

5 Keys For More Effective Practice

1. Duration

Keep practice sessions limited to a duration that allows you to stay focused. This may be as short as 10-20 minutes for younger students, and as long as 45-60 minutes for older individuals.

2. Timing

Keep track of times during the day when you tend to have the most energy. This may be first thing in the morning, or right before lunch, etc. Try to do your practicing during these naturally productive periods as these are the times at which you will be able to focus and think most clearly.

3. Goals

Try using a practice notebook. Keep track of your practice goals and what you discover during your practice sessions. The key to getting into the “zone” when practicing is to be constantly striving to have clarity of intention. In other words, to have a clear idea of the sound you want to produce, or particular phrasing you’d like to try, or specific articulation, intonation, etc. that you’d like to be able to execute consistently.

When you figure something out, write it down. As I practiced more mindfully, I began learning so much during practice sessions that if I didn’t write everything down, I’d forget.

4. Smarter, not harder

Sometimes if a particular passage is not coming out the way we want it to, it just means we need to practice more. There are also times, however, when we don’t need to practice harder, but need an altogether different strategy or technique.

I remember struggling with the left-hand pizzicato variation in Paganini's 24th Caprice. I was getting frustrated and kept trying harder and harder to make the notes speak, but all I got was sore fingers, a couple of which actually started to bleed. I realized that there had to be a smarter, more effective way to accomplish my goal.

Instead of stubbornly keeping at a strategy or technique that wasn't working for me, I forced myself to stop practicing this section altogether. I tried to brainstorm different solutions to the problem for a day or so, and wrote down ideas to try as they occurred to me. When I felt that I came up with some promising solutions, I just started experimenting. I eventually came up with a solution that I worked on over the next week or so, and when I played the caprice for my teacher, *he* actually asked *me* how I made the notes speak so clearly!