

Getting The Most Out Of Your Practice

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Too often we sit down to practice and blindly go through the motions of playing a few tunes, as distinct from actually practising, with no actual plan or structure to what we are doing. Improvement is therefore slow and our direction often misguided. Many pipers do not seem to practice at all unless they are preparing for something, and again that is usually time spent inefficiently. Those lucky enough to have a good tutor are sometimes well directed in what is required but practice methodology can often be improved and aimed beyond the tutors instructions with a view to leading the players along their own road to musical independence.

Why do we practice?

Have you ever seriously sat down and thought about the reasons why we practice? It is probably a good idea, as it will give you an indication of some more efficient ways to achieve your goals. I would suggest the following are the fundamental reasons for practice:

- To improve technique, build strength and consistency of movements and remove technical errors.
- To improve stamina up on the pipes, making performing more comfortable.
- To improve your repertoire.
- To prepare a repertoire for a competition or a performance and become competent with the tunes.
- To improve the musical nature of your performance, ie; expression, phrasing, mood, rhythm etc.
- To prepare yourself mentally for a performance.

If you consider the points as to why you are practising you can often invent efficient ways to achieve the desired goals. It is important to have the goals firmly established so that practice time has an objective, a direction and something achieved. This will give you the motivation to continue and a new positive view on what you are trying to do.

A Practice Diary

Discussing this issue with a friend who plays in an orchestra, he told me that a practice diary was one of the best things he had instigated. It gave him direction and set out clearly in his own mind what he was trying to achieve. Many things can be written in your diary, here are some suggestions:

- The reasons why you practice.
- The reasons why you play bagpipes, and what you want to gain from piping (your long term goals).

- Your medium term goals, such as what you are planning in the next 12 months.
- What you want to achieve from this practice session.
- Some specific notes about this practice, (how you felt, what was wrong, what was good).
- A plan for your next practice session, including faults raised during the last session.
- General notes, CDs to listen to, players you admire, performances that impressed you, tunes to learn, etc.

Setting Goals

The importance of goal setting cannot be over emphasised. They give you direction, motivation and help structure your practice. It is important that your goals be:

- **Specific** - What do you want to accomplish? Where will it be? When should it be accomplished by? Requirements and constraints? Specific reasons, purposes or benefits of accomplishing the goal.
- **Measurable** - You should devise a method by which you can establish whether you have achieved your goals.
- **Attainable** - Identify the goals that are most important to you. Then think of ways to achieve those goals. Plan the steps you will take to meet the goal, and the time frame needed to accomplish the task.
- **Realistic** - You must set goals with an objective that you are both *able* and *willing* to work towards. It must represent a challenge, as there is little motivation in an easily achieved objective. It must not however be so difficult that it cannot be achieved and will create nothing but frustration and negativity.
- **Tangible** - You should be able to ascertain the results of a goal with one of the five senses. If a goal is intangible, like a behavioural change, try linking it to a more tangible goal to make it more easily recognisable, like a more confident and fluent sounding performance due to a psychological improvement in your performing ability.

Plan goals for each practice session, for the next competition season, the next level of education, or where you want to be as a piper / band in the next 5 - 10 years.

Exercise Routines

Some years ago I had a series of lessons with Capt. John McLellan. Although I had a good technique and was an accomplished player at the time, I was given an exercise routine. No explanation, and none asked for, just something that had to be done. I have since modified it to suit my own needs, but it is something I use frequently and pass on to everyone I tutor. They are based on the scale, but adding all of the embellishments and playing them 4 times each movement, eg; scale 4x, scale with 'g' gracenote 4x, 'e' gracenote, 'd' gracenote, 'g.d.e'

movement, scale with high 'a' doublings and so on. These not only build consistency of the movements and competency playing them from various notes, but they highlight technical errors such as crossing noises, gracenotes of differing strengths, rhythmical inconsistencies, but most of all build the strength in your fingers through repetition. They do not take long, but have a noticeable benefit to the technique of players of all standards.

Smart Practice

If you are paying close attention to the detail in a tune, by breaking it into bars and phrases, you can often cut down significantly on how much of the tune you need to concentrate on. You will often find that tunes have phrases that repeat throughout. Once the phrase is mastered and you have identified it in other places in the tune, it should just be a matter of briefly reviewing it each time it appears. I like to break tunes into phrases to work on them, as it reinforces each individual phrase in my mind and improves the phrasing when I play the entire tune.

Often I do not work on a tune from start to finish. I may start breaking up the last part first. Too often we become masters of the beginning of tunes and they deteriorate as we progress. Working on the last part of a tune first can help ensure that you give appropriate attention to the end of a tune, thus avoiding the common problem of losing focus as you proceed through the tune and never really giving your best attention to the last parts.

Repertoire

This is one of the most important aspects of practice. It is often why we are practising. Whether it is to learn the set list for this years competitions, or new tunes that the band has set, or just tunes for our own enjoyment. I cannot over emphasise the importance of a large repertoire. The more tunes you learn, the better a piper you will become. You will better understand the music, be better at sight reading, your technique will improve and you will stay motivated. If you play in a band, don't just practice the band tunes, as it will soon get very boring. Link your repertoire to your goals, and set yourself some challenges. Practice tunes that will help you to progress to the next level.

It is also of importance to have some fun while you practice. Learn some tunes you like to play, for no other reason than they are fun. Maybe several jigs, reels, hornpipes, anything and just play them at the end of a hard practice session to remind yourself that all is not sweat and toil!

Visualisation

Set yourself up psychologically for a good, confident performance. Remember why you are practising and think of the event that is forthcoming. As you play the repertoire for the event, play it as you would at the time of the performance. Imagine the venue, the audience, the judges. Imagine what it feels like to be there at the venue playing in front of the people present. If you play in a band, imagine the band around you, the procedures on the contest field and practice the starts and finishes. Be confident and practice for a strong, capable performance.

Practice Conditions

A lot of what we do involves an intimate knowledge of our instruments reactions to various environments. Practice under differing conditions so that you become aware of what your pipes will do. You may have to make some alterations for your instrument to be at it's best under certain conditions. If you have to play outside in the cold, but only practice in a small heated room, you cannot expect your instrument to be at it's best when the time comes to perform. Similarly, ensure that you do some practice in the jacket you wear when playing as this can have a huge effect on your performance if you are unfamiliar with how it feels, or if it causes your bag to slip!

A practice chanter with a bag attached was one of the best investments I have ever made. It allows me to practice piobaireachd without the annoyance of taking a breath and affecting the flow of the music. I can move around as I would when I play on pipes and maintain the same mental attitude. It does not however have the same physical detriments such as, noise levels in a small room and pressure on my shoulder which suffers occasionally after long periods of playing up on pipes. It enables me physically to meet the requirements of my practice goals. I usually leave it somewhere in sight, with music, so I have a reminder in front of me that I need to practice. Putting your gear away so that you have to make an even insignificant effort to get it out is often a stumbling block to practice.

Practice Vs. Rehearsal

To me these are two completely different things. I deliberately separate them in my own mind. When I rehearse I have a particular performance in mind. I play up on pipes and go through the repertoire needed for that performance. My instrument is tuned and I pay close attention to any movements in sound, pitch, tuning etc. I visualise the performance and work on my confidence and musicianship. Often it is a good idea to record these rehearsals for later appraisal and self critique.

Practice is different. It is the time for attention to detail. It involves some exercises, learning tunes, improving technique, phrasing, expression etc. It could be on pipes, it could be on chanter, depending on what you need to achieve. Tunes need to be looked at phrase by phrase and have to be carefully thought out. This is not time to just play a few tunes, it is time to work on some of the goals you have set for yourself. Productive practice won't be done in front of the television, give yourself every opportunity to make the most out of your session. Find a quiet comfortable spot with no distractions and prepare yourself to sit down for a reasonable time without having to disrupt yourself to get a drink, go to the toilet, feed the dog, or do the garden. It is easy to procrastinate. When I study, I have the best looking garden in the street and play pipes at my best, as I can justify these procrastinations. They do not help me achieve the goals that I have set though. It is the same for practice. If you set goals, you presumably enjoy piping, and you wish to improve, with some thoughtful consideration you should be able to make huge improvements and keep yourself highly motivated.

Conclusion

Efficiency becomes more important as life's commitments increase. I often have pipers new to my band comment that the time they have to commit to play at a grade 1 level is not that much more significant than in lower grades, but it has become time more efficiently spent, with dramatic rewards. Just imaging how many tunes you would have to play to improve an 'e' doubling problem as compared to a 30 second exercise in which you play 32 'e' doublings.

Practice goals, a diary of progress, and a clearly established mind set will help to convert what many call practice, but is really just a playing session, into something that can really make a difference to your playing. Think intelligently about your path and repertoire to ensure that it is challenging, achieves your objectives, is motivational and most importantly includes some fun!