, don't let it distract you. If you spend more time on the computer than you do on your instrument, that is not time well spent. I have a friend who is a wonderful concert flutist, but every time she gets an idea, she always wants to make a perfect working chart in Finale. It's almost as if she's addicted to the appearance of the music, and I believe that because it sometimes sacrifices her time on the instrument, the actual execution of the music suffers. Be careful that this doesn't happen to you.

7. Keep clear notes so that you can pick up where you left off on a different day. For example, you got your C and F minor chords up to 80 beats per minute at one bar per chord. If you write this down specifically with the date, the vamp that you used, and the tempo marking, you can easily pick that up on a different day without having to figure out where you left off. The importance of this cannot be overstated. Going back to the book, "Winning with Integrity" by Joe Nameth, his sixth step to "Practice with a Purpose" is to keep a performance journal. He mentions that you can put emotional things in here, such as celebrating your victories, or enduring the suffering of your shortcomings. But in general, he means keeping an actual log of what you worked on, and what you need to work on, and ideas for future practice. You will save so much time here.

All the best and good luck.