

## Deliberate Practice

By Katherine Baird

Parents of children who are learning music often say, “My child plays something several times and thinks he’s finished with practicing. How can I help him work more carefully and spend longer in the practice room?”

The best music teachers know that mindful and correct repetitions are key to significant progress on an instrument. Here are some specific strategies for effective practicing that can be applied to any level of student in any music classes, whether piano lessons, violin lessons, or choir, whatever.

**Set a weekly and daily practice goal for each scale, etude, piece and any drills assigned for the next lesson.**

After your weekly music lessons, determine what your goals are for next lesson, then break down each day’s practice into smaller goals that are the foundation for the bigger weekly goal.

Examples:

- **Skill Drill** If the cello (or violin) teacher wants fingers to move before the bow in Perpetual Motion, then determine a number of times to “micro-practice” this skill. Isolate two measures and practice the two measures with fingers before bow that many times each day for three days. The fourth day aim for fingers before bow but at a faster tempo. Another skill drill could be developing a sense of breath control in voice lessons or choir class. Set a number of times between 5-10 to correctly repeat a breath control exercise.
- **Dynamics** Let’s say the teacher wants clearer crescendo and decrescendo in various phrases. Strategize note-by-note the increase or decrease in volume for each note or series of notes. As an example, in mm. 5-6 and like measures in Bourrée by G. F. Handel, each group of four eighth notes would be practiced under tempo with bigger sound on each consecutive group, and a clear quarter note rest between each group so that the new dynamic can be planned and executed:



- **Learning a New Piece** When learning a new piece, determine how many measures of the piece you will master by the next lesson (this may have been set by your teacher). First day practice slowly until you can play through fluently at a slow tempo. Each day have a new goal tempo that will lead you to a tempo that’s appropriate for the piece by the next lesson. If we use Bourrée as an example again, on day one I may practice at 90=quarter note. My goal on day one is to be able to play the determined section easily all the way through at 90. I spend as much time as I need getting it there. If my goal tempo is 130, then each of the days I practice I’ll increase my speed 6 notches each day.
- **Mastering Velocity in a Fast Passage** Suppose there is a passage of music that needs to be at 120 on the metronome and you’re presently able to do it at 60. Practicing in rhythms are a musician’s go-to for developing muscle memory and speed. Here are a few rhythms, and making up more complex ones will flex the brain and body skills even further:



For each rhythm, aim for 5-10 correct repetitions for each rhythm, every day, upping the metronome marking each time.

- **Tone Development** Spend 5-10 minutes of each practice session working on tone development. How to do this varies from instrument to instrument, so ask your teacher for ideas.

**Additional ideas for focus on a variety of one's assignments could include:**

- ✓ Intonation work (practicing with a drone is extremely useful. There are apps that offer this, such as Tuneable®)
- ✓ For strings, shifting and vibrato development
- ✓ Memorization
- ✓ Comparing and contrasting different interpretations of your piece(s)

Sometimes I set a timer for a specific number of minutes for each segment of practice: in an hour's worth of time I recommend to students at an intermediate level 5 minutes on tonalization, 5 minutes on scales, 10 minutes on etudes, 15-20 minutes on polishing piece, and 10 minutes on supplemental. This of course depends on what needs most priority.

Connect with other parents, and you teacher, for ideas on how to practice efficiently and effectively. In particular, this may be helpful to new beginning Suzuki students and parents as they learn how to practice well. This creates a foundation for success!

Remember, effort creates motivation. Happy practicing!