

## **Tips for Effective and Efficient Practicing.**

### **From the Liz Leehey Clarinet Studio**

#### **Get Focused for your practice session.**

Set up in a quiet room away from distractions - turn off the computer, TV, cell phone. Gather all of your equipment (instrument, music, reeds, pencil, metronome, etc.) *before* you begin to practice so that you won't have to stop to get something (like a pencil) once you have begun. Position your music stand high enough so that your head remains level as you are reading the music. If you are sitting, use a chair that has a hard, flat seat (not a soft seat or one that slopes down in the back). Make sure your lighting is good and that the room temperature is moderate. (Extremes of room temperature can affect your instrument and reed).

Set a reasonable practice goal for each practice session and for the week. Review your current assignment or audition/performance deadline and pace yourself throughout the week. Keep a practice log to help you keep track of your assignments, goals and deadlines.

#### **Warm up.**

Get your reed vibrating properly. Wet your reed either in your mouth or in a small cup of water. Be sure not to over-soak your reed as it can become waterlogged. Flatten out the tip of your reed before you put it on your mouthpiece - *flatten the tip even if it looks flat*. (Do this by placing the tip of your wet reed horizontally on the flat part of your mouthpiece. Using your thumb, rub the reed towards the tip in the direction of the grain.)

Begin with a few MF sustained notes. Start with an easy note like 1<sup>st</sup> line E. (Avoid starting on a resistant note like 3<sup>rd</sup> line B). As you play the note, listen to the quality of the sound that your reed is producing. Is it clear or fuzzy? Evaluate the resistance of the reed to your air column. Is it easy or hard to produce a sound? Play a few more MF sustained notes in each of the registers to continue to get a feel of how the reed is responding. Then try tonguing a scale - choose an easy scale such as a 2 or 3 octave F scale so that your focus will be on *evaluating the reed* and not on fingerings and notes. If the reed is not responding the way you would like it to, try repositioning the reed on the mouthpiece and see if this affects the response or sound. Also experiment with the position of your ligature (lower or higher on the mouthpiece). If none of these adjustments work, try another reed.

(Note - discussion of adjusting reeds with sandpaper /reed knives will be in a future article).

Intermediate and advanced students: Once you have a reed that is responding well, do some voicing exercises to "wake up" your internal embouchure. (See my article "**Warming up your internal embouchure**" for a discussion on voicing exercises).

## Scales.

Next, play a few scales - SLOWLY at first. Start with ones that you know well and progress to more challenging scales - include majors and minors. Once you are secure with the notes and fingerings, you can gradually increase speed. *Don't speed up until your fingers know where they are going.* If you are proficient in your scales, continue with arpeggios, or work from one of the scale study books such as the Albert or Baermann scale books. As you become more proficient in scales and arpeggios, your sight reading will improve and you will find that you are able to learn pieces easily and quickly.

## Etudes.

After scales, continue on to your etude. We work on etudes to develop the skills needed for bringing the fullest musical expression to our pieces.

Avoid starting at the beginning of the etude and playing through to the end with a lot of mistakes. When you make a mistake - STOP and THINK! Use a pencil to mark you music with accidentals or other reminders. Avoid repeating mistakes. *Once you've played something incorrectly a few times, you've learned it incorrectly.*

There are many techniques for practicing technical passages. Here are just a few:

- Divide challenging passages into smaller sections - as small as needed to play without any errors. Play the small section multiple times CORRECTLY. Gradually expand the section until you can play an entire phrase correctly. Then practice the phrase multiple times CORRECTLY. Practice only thoughtful repetitions - never play mindless repetitions. Proceed through the entire etude this way. Practicing in the manner takes patience and discipline, and will give you good results quickly.
- Alter the rhythm of the passage. Example:



There are many more ways to alter the rhythm of a passage. Experiment and have fun with it.

- Play it backwards. Example:



- Play the rhythm with easier notes.



- Use a “practice fermata”. Note exactly where the difficulty is and place the practice fermata on the note before the difficulty. While you are holding the fermata note, THINK about where your fingers need to go for the next note. Example:



- Play the passage SLOWLY. Use a metronome to guide you. *Slow practicing will enable you to play fast.*

If you find yourself becoming distracted or frustrated, STOP and take a 5 minute break. Get up and move around. This will help to refocus you.

Besides notes, rhythms and articulations, think about the dynamics, breathing and character of each phrase. (For a detailed discussion of this, see my article “Making music out of the notes”).

After practicing passages, practice run-throughs of the entire etude. This will help you build endurance of embouchure, breathing, and mental focus. Evaluate your run-through to see what is needed for your next passage practice. Have you played all the correct notes, rhythms, articulations and dynamics? Most importantly - have you played the phrases with expression and character?

### **Repertoire.**

Once you’ve done you scale and etude work, continue with your piece(s). Use the practice techniques outlined above to help you learn your piece with ease.

Intermediate and advanced students - listen to professional recordings of your piece. When possible, listen to several players’ renditions for different interpretations. Don’t expect yourself to play the piece at the same tempo as the recording, and keep in mind that most recordings today have been heavily edited to sound perfect. Record yourself playing your piece - you may be amazed at what you hear!

Remember - it’s the QUALITY of your practice, not the quantity, that will bring enjoyment and satisfaction to your music making.