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**How can one practice in an effective manner and
in a way that will cultivate improvement and
enjoyment in one's work?**

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Abstract

In this thesis, I will discuss what good, effective practicing is. The project is of course self-directed, I am my own test subject, however it is my hope that the research conducted in this will be useful to other musicians too.

I will write about why we practice, our motivation for doing so, practice for performance, simulating nerves, efficiency and the effect meditation has on practice quality.

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Beneficial

Session(s)

Improve

Deliberate

Goal(s)

Process

Motivation

Introduction

In this project I want to explore what good practicing is and how to implement it into my day to day life. It sounds easy, but to me practicing the right amount, thoroughly and in an effective manner is very difficult. Not only that but making it an enjoyable experience is arguably an even tougher task in my opinion.

More and more people are playing and practicing musical instruments. It makes music as a profession, more competitive. These days I hear the word perfection being thrown around quite a bit. We live in a world where success in one's field and good results seem to be a priority. These things are important, but this outlook can take us away from why we want to play and listen to music in the first place. It must be in balance with other things like good physical and mental health or good relationships.

It is easy to lose focus and feel uninspired when we lock ourselves away in the boxy practice rooms of the standard music conservatory, (there by necessity of course). One can forget what music and performing is all about, but playing a musical instrument is one of the most profound and beautiful ways one can express themselves. Through the notes, text on the page, timbres, voices of instruments one is capable of saying things that words can't. I want to look at why we practice as well as ways to do it better. I think if we can enjoy what we are doing, in any field, we will have a much greater capacity to achieve our goals and be happier in life.

I would first like to explore Why we Practice something.

Why we practice

What is the point? In a nutshell it is to maintain and improve a skill. Concentrated practicing is a sure-fire way to improve in an area. But instead of practicing, let's call it learning. That is what we are doing when we practice anything, we are sending signals through our brain and reinforcing the messages or habits through exercises. It is to do with brain plasticity.

I.1 GIGO Principle

In Jonathan Harnum's book, "The practice of practice" he writes about a substance in our brain called Myelin which reinforces the information we take in. 'Myelin is a fatty substance that thinly coats the axons, the slender conduits along which electrical signals pass from neuron to neuron. Myelin insulation coating the axons enables neurons to fire with more efficiency, speed, and precision'¹. So this enables us to get better at things and learn at a faster rate, because it reinforces and the connections become stronger. However, Myelin reinforcement is a double-edged sword, because it can make someone learn mistakes or bad habits. My former teacher used to tell me that if I really didn't feel like practicing and tried to force myself to do it, it could actually be detrimental, since I wouldn't be engaged enough and could end up compounding bad habits. Harnum refers to this as the GIGO principle² Good in=Good out.

I. 2 Practicing Slowly

This is why practicing slowly is crucial, this is something I did not appreciate until recently. According to flute player Julius Baker³ "you'll never make a

¹ Harnum, *The Practice of Practice*. 24

² Ibid. 22

³ Ibid. 26

mistake if you never make a mistake”. Practice slowly enough that a mistake is impossible. This of course is difficult; we are impatient by nature, I am at least, and we want to learn something and be able to play it well as soon as we can. So according to the GIGO principle, we have a responsibility to our brains to practice slowly and thoughtfully, otherwise the information we reinforce could be wrong. This is what the professional musicians know already, they listen carefully and address mistakes as soon as they arise. Apparently at the Meadowmount school of music in New York, the mantra is that if someone recognises the piece being practiced, the student is practicing it too fast.⁴ I tried to practice slower and found it really helpful in certain areas, such as in legato practice. I could not maintain this sort of intensity for an extended period of time though. I find now, it’s more effective if used sparingly, in order to maintain good concentration levels.

This ties in with *deliberate practice* and the 10 000- hour rule⁵. The 10 000-hour rule comes from a research paper by Ericsson, Krampe and Clemens Tesch-Römer. This is a well-known paper; in this they claim that anyone can become an expert in a chosen field if they put in 10 000 hours. They presented data from four different studies of experts in various fields including music.⁶ However, what many people forget is that one would only become an expert if they put in focused practice for most of that time period, using *active listening* and *deliberate practice*.

1.3 Deliberate Practice

Deliberate practice is when one works in the practice room with clear intentions and good concentration throughout. So just going to the practice room and repeating passages over and over will not help one improve so much⁷. It is having specific goals to help improvement, being your own teacher in a sense. Recording yourself working on a phrase, listening back to critique your performance, and fixing the issues that present themselves, is a good example of deliberate practicing. Some of the practice elements I present later in this paper, can be thought of as examples of deliberate practice.

⁴Coyle, “The science of growing talent”

⁵Ericsson, Kampe and Tesch- Römer, *The role of deliberate practice in the acquisition of expert performance*

⁶Harnum, *The Practice of Practice*. 7

⁷Clear, “Deliberate Practice: What is it and How to use it”

Motivation

2.1 Internal Motivation

In the last section I looked at the scientific reason as to why we practice, but it has to be from a source of internal motivation. It helps to have external motivation also, such as goals i.e. preparing for auditions and concert performances. However, it is strongest if it comes from within you, when the motivation is internal. To pursue musical performance as a career one must have true passion for it, and only then can practicing become a value- something that is part of who you are and what you want.

Where I grew up, a lot of my school friends played musical instruments, but most gave up. The practice they did was forced on them by their parents and they did not develop an interest and love for it. The motivation was too external, they were playing and practicing to please their pushy parents or just to pass an exam, not for themselves or because it was in line with their interests.

Looking further ahead, many music students including myself, become discouraged because it is a really competitive industry and the majority of us face a lot of rejection before we get accepted into an orchestra for instance. It is also hard work, a natural affinity for music can only take you so far and eventually you need to put the hours in. You can lose the desire and motivation to continue quite easily. So we need to work at keeping our drive.

A great way to do this is to attend concerts. Seeing an inspiring performance can remind us why we want to practice a musical instrument. Also listening to our favourite recordings and feeling the effect that it has on us. In terms of practice sessions, I have found that sometimes it is more beneficial to play repertoire I enjoy, instead of practicing the same technical exercises every day, which can turn into something routine and a little monotonous.

2.2 External Motivation- Practicing towards goals

It is very important to have long and short term goals to practice for. Having specific goals and dreams makes the will to practice stronger. It motivates and gives you an opportunity to develop. According to David Dumais' book "Music Practice", 'setting goals may be the most crucial step you take in practicing effectively'⁸. To make them more tangible, write them down, and then write down the steps required to reach them. Aim to act and improve on these goals a little bit every day. Dumais suggests to find someone who has already achieved the goals you set for yourself and replicate what they did in order to get that end result. This is a really good idea. I have learnt so much from my colleagues where I have studied, in particular those who are further ahead than me. Even when we really don't want to practice, having a small specific goal which is easily achievable can help us stay in the practice room a while longer.⁹

In Practice of Practice, Harnum takes goal setting another step further. Another good reference is Mary Noden's thesis (a former KMH student) in which she outlines her personal goal setting table¹⁰. In Practice of Practice, he writes about setting goals appropriately for ourselves. 'Setting your goals "just right" will do wonders for motivation, because setting the appropriate goal means success. Nothing motivates more than success'. He calls it the Goldilocks Zone¹¹, where everything is "just right". This is something I haven't done so well in the past. It is easy to only think of our ultimate goal and just aim for that, like getting into a professional orchestra. Having goals set too high is a recipe for disaster in my opinion, especially when one isn't in the right mindset or doesn't engage in the right behaviours to go after them. You can't go from not doing exercise at all to running a marathon in a week; even saying to yourself, 'I will run 3 times this week' from not running at all, is probably too much. Large goals like winning an

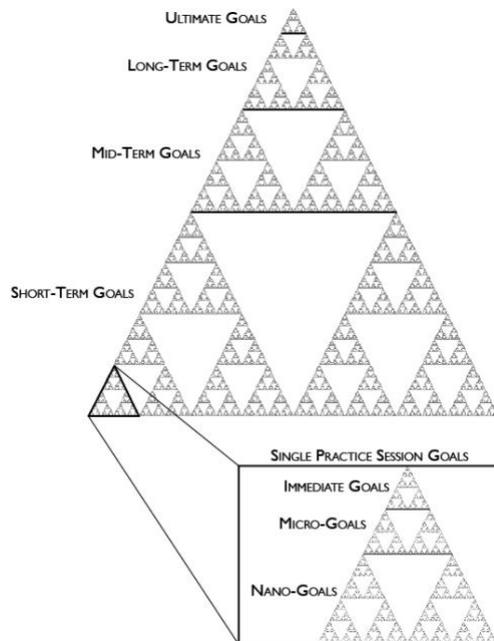
⁸ Dumais, *Musician's guide to practicing and mastering your instrument like a professional*, 6.

⁹ Harnum, *The Practice of Practice*, 44.

¹⁰ Noden, "Just practice!" *To what extent is practice the key to success in orchestral auditions?* 31.

¹¹ Harnum, *The Practice of Practice*, 49.

orchestra position, take many years of work, and if the only goal is of that magnitude, then it will seem impossible to achieve and become overwhelming.



This is the model he uses, and it is the single practice session goals which I find particularly interesting. A short-term goal could be learning an excerpt to play for you colleagues next week. Whereas Nano goals could be to perfect a shift between two notes. The idea is, that if you can dilute your goals down to this level, you will be successful a lot more often and you can wrap your head around what you're doing¹² If one is good at practicing, they are probably doing this already without really thinking, but if you take this very deliberate practice further and write it as an easily achievable goal, then you will start to feel better about yourself and hopefully want to practice more. I tried setting more goals and have found this really useful. It has provided me with more purpose when I go into the practice room.

¹² Harnum, *The Practice of Practice*, 52.

2.3 Keeping yourself in the practice room

There are ways within your practice time to stay motivated, but what is perhaps more important, is the way we think about learning and practicing a skill. Harvard psychologist Carol Dweck, published some groundbreaking research about mindsets and our conceptions when it comes to intelligence¹³. She has studied the behaviour of thousands of children comparing what she calls 'fixed mindsets' and 'growth mindsets'¹⁴.

In one of the research studies¹⁵, she gave a group of around 400 young school students a simple IQ test. After the test was completed, Dweck divided the research group in two. For one of the groups, she praised the students' intelligence, 'you are smart at this' and in the other, she praised the effort the children put in, 'wow you worked hard at this'.

In the second half of the study, the children were given the option to choose between another more challenging test, one which offered an opportunity to learn more and grow, and an easier test, one that they would surely do well in. The results of the choices showed that 67% of the children praised for their intelligence chose to do the easier test and 92% of the children praised for their effort chose the more challenging one.

This is because, the children saw value in the things they were being praised for. The children praised for their intelligence became complacent; they didn't want to tarnish their new-found reputation so they played it safe and went for the easier test; they are developing what is called a fixed mindset. Whereas the children praised for their effort are on their first steps to seeing value in hard work and perseverance; this is an example of a growth mindset¹⁶.

Someone with a fixed mindset believes that intelligence is fixed, either you have it or you don't¹⁷. People with fixed mindsets also feel the same way about talent; they will seek out easy tasks to make them appear smart and avoid difficult ones, as they don't want to bruise their ego.

¹³ Dweck C, "Research into growth mindset"

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ragan T, "Praise and mindsets"

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Harnum, *The Practice of Practice*, 35.

A person with a growth mindset doesn't feel the need to show off how intelligent they are, as they know intelligence is flexible, it can be increased and isn't fixed. They use failure as a tool, information that means they need to work harder next time or try a different approach. It is an opportunity to learn, not an example of a fundamental lack of intelligence¹⁸.

Dweck then took the experiment a step further. The 2 groups were given an 'impossible' test. The 'effort' group worked harder, longer and with more enjoyment than the 'intelligence' group. However, the children in the 'intelligence' group became frustrated and many gave up.

As a fourth and final step, she introduced one more test which was of the same difficulty as the first. The results were fascinating. They showed that on average, the 'effort' group's results improved by around 30% in comparison to the first exam and the 'intelligence' group's results were worse by 20%.

This research study reveals that praise is very important and the mindset we adopt, changes results drastically. It is important to feel that there is time to develop and grow. I think adopting the growth mindset, is really beneficial in the practice room. This study is relevant to our individual practice, because we critique our playing and musicality often. Having compassion and positive self-talk, recognising we are in the practice room to improve and not berate ourselves, is really important. Our teachers give us advice and they can set a tone for how we treat ourselves in the practice room, but as I have written previously, to have really deliberate practice, we must become our own teacher.

Performance Practice, Mock auditions and simulating nerves

¹⁸ Harnum, *The Practice of Practice*, 36.

Practicing is an experimental process. Every time we audition for something, we go through a preparation process. I have found this to be as or more important than the audition itself; the refinement of preparation through practice is a great opportunity for personal growth as a musician. Rob Knopper is a percussionist in the Met. orchestra and he has a website called audition hacker¹⁹ which outlines a 5-step program he used to win his job. According to Rob, the most common reason we don't win auditions, is because our preparation process wasn't as effective for ourselves as it could be. Most of my improvement has come in practicing for auditions and there are so many ways one can practice for them.

Last autumn, I had a bit of an epiphany. I, like the majority of musicians have had a lot of rejections from music academies, festivals and orchestras. I had a good look at my preparation process and I realised I wasn't doing nearly enough to prepare myself properly and get the results I wanted. Rob's website showed me that mock auditions and run through performances are crucial. I never really did them before and it felt a bit ridiculous that I hadn't. How could I expect to get into these competitive courses when I hadn't done the right preparation required. Looking at it objectively, you are essentially simulating an audition and performing under pressure- thereby getting used to the "audition situation". One could do 50 mock auditions before the real one comes around and by the time they get to the event it will feel a lot easier to cope with.

Playing to colleagues and professors is a good idea. Playing to someone specific that makes you nervous is even better. It is good to get used to performing to people. It is very easy to get into a "practice room" performance mindset, where you only play to yourself. In only doing that, you are restricting yourself to one way of thinking. Playing to others allows you to think and analyse differently, as well as getting used to the added pressure of another's presence.

You can also create the same sort of environment. If the audition is screened, find something that can act as an obstacle or a fake screen and run through the repertoire. If you want to apply a bit of lighter pressure during day-to day practice to get used to the feeling, you can record yourself. This is one of the many reasons that recording yourself is so useful. A great book for reference is Don Greene's audition success. Don Greene is a former sports psychologist who

¹⁹ Knopper R, "Audition Hacker"

now works with professional musicians. In his book there is a transcript²⁰ of a dialogue between Don and 2 professionals auditioning for jobs, in which he gives great advice.

3.1 Practicing under pressure

One thing Don Greene writes about which my own teacher also touches on occasionally is simulating nerves. It is important to be able to cope with the feeling, which can be terrible. I have had some bad experiences in the past and I know of some musicians who really struggle even when they have prepared meticulously. So, one good way of simulating nerves in the practice room is to run up and down some stairs, take a few breaths and then play through the entire programme. If you play a reed instrument like me- my teacher also recommends using a bad reed in these practice situations to make it even more difficult. You also record yourself. This piles on a lot of pressure, but it is a good way of finding out if you have practiced well enough or not. When you listen to the recording it may not be as bad as you think. The part I like the most about this exercise, is that it acts as a bit of a psychological anchor for me. It's quite an intensive process, and if I go into a performance knowing that I've done this sort of preparation, it can give me a bit of a mental edge.

3.2 Performance situations

When there is an audition coming up, it is good to try and put yourself in lots of different performance situations. What I mean by this is that sometimes things

²⁰ Greene, *Audition success*, 9.

happen which are out of your control and this can affect you in a negative way. Often, auditions don't run on time as there are lots of people to get through on the day, so sometimes you won't have time to go through your whole warmup process and relax, or alternatively you might have too much time. I have had auditions when I had 5 minutes in a tiny warmup room with other applicants there, before I had to go in and play. Unfortunately, this happens often. Therefore, one has to be practical and prepared for nerves to set in. One way of practicing this, is instead of warming up for half an hour, trying to play through the repertoire straight away. There is a great video with the Berlin Philharmonic flautist Emmanuel Pahud on youtube²¹ in which he talks about performance nerves- and he says, if you make a mistake nothing happens, it's not a disaster, no one dies. Alleviating the pressure of making mistakes usually makes it so one does fewer.

If I didn't have the amount of warmup time I would have liked, I won't suddenly forget everything I have worked on. I have found that when I have experimented with putting myself under pressure in my preparation process, I have coped with nerves much better in the auditions. This is an area that I would like to refine and develop further.

Efficiency

I am still studying but approaching the end of my studies and it is becoming increasingly clear to me that being efficient in one's practice is becoming increasingly important. I will first look at time pressure as an efficiency method.

4.1 Time pressure and Exercises

As my playing is developing, I am being asked to participate in more projects than before which of course is a good thing. I am also realising that even though I have less time, I still have far more than orchestral musicians. For example, my teacher is extremely busy, so often he doesn't have time to do the practice

²¹ Pahud, "How to stay focused during a performance"

required for his current project. So to cope with this time-pressure, he uses specific exercises which he obtained from his teachers and then mastered as a student. These keep him in good playing-shape and the concepts would work for anyone. One example is called a note beginning exercise. This exercise is used to practice the quality of attack of a note. You set a metronome at a moderate speed, between 60-70 quarter note speed, and attack the note once every four beats. You repeat the attack of the note playing in piano and forte dynamics and then go up an octave and do the same. Whilst doing this, you are paying great attention that you are satisfied with how the note begins and that it is sounding with good quality. I think this exercise could be used by many different instruments, but it is perhaps particularly useful for wind and brass instruments. You can use this when practicing repertoire, if for example there is a more resistant note that you're struggling with in an excerpt, you isolate it and do this attack exercise. In doing so, you are finding out what the right speed of air is and a good embouchure shape for the note. I would advise a student to try collecting and practicing many specifically targeted exercises during their study-time. They ideally should cover the technical scope of the instrument- dynamic range, high and low registers, articulation and legato etc. It is important that they are not aimless and random; it is often a good idea to do some targeted exercises as a warmup for daily practice.

Now I have many exercises to work with- but practicing all of these every day would take up a lot of time and wouldn't be efficient. So one has to pick and choose; the best thing is when they target areas of playing that one struggles with. I would get incredibly bored if I had to go through all of these exercises at the beginning of each day. Using short but effective exercises to target those areas in the technique that need work is recommended. If you want to be really efficient, you can use exercises which cover more than one area of your playing technique so you are practicing more than one thing at once. For example, I have a clarinet exercise which covers the range of the instrument; you play a descending scale legato. First 3 notes, then 5, then a whole octave. The first time you do this you play forte, the 2nd time you play quieter and diminuendo to nothing on the final note. And you repeat this in the different registers of the clarinet. The reason why this exercise is so good is that you practice legato, dynamic range, instrument range, support, free flow of air through the instrument and tone quality all at the same time.

These sort of exercises are ideal and this sort of approach works well for me when I have less time; when it comes to daily practice, I use these exercises, but

much like practicing slow, I have to vary the choices, otherwise it gets boring and not so creative.

4.2 Practice Structure

In structuring a practice session, we can maximise our practice quality and concentration levels. I am always an advocate for quality practice over quantity. I have found my ideal practice amount in a day is 3-4 hours, with breaks within and between practice sessions. People tend to concentrate better in shorter time frames.

According to the famous Swedish trombonist Christian Lindberg, the time frame in which one can fully concentrate whilst practicing a musical instrument is only 24 minutes²². He is very disciplined and practices in 24 minute bursts with 6 minute breaks- I have found this to be a good model to follow. I think a good larger scale practice structure to emulate is that of the violinist Heifetz. He claimed that he practiced only 3 hours a day and would take a day off every Sunday²³. I have found both of these structure models to be effective. I don't have a strict schedule in the same way, but when I did follow these, it worked really well.

I find that the most direct way to limit wasted time and get the most concentration in my practice is to set alarms. These are especially good for when I don't want to be in the practice room for too long. I use my phone. I'll generally set myself 5 minutes for a short exercise, 10 for a longer one and 15-20 for the longest ones. Sometimes they require longer and that's ok, just as long as I remain focused. I spread out the session, taking short breaks every 25-30 minutes. So I'll take a break, around 5 minutes is ideal. A mistake I often made, was going too far from the practice room, and I ended up talking to a friend, getting coffee, answering some emails and before long a whole hour would pass. To avoid this, I found that staying in the general vicinity of the practice room was a good idea. Doing something a little active, going outside for a short breath of fresh air. Regular breaks and staying hydrated is really important. Our brains tend to remember best the beginning of an activity and the ending of an activity, so the

²² Lindberg, "The Daily Routine"

²³ Kageyama, "How many hours a day should you practice"

more beginnings and endings you create, the better you will learn, recall and remember your ideas²⁴.

I try to always structure my practice now, to ensure that I am covering all of the areas that require attention. After experimenting with this, I found that while I am more efficient with structured practice, there has to be some flexibility. If I feel that something requires more time than the alarm I set, then I will go for longer. Also, when I was feeling less inspired, I found it worked better to not follow such a strict structure, but to play more freely.

4.3 Scheduling

Scheduling practice times well can be incredibly effective. If one has a project or audition coming up, setting aside time to create a practice plan can really make a huge difference. To meet the demands expected in the classical music world, I would say it is essential to be organised in this way. The reason why scheduling practice times and planning in advance what I will practice is such a good idea, is because it keeps me present. It reduces a large amount of stress if you know what to do and when to do it. Whereas if I go to school with all these different things to practice ahead of me, but with no sort of structure, it can feel overwhelming. If you are bad with your time management then you can take this one step further and schedule your whole day. When you get up, have lunch, go to the gym and spare time for fun activities. I have definitely got stressed and overwhelmed by my workload in the past, so I would say to avoid this, effective planning is a necessity. *The Power of Now*, by Eckhart Tolle, is a great book which is largely about staying present in whatever one is doing, which is an incredibly helpful frame of mind to have, especially when one has lots of things to be working on in a short space of time.

Scheduling is a good habit to get into, I found that when I started to do it more often, it became more refined. One thing I would like to do is to plan more fun activities. I think that if I plan fun things to do outside of the practice room, it will give more incentive to practice and have something to look forward to. Also

²⁴ Dumais, *Musician's guide to practicing and mastering your instrument like a professional*, 12.

giving myself permission to take a day off. Most of the professional musicians I have spoken to have told me that they take one day off playing a week if they can. One needs to have other interests, otherwise they will go a bit mad. However, I do find that if the scheduling is too rigid, it can become stressful in itself. My practice was not so good when I only did it because it was in the schedule, not because it was what I actually wanted to be doing.

4.4 Taking notes

Taking notes is something I started trying to do at the beginning of last summer. At the end of practicing each excerpt or piece I would take notes. The main purpose of this is to know what needs practice next time. It's hard to remember all we have covered in a practice session, so it's good to refer to recordings and take notes from what you observe from them. Notes can be a useful tool to refer to and also quite powerful as they give one a sense of purpose and continuity. It is also an easy way to track progress through a preparation process.

Meditation and The power of now

In an increasingly modern and technological-driven world, there are more things that demand our attention and distract us. As much as technology can be useful, it can also be counterproductive. This is what I have experienced, and I am finding now more than ever that being present in what one is doing is incredibly important. For the last 2 years or so I have used the app headspace for guided meditation. It has so many benefits for concentration and health. Headspace is great because the sessions only take 10 minutes so it's easy to fit in a day²⁵.

The reason I write about this here, is because I believe that meditation can really aid one's practice. My best practice happens when I am more observational than self-critical. Of course one has to be both, but if you are thinking too much and being too hard on yourself, you will try too hard and then tension can set in, which leads to other issues. However, meditation gives one more awareness and

²⁵ Puddicombe, <https://www.headspace.com/>

more possibilities to observe what is going on in the present moment. So, if there is a tricky technical area in a piece, I can approach it now with a heightened awareness of my body. Not thinking too much, just feeling and then observing. Then through this relaxed concentration, I can pinpoint which areas in my body aren't working together to get the result I would like. In the past I would struggle to find a solution, trying to think my way out of the problem. But now I can take a step back and calmly observe and feel, finding another way to solve the issue.

If I got to a point where I couldn't work out why I was making mistakes, then I recorded myself. When I listened to the recording, it almost always became clear to me where I technically or musically went wrong. I also recorded when I wanted to perform something not only because it applied a certain pressure, but more importantly it separated the observational way of playing from the critical. I find if I perform something, being too analytical and critical with how I sound and all the elements that go with that (Intonation, tone quality etc.) I don't play so well, the playing becomes too insular. There is too much ego involved. Whereas if I involve myself in the phrasing of the music and focus on feeling the particular sensations that go with my good sound, then I am more successful. The practice sessions went even better when I was really involved in the music, having strong phrasing ideas that drew me in whilst practicing and performing. Having this mindfulness made practice much more enjoyable, as I could clearly observe what I was doing and hear improvement taking place.

The reason I referenced *The Power of Now* in the chapter about scheduling, is because I believe the words from that book can effectively conceptualise the things one learns from meditation. Tolle's concept is that virtually all our attention should be directed towards what is going on at this precise moment and nothing else. Of course one has to think practically about certain things and plan their life a bit. However, for someone who is an over-thinker, this book can be incredibly helpful. One of his philosophies is that the past and future do not exist. What he means is that they exist only in our minds, but we cannot really act on them. He claims that we as humans are addicted to our thoughts and feelings. We have tendencies to ruminate and think about elements we can't control²⁶, but there is nothing we can change about the past or the future. The

²⁶Tolle, *The Power of Now, A guide to spiritual enlightenment*, 21.

future we can attempt to shape and plan to the best of our ability, but we can't really control it²⁷. So the idea is to let go of those concerns and thoughts about time and therefore take steps closer to enlightenment. His idea of enlightenment to my understanding, is a free, conscious mind fully involved in what is going on, right in the present moment.

Meditation helps to train our brains and challenge our perceptions. It can feel transformative. It can make something as banal as washing the dishes into something quite fascinating. After reading this book and practicing meditation regularly, I found that when I had this level of concentration and awareness during my practice, one less occupied by distractions, it made practicing really enjoyable and effective.

Conclusion

During the time spent researching this project, I have experimented with the different techniques and ideas I have outlined in the paper. Many of these concepts are useful, some are great for every-day practicing, and others, only at specific times. It is difficult to maintain all of these practice habits simultaneously. Ultimately it is down to the

²⁷ Ibid. 22

individual to implement the various exercises into their practice and find their own way of working.

I found that whilst experimenting, it was fairly easy to find ways to improve and practice effectively. However, finding a feeling of enjoyment and creativity was at times very difficult. Part of what I feel this thesis is asking, is, is practicing really effectively actually enjoyable? In my experience, the answer is sometimes yes, but not always. I believe that, pursuing a high level in any field requires a very large amount of commitment and discipline. So there are times where it can be quite frustrating, especially when I try to learn new concepts which take a long time or if I am going through a period where I have to be particularly critical of my technique. Even when I improved, I found that it was easy to take that for granted, I just wanted to keep getting better. There is so much quality control in practicing the classical music repertoire, and in focusing on that, it was easy to forget the progress I had made. This is a problem for many and this is definitely something I would like to reflect on.

Therefore, it is important for one to recall why a particular practice session was enjoyable. If one finds that they aren't enjoying their practicing in any way, they should probably consider doing something different. But for instance, I found my practice is at its most enjoyable when I am present and aware of what's going on. I would make mistakes, but not judge them harshly. Being critical is always important, but being overly judgemental makes practicing far less enjoyable. What I mean is that just because I make mistakes doesn't make the initial judgements of myself being incompetent or idiotic, correct. It also helps to work on repertoire that you connect with and really enjoy playing, not only orchestral excerpts or technical studies.

My hope is that in this thesis I have shown different ways that one can be effective, creative and improve their practicing. I think that music students need to be encouraged to make their practice as creative and informative as possible. That's the whole reason we study musical performance degrees; we all have something to say.

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