

Individual Practice Guide

Introduction

One of the most important attributes to any quality musician is their ability practice effectively and efficiently. Since a very large portion of a musician's playing takes place during individual practice, their ability to practice correctly becomes essential in their development as a musician. The ability to practice correctly can help to avoid frustration, yields better results, and makes the overall performance process more enjoyable. In order to practice in a quality manner, a musician must:

- **be very organized** - must set goals for each practice session before its start
- **have a focus for *each* portion of the practice session** - must understand why they are practicing a particular exercise or excerpt
- **set performance goals** - have a good mental/aural picture of their desired sound
- **develop a high level of listening/judgment skills** - be able to critique themselves ***honestly*** with regard to their playing goals
- be able to concentrate on performing, yet be able to listen for and detect errors (essentially, **they must take on the role of both the student and the teacher**)
- **be very patient** - does not make a regular practice out of moving on before fully completing a task (avoids just "playing through" their music)

This practice guide will help in offering suggestions on how to achieve the most efficient level of practice possible for any musician. The questions asked in each session are questions any musician should constantly ask themselves during practice sessions in order to know if they have the correct focus and goals, and if they are achieving those goals. **Ideally, having at least an hour to work through the different sessions would be necessary**; however, if there are time limitations, do not condense the times and try to get through all of the sessions. Simply choose one or two of the sessions as you have time for them.

This guide will help you use your time more effectively when practicing for the PCEP Varsity Band. However, if applied to your primary instrument, you should see positive results there as well. During these sessions, instructors will give you specific tasks to accomplish. From rehearsal to rehearsal, these concepts and tasks must be accomplished by each individual.

Throughout the year, you should find time on a regular basis to personally take care of the items discussed during rehearsals. **We consider this time to be essential in the development of each player in the ensemble.** It should be used very effectively, and with the use of this guide, much improvement should be evident from week to week. **Each day, you should have specific tasks you plan to accomplish related to your individual playing. This time should become one of the most important parts of your day** in which you are allowed to individually apply the ideas discussed in sectionals, during daily development, or during group practice. Your attention to detail during this time will have a direct effect on the quality of our overall program. Remember, GREATNESS is built from the bottom up.

For this and other reasons, this practice guide will become one of the most important parts of your band program. Remember that the use of this book requires persistence and daily use. Maximize your practice time and the results will follow.

Tone Development (10 - 15 minutes)

It is important that during every practice session, your tone is always your highest priority. If *you* do not make the quality of the sounds you produce an important part of your playing, then you cannot expect others to do this for you. So this portion of the practice session is vital. Since this practice session will be a build-up process, tone development is placed at the beginning of your practice session. Once your sound is exactly as you want it, then you can carry that into all other portions of the practice sessions. Using a mirror to check your embouchure during this part of practicing is an excellent way to see if your face is set correctly.

Exercises - (choose 2 or 3) it is not necessary to perform all of these during a practice session

- Breathing exercises
- Mouthpiece work
- Singing
- Long Tones (different registers)
- Flow Studies
- Melodic line exercises
- Dynamic control exercises
- Pedal tone exercises
- Range development (upper and lower)

Self-guided Listening Questions

(During each of these exercises you should be asking yourself these questions.)

- **Am I standing/sitting with excellent posture?**
- **Am I holding the instrument correctly?**
- Are all of my breaths relaxed and full breaths?
- **Do I have a concept of what I want to sound like?**
- Am I using the maximum amount of air possible to create the desired tone and intensity?
- **Is my tone steady, consistent, and well centered?** Or, does my sound move around a lot?
- **Are my embouchure and face very still when playing?** Are my corners set firmly? Do I have control over my air stream? Or, is air entering parts of my mouth that it should not (i.e. - puffy cheeks, air between front teeth and lips, etc.)?
- **Is my sound a dark and fully resonant sound on each note?** Or, does the resonance come and go?
- Are all of the tones I produce blocks of sound? When I move from note to note does the sound take time to establish, or is the change instantaneous?
- **Is my sound the same throughout the range of my instrument?** Or, is my sound thin in the upper register or uncentered in the lower register?
- Is there extra “junk” in my sound? What is causing the extra “junk”? (embouchure, air, tongue placement, etc.)
- **Am I playing in tune on every note?** Am I using the slides/joints on my instrument properly?

In answering these questions, you can better understand what types of things you should be practicing during this portion of your practicing. **This will also help guide your ears in knowing what to listen for.** Again, being very honest and critical of yourself with regard to these questions will help raise your standards for your sound, which will ultimately lead to having the right sound every time you play your instrument. One of the most significant improvements you should make this year should be the quality of the sound you produce on your instrument.

Technical Studies (15 - 20 minutes)

When moving into the technical portion of your practice time, recalling and referring to the tone development portion is essential. Displaying technical ability without a good tone is very unimpressive to educated listeners. Your tone should still remain your highest priority.

This portion of your practice will help in developing flexibility, clarity of articulation, and strong technical facility over your instrument. The key to these exercises is thinking of each note played as being somewhat of a tone exercise. Every note of each lip slur, scale, or articulation exercise should be as clear as the notes in your long tones. This might mean that you need to take these exercises at slower tempos. One common misconception of technical studies is that they must always be performed at fast tempos. While this may be a long-term goal, performing these exercises at a tempo that you can play them correctly should be your first priority. From there you can develop proper technical facility over your instrument that has a great deal of clarity.

Exercises - (choose 2 or 3) it is not necessary to perform all of these during a practice session

- Scales (Major and minor)
- Arpeggios
- Thirds
- Flexibility Exercises
- Clarke Studies (learning later)
- Articulation/Style exercises
- Multi-tonguing exercises

Self-guided Listening Questions

(During each of these exercises you should be asking yourself these questions.)

- **Do I have correct hand position every time I play?**
- **Am I applying all of the tonal concepts from the tone development portion of my practice?**
- **Am I using a metronome?**
- **Can I hear each individual note of the exercise very clearly?** Or, do some notes sound fuller than others? Do some notes not speak at all?
- **Could I perform all of this exercise on my mouthpiece with a full resonant sound as well as accuracy?**
- **Are my fingers, air and tongue all moving at the exact same time? If not, which of these are moving correctly in time, and which are not?**
- **Can I perform this exercise slurred as well as articulated?**
- **Is my articulation getting in the way of the tone quality? Is it causing there to be extra "junk" in my sound?**
- **Is my articulation clear enough? Is my tongue fast and firm enough for the audience to clearly hear the articulation?**
- **How consistent is my articulation? Am I articulating with the same part of the tongue in the same part of my mouth every time I articulate?**

Again with anything that is technically demanding, clarity becomes one of the most important aspects to focus on. The quality of sound, especially on fast technical or articulated passages, is the highest concern for creating that clarity. Each note should be a block of sound that does not change shape from start to finish. **Practicing technical passages slowly allows your ear to hear the details in the questions asked above.** As you slowly speed passages up, you can still focus your hearing to the same questions. Do not lower your standards, or let certain questions slide as you approach faster tempos. Keep these ideas in mind and work your way up to actual tempo. When working up technically demanding passages, it will be necessary to repeat the process of starting slowly and gradually speeding on several different occasions.

Sight-reading (5 minutes)

The ability to read music correctly the first time you see it is an asset to any musician. The ability to read music better will allow you to start at a higher level whenever beginning work on a piece. Imagine being able to read **any** piece of music correctly with regards to rhythms and notes the first time you play it. This would allow you to work on other aspects of the music sooner in the development of that music. You could focus on dynamics, phrasing, and style while others are developing the correct notes and rhythms. Even though sight-reading will not be an “every day” part of your year, increasing your ability to read music the first time you see it will allow you to have a more control over your instrument and give you more flexibility with your music.

The only way to develop your sight-reading ability is to do it daily. Over the year, you should make it a goal to read one new piece of music every day, whether from a book, literature from class, etc. When doing this, you should set the metronome at the correct tempo, and then play the piece from top to bottom without stopping. If you make a mistake, just keep moving. You can go back after finishing the piece and see what you messed up; However, the ability to look ahead and recover from mistakes will be essential in your proficiency with regards to sight-reading.

Exercises

- **Sight-reading books** - books are available that discuss and breakdown sight-reading skills
- **Use intermediate method books** - start reading music that is at a lower level than your current playing level, then slowly increase the difficulty
- **Read other parts from players in the ensemble you are performing in** - this will allow you to read new music while getting to know other parts in the music you are performing

Self-guided Listening Questions

(During each of these exercises you should be asking yourself these questions.)

- **Am I using the correct hand position and playing position?**
- **Is my tone quality at its highest performance level?**
- **Am I keeping my eyes looking ahead in the music?** Do I get caught up with simple mistakes?
- Am I able to recall the mistakes I made while performing the excerpt? Or, is the excerpt too long?
- Am I having more problems with the rhythms or the pitches? Could I play through the excerpt correctly on one pitch?
- Am I paying attention to details such as articulation, and dynamics? Or, am I just playing notes and rhythms?

When sight-reading, you should make an effort to perform all aspects of the music. Articulations, dynamics, and style should not be disregard simply because this is the first time you have seen the music. Look for items that repeat themselves such as rhythmic, articulation and note patterns. The excerpts that you perform should be relatively short. This will allow you to perform the excerpt and be able to remember your errors. Once you have read the excerpt, go back and look for 3 to 5 things you can correct or improve on. After this, play the excerpt again to improve on the performance. After playing the excerpt twice, move on to the next excerpt.

As your sight-reading abilities improve, in all aspects, the excerpts should increase in difficulty, responsibility, and length. The excerpts should have more rhythmic and intervallic responsibilities, as well as more articulation and style responsibilities. The length of the excerpt should also increase. Also make sure you read many different styles of music. Keeping tone quality a high priority and the ideas discussed above in mind should help to develop strong sight-reading skills.

Music Studies (20 - 45 minutes)

Many times, this portion of the practice session is the only part of the practice session. Many musicians pull out their instruments and immediately begin to play through their music. **You'll find that by practicing the first three sections of this practice guide first you will be more prepared to practice and perform your actual music;** however, this portion of your practice might possibly **require the most organization** and focused goal-setting out of all of the parts of this practice guide. Many people simply play through their music and never truly break down music to perfect it. This session could most easily be described as “**quality over quantity**”.

It is actually important to **place some limitations on the amount of music you will practice**. If you have 20 minutes of actual music to perform and you finish this portion of your practice in 30 minutes, you don't even have enough time to perform every part twice. When practicing and perfecting a portion of your music, **you actually should need to play the excerpt several times in many different ways**. In addition to the number of repetitions, there should also be time between reps for thought and question/answer periods. **The mental part of all practicing is as important as the physical part**. Since repetitions and thought take time, choose two or three portions of the music you have and put a great deal of effort into perfecting every aspect of that part of the music. Since you could never make it through all of your music just practicing small portions of your music, it is essential that you practice regularly and often. This will allow the in depth study of your music and the ability to practice all of the music.

Keys to practicing/perfecting music

- **Plan the exact segments to practice** - know the segments of music you are going to practice, and the concepts or ideas that you plan to implement on those segments
- **Practice small segments of music at a time** - perfecting a 24 to 36 measure portion of your music in a practice session is more productive than playing through all of your music
- **Increase your standards for that segment** - practice to perfect every aspect of the music you are working on
- **Different practice techniques** - perform each segment of music in several different ways (subdivided, on one pitch, on the mouthpiece, all slurred, all articulated, as written, etc.)
- **Use a metronome and a tuner**
- **Record your practicing** - listening to yourself perform excerpts will allow you to better evaluate your progress and determine if you truly reached your performance goal
- **Document your practice sessions** – it is important to know where you are, where you have been, and where you are going
- **Review and recall work from a previous session** - take time out to review practice and concepts from the last practice session
- **Keep the overall goal in mind** - practicing small segments is important, but you should try to touch on every part of your music over a three or four-day period

Self-guided Listening Questions

(During each of these exercises you should be asking yourself these questions.)

- **Do I have correct hand position and playing position? Am I breathing properly? Is my sound at its highest quality?**
- **Do I have a purpose behind practicing this segment of music? Have I accomplished that purpose?**
- **Can I correctly count this portion of the music I am practicing? Can I play those rhythms accurately on one pitch?**
- **Are all of the tones coming out of my instrument controlled sounds? When performing this segment, can you clearly hear each individual note? Are any tones not of the same quality of others?**

Music Studies (cont'd)

Self-guided Listening Questions (cont'd)

- **Does each note get equal emphasis?** Are some notes louder or softer than others? Is the line of music smooth and flowing?
- **Are the articulations 100% accurate and are they clear to the listener?** Are the note lengths on lifted notes the same? Do notes that touch actually touch?
- **Can I accurately perform this segment with and without a metronome?** Am I pushing and pulling the tempo unknowingly?
- **Have I correctly applied several different rehearsal techniques to this segment?** Can I correctly play all of the subdivisions of this segment? Can I perform this segment correctly on the mouthpiece?
- **Do I have control over my sound when performing dynamics?** Does my sound or response change with the change in dynamics? Do I know where the peaks and valleys of the dynamics are?
- **Can I consistently perform this segment?** Can I correctly apply all of the concepts above to this segment several times in a row?

Constantly keeping these questions in mind during practice sessions will help to better guide your listening. With a great deal of **honesty and patience**, you should slowly begin to hear many more mistakes in your playing than you first thought were there. **Your standards should rise with this awareness.** Taking the time to work out these imperfections will result in a much more consistent and accurate performance of all of your music.

You may have to fight the urge to simply play through music without critically listening to yourself. This is an easy, feel-good way to practice that will lead to frustration down the line. **Taking the time to be a problem solver and work out each portion of your music will result in a much more refined and polished product in the end.** So it is important to always keep the end result in mind when planning your practice. Then it becomes a matter of sticking to the plan and patiently increasing the level of all of your music.

You may find it easiest to organize your practice if you put it down on paper. Planning out the week before it happens, and the ability to look back and see what tasks you have focused on can help create a more balanced practice time. Choose a format for documenting your practice session, and keep them fairly accurately. **Remember, planning is one of the most important aspects of your practice time.** During the summer, you will need to document what you practice because there may be several days between practice times depending upon tour schedule and other unforeseen incidents.

Remember, quality and quantity of practice time directly impact your ability level on your instrument.

Make long and short term plans with regard to your practice time!!

Could you explain what you will and did accomplish during your practice time to other musicians?

Make sure you can perform specific items up to your standards several times on a consistent basis.