

Music Matters

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Become Your Own Best Teacher: A Guide for the College Music Major

- *Dr. Lisa Garner-Santa*

Discovering the Teacher Within

Having a teacher who is knowledgeable and inspired is an important component to staying motivated, but ultimately the motivation to develop as an artist must come from within. As a student you will be responsible for guiding your learning. You will have opportunities to choose activities that support your growth, seek knowledge that supports your interests, and practice in ways which develop your own unique sense of musical expression. You will spend a few hours a week under the guidance of your applied teacher, but you will spend the other 165 hours (minus 56 hours, give or take a few, for sleep!) of the week being your own best teacher. It is important to understand that progress and

growth in any discipline is the responsibility of the one engaged in it. Your external teacher can provide inspiration, enthusiasm, perspective, and other types of input, but ultimately it is the teacher within that must process and apply that input, supplement it with additional material (listening, research, individual inquiry), and evaluate and re-evaluate progress and purpose. Knowing your intentions and following through with consistent action is an important aspect of the creative process and is necessary to efficiently and effectively develop technical skill and musical creativity. However, it is also equally important to understand and accept that technical and creative goals may change as you learn more about the process and about your unique self.

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Staying Motivated

“Know Thyself!”

In order to stay motivated to practice, it's a good idea to reflect on what has motivated you to this point, the point where you have decided to pursue music as a career, and to invite those aspects into your planning. Here are some questions that may help you discover what sorts of things inspire you to practice. This is by no means an exhaustive inquiry. Invite additional reflection. Write your responses down and share them with your teacher.

What is it about music that has led you to pursue it as a career?

When do you feel inspired to practice?

What time of day do you enjoy practicing?

Where do you enjoy practicing?

How long can you practice without losing interest?

If you were registered for an upcoming competition or audition, would you feel inspired to practice?

If you had a recital or performance date planned in a few weeks would you feel inspired to practice?

If you had a technical or musical goal for the week would you be inspired to meet it?

If you had a date with a practice partner would you be inspired to practice?

Are you intrigued learning new pieces?

Do you enjoy uncovering and discovering musical details by applying techniques of music theory?

Do you enjoy reading about the historical context in which a work was written?

Which musical artists do you find inspiring? (Don't limit your answers to flutists or to classical musicians.) What is it about their performances that inspires you?

Do you have other ideas or thoughts about what motivates you?

Set Mindful Goals

As a university teacher in Texas, I often find that I am assisting students with recovery from “All-State Syndrome.” This disease manifests itself in the individual as the tendency to directly relate self-worth to the placement outcomes of auditions. Audition placement (for example “winning first chair”) has been the primary motivator throughout the development of many young flutists. It has earned them recognition through achievement (certainly a worthy reward) and has probably given them many opportunities for “sparkle time” (those moments when they get the big solo in the orchestra or band. And honestly, who doesn't love and need a little “sparkle time”?!). But choosing a career in music really requires a completely different mindset. At some point you will reach the top, the place where you've won first chair (or a chair) in an orchestra, the place where you are the music educator (the one chartering the bus for the band trips instead of the one on the bus goofing off), or perhaps some other career place that provides “job security.”

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Chair tests and auditions will be a thing of the past. So, without the audition, what is going to be the motivating factor to practice? Music is not a competitive sport (just think of what would happen to an ensemble if everyone were vying for higher, faster, and louder) but a collaborative art (interaction with others, both musicians and audience, to create a musical experience). A shift must happen. To be successful (and happy) in a career in music you have to shift from attachment to winning to an acceptance of the creative process, which by the way, never ends. That's what makes it so wonderful! Take on the responsibility of becoming a great "artist," not only a great "instrumentalist or singer." What does that mean? Well, reflecting on that statement will lead you to some interesting thoughts, and most likely questions, about your own ideas related to musical artistry.

So with all of this in mind, is competition a bad thing? Not at all. Performance opportunities motivate us (or at least the majority of us) to practice, and it is only through practice (whether physical or mental) that we can nurture our abilities to create, to get outside of our "music box" so to speak. Using competitions, from placement auditions to young artist competitions, as performance deadlines has great value. You just have to be thoughtful about setting mindful goals related to competitions.

"Winning" an audition or competition as a "goal" can certainly be motivating. This is what drives athletic performance. We can all confirm that by watching a few moments of any year's Olympic Games. However, being too attached to winning can cause feelings of defeat and, if winning is generally the only

goal, losing can have a significant and detrimental impact on self-esteem. Realize that "winning" as a goal places much of your success in the perception and/or judgment of others.

Lets look at a standard flute placement audition as an example. You've "worked really hard" on the audition material with the aim of "winning first chair!" As expected you are a little nervous as you walk into the room (which was much colder than expected) and behind "the screen" (unfortunate because you love interacting with your audience). You play, in your opinion, very well (even though the cold temperature did impact the intonation on the opening slow excerpt). You feel good about your performance. After the results are posted, you notice that you are listed as third chair instead of first chair. Because you didn't win first chair, your stated goal, you view the experience as a failure and become resentful of those who placed ahead of you. You feel bad about your audition and the audition process.

What happened? Well, Judge #1 liked your beautiful tone and had you placed 1st because tone means everything to Judge #1. Judge #2 docked you for a lack of rhythmic precision and had you placed 3rd. Judge #3 prefers a thicker tone with more edge and also felt that your issues with intonation were significant and placed you 5th. Is Judge #1 right and Judge #5 wrong? Or vice versa? Well, there is no right or wrong. Each judge has different preferences and perceptions based on their individual experiences with music, and you, whether you like it or not, can't control any of that. You can only offer the performance you have prepared and choose to accept the outcome, whatever that may be.

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Let's look at the same audition from a different perspective. Let's say the goal is "to perform the audition with a beautiful tone" rather than "winning." For you this is a big deal because you are incorporating an embouchure change. You have patiently worked through the airy uncontrolled sound that often accompanies the beginning of such a courageous process and now you are starting to reap the rewards. Your tone is what you consider beautiful (clear, full, and free) but you are still working with refinement in regard to intonation. Although you were nervous, you didn't revert to the old embouchure under pressure. You focused on keeping the embouchure working but relaxed and were able to totally "get into" the sound you were creating. When the results are posted, you see that you placed 3rd. That will offer you the opportunity to perform with the top ensemble. That will be very exciting. You perceive the experience as a great success.

Rather than using winning as THE motivator in your practice, a better option would be to mindfully set attainable, skill related goals in combination with your creative goals. And, is it possible to view everyone as a "first chair?" Is there a limit on the number of people that can play the right notes in the right places, beautifully in tune, in the right style, with a great sound and full of heart? Absolutely not! Anyone who has the patience and perseverance to develop the qualities of a great musician can. This is known as abundance mentality.

Summon Intention as a Guide to the Creative Process

Acknowledging your intentions for your practice can be a very powerful tool. Basically, it is useful (perhaps even pertinent) to know

why you are practicing, beyond the fact that your teacher told you to do so. Below are some questions to help you clarify the intention of your practice sessions. Revisit your intentions frequently. Watch how they serve you and how they change. Also be willing to let them go and create new ones if you discover they are no longer serving you. Consider both long-term and short-term intentions. Be as specific as possible.

What are your long-term musical intentions? (Basically, what do you want to be when you grow up? Go ahead and dream big!)

What are your musical intentions for the semester? (Specific areas you'd like to develop, recitals, repertoire, competitions if that appeals to you, articles to read or write, recordings to listen to or make...anything goes, don't limit your responses.)

What are your musical intentions for the week?

What are your musical intentions for today's practice session?

Developing a Personalized Daily Routine

I am often asked by students, "How long should I be practicing everyday?" My initial response is "Fantastic! You are practicing every day!" It is common knowledge that several periods of shorter practice spaced at close intervals are more beneficial than, single long, isolated periods of practice. 30 minutes a day produces much better results than a single 3½-hour session once a week. Now don't get too excited; I'm not suggesting that 30 minutes a day is a sufficient amount of practice time for a college music major. While 30 minutes a day yields very quick results for a beginner and may have even served you in high school, in order to develop the technical

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skills, creative insight, and musical intuition to succeed in a career in music, it is going to take a bit more (no, A LOT more) of a daily commitment.

This time in the life of a developing musician is often referred to as “paying dues.” So, how long should you be practicing everyday? There is no hard and fast rule about this. How much you “should” practice everyday will depend on what your individual goals and intentions are and how efficient you are in your practice.

If you are smart about how you organize your practice time, you may be able to accomplish in one hour what would take someone else, disorganized and mindless in his or her practice, three or more hours. That is why creating intention, as part of the practice process (knowing why you are practicing) is so very important. The amount of time you practice will be unique to you and more than likely it will change over a period of time (increase for some, decrease for others).

However, it is wise to set aside specific times for your practice. The body and mind respond well to routine. You are more likely to develop consistency with your practice if you have regularly scheduled practice times. It is also best to break your practice up into two to three sessions a day, rather than to have one long session once a day. There are a couple of interesting scientific studies that support this. One is that memory retention is best if the input is repeated within 6 hours. (Optimally, you would schedule your practice sessions 6 hours apart, for example 8am, 2pm, and 8pm.) Another is that the ears’ ability to discern fine pitch differences diminishes greatly after 15 minutes. (Ever wonder why the pitch seems to spread in the orchestra pit by the end of a 3-hour opera?) Taking short

breaks during your practice session can be beneficial for this reason among many others. Try to have at least a 5-minute break every 30 minutes. Insert short stretching and breathing breaks to keep the body and mind clear of physical and mental tension.

So I still haven’t given you any answers to, “How long should I be practicing everyday?” Well, as mentioned, there are no definitive answers, but I do have some guidelines that I will suggest. For a music education major I suggest 2 hours a day and for a music performance major I suggest 4 hours a day. For some of you these numbers will seem high and for others they will seem low. It will depend on what your current commitment is, as well as, how efficient you are in your practice. I will say that there have been many times when I’ve asked a student, “So, how is your practice going? Are you getting in four hours a day?” and I get a blank stare in response, followed by, “I just don’t have that much stuff to practice. What do I do with four hours of time?” That is a great question. You don’t want to be watching the clock as you hold the flute up to your face just filling time to meet a perceived practice time requirement. (You might as well just put the flute in its case and go watch the sunset. That would be more productive!)

But, filling two to four hours of time is actually not that hard to do, not if you are really mindful about what and how you are practicing. The time will fly by if you are engaged in your practice, and if you are not, then you need to be looking into why.

Here are some basic guidelines for a two and four hour practice. Remember, that you can break these up into any combination to create shorter practice sessions, and you can extend or reduce the time in any area to meet the personal intentions of your practice. Don’t forget to include active listening, score study,

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and historical research or other hands off approaches to developing musicianship. These all count as practice too. (However, ensemble rehearsal doesn't really count as personal practice, though it is an incredibly important part of our musical growth.)

Music Education Major General 2-Hour Practice

Tone Development/Intonation	10 minutes
Vibrato	5 minutes
Articulation	5 minutes
Technique	30 minutes
Repertoire	40 minutes
Etudes/Excerpts	20 minutes (This can include ensemble music)
Sight Reading	10 minutes

Music Performance Major General 4-Hour Practice

Tone Development/Intonation	20 Minutes
Vibrato	5 minutes
Articulation	15 minutes
Technique	60 minutes
Repertoire	90 minutes
Etudes/Excerpts	40 minutes (This can include ensemble music)
Sight Reading	10 minutes

Based on the reading and inquiries above, build your weekly practice schedule and individual daily practice routine. Consider what motivates you, what times of day you enjoy practicing (realize that you may have to practice occasionally at your least favorite times), what your schedule will accommodate, and what your long and short term musical intentions are. Be as specific as possible.

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