

From Weait, Christopher. *Bassoon Strategies for the Next Level*  
Copyright 2009 Christopher Weait, LLC  
**Permission is granted by the author for duplication for study.**  
**Sale for profit is strictly prohibited.**

#### **4. PRACTICING**

##### **Practicing and your musical imagination**

The effectiveness of your practicing will be improved if you keep your musical goals in focus: the phrasing, the mood and the emotional content that you want your listeners to notice.

The most common emphasis in practicing (and instruction for practicing) appears to be the acquisition of technical fluency. This can lead to neglect of the musical goals and may result in uninteresting interpretations.

While it is necessary to learn pitches and rhythm, we should apply our musical imagination to decide on phrasing, mood and the emotional content as soon as notes are learned.

Allow your musical imagination to precede repetition, your artistry to lead your technique.

##### **How to enjoy practicing**

Our task is to turn the responsibility of practicing into a restorative, creative activity that allows us to perceive progress and musical satisfaction.

Disarm destructive thoughts like these:

- "Do it or else!"
- "You will not succeed unless . . . . "
- "You must suffer as I did! "
- "No pain, no gain."
- Add your own to this list . . . .

Replace them with constructive thoughts like these:

- I want to perform well for my listeners.
- I do this for the music, my listeners and myself.
- I enjoy the process as well as the outcome.

Consider the realities of your life and environment:

- What are your musical goals?
- How much practicing is necessary to accomplish your goals?
- How much practicing can you do given your responsibilities and schedule?

### **Planning your practice time**

When organizing practice time, the tendency is to plan blocks of time for specific tasks (scales and arpeggios, etudes, orchestral excerpts and solo repertoire) at each session.

That kind of system is a good way to establish practicing habits. But it may not be an effective regimen for every practicing purpose.

I suggest that practice sessions should have 3 parts:

- 1) warming-up
- 2) main work (practicing!)
- 3) planning for the next session.

Warming up prior to the main work allows you to check all the basic factors: instrument, reed, tone, ear and rhythmic sense. Think of warming up as the walk-around check every pilot gives his plane before starting the engines.

The main work, of course, is practicing - an opportunity for repetitive work on the music you need to know. Many strategies for repetition are shown in the section "Practicing strategies". It is curious that we often refer to our performing as work, but we spend the majority of our time preparing to perform. I propose we also think of our practicing as work.

Plan for the next session while cleaning and putting away your instrument. Sticky notes or a notebook can help with reminders.

Decide on the best use of your practice time by considering:

- Your goals for personal development and improvement.
- The demands of your employment.
- The deadlines of your musical events (concerts, recitals, auditions).
- The physical conditions of your performing environment.
- Your physical condition and mental endurance.

Musicians practice differently from each other. Each player's approach, emphasis and time allotments will be different. Furthermore, a musician's practicing will change over time depending on goals, employment demands and the personal need for development. Decide on your practicing routine based upon what works for you.

Disconnect reed-making time from practicing time. While the one may blend into the other, time can be lost in a never-never land between reed-making and practicing. That is especially true when breaking-in a new reed. Reed-making usually needs to come before practicing; a bassoonist cannot practice without a functioning reed. During a practice session some simple, quick adjustments to the reed can be done. But, if bigger, time-consuming adjustments are necessary, that reed is not in practicing condition.

### **Limited practice time**

Let's face it, not having enough time to practice is so common that it is often the normal situation for many working musicians. We need to recognize that and be as efficient as possible with the time we have so we can continue to make music. It is a waste of time and energy to feel guilty about the situation.

Practice time can be limited when we are:

- On tour.
- Teaching full-time.
- Occupied as full-time homemakers, parents or care-givers.
- Employed in a full-time occupation outside of music.
- Students with big academic loads.
- Faced with short work-up time prior to a performance.
- (Whispered very quietly,) we haven't practiced enough when we had the time!
- Or any combination of the above.

I recommend the following steps:

- Set aside regular practice time, remembering that two shorter daily sessions may be more effective than one longer session.
- Practice when you are physical and mentally in your most alert state. Avoid leaving practicing to the last thing in the day; consider practicing before doing anything else.
- Make firm decisions about the music that needs to be practiced; consider event deadlines, personal learning speed and available practice time.
- Isolate the unplayable from the playable passages in the music; practice the unplayable (hard) stuff.
- Consider reducing another area of your schedule to allow for concentrated practice time.
- Return often to difficult passages; learn them in increments by tackling one element at a time: pitches, rhythm, articulations, phrasing, dynamics, tempo.
- Eliminate all unnecessary and time-wasting practicing habits to accomplish your goals.
- Be firm about interruptions to practice time; do not answer the phone or the door! Put up a sign:

WORK IN PROGRESS or

MUSICIAN WORKING - PLEASE DO NOT DISTURB

- If your practice room has a door with a window, temporarily block the window to reduce distractions.

## **No time to practice**

If you have NO TIME to practice :

- Make sure you have an operating reed.
- Use an efficient warm-up routine.

Eventually, perhaps sooner than you expect, an absence of practicing catches up with you. If you suspect that is happening, or someone has hinted at it, you should immediately consider changing your schedule to allow practice time.

## **The practicing environment and equipment**

The ideal circumstances for practicing are:

- A regularly occurring, uninterrupted period of time.
- A safe location with nominal human comforts like good lighting, proper heat and ventilation, etc.
- Have everything you need available:
  - Instrument.
  - Music (even if you are playing from memory).
  - Water cup to soak reeds.
  - Reeds.
  - Reed tools for simple adjustment of reeds.
  - Metronome.
  - Tuner.
  - Pencil and eraser.
  - Note pad or sticky notes.
  - Drinking water.
  - Table or other place for case, accessories.
  - On some occasions, a recording machine with a decent microphone.
  - On some occasions, a mirror.

The following things are NOT needed:

- Telephone.
- Television.
- Radio, or other sound making medium.
- Newspapers, magazines.
- Gossipy friends or colleagues.

### **What to practice**

Independent musicians sometimes have difficulty deciding what to practice to maintain musicianship and physical skills. This is particularly true when regular lessons have ended. It is not always easy to find a balance between the time used for preparation of music for a regular job and that needed for our personal improvement and progress.

When you aren't sure what to practice, try some or all of these:

- Melodies. Experiment with different phrasings on familiar melodies.
- Rhythmical exercises and reading. Play through a book of rhythmic exercises or snare drum etudes.
- Key / scale cycle. Details are given in the section "Improving your technique".
- Dynamics. Work on widening your dynamic range in every register.
- Articulations. Expand your range of accented and unaccented articulations.
- Tuning and intonation. Play short melodies, scales and arpeggios against a drone pitch.
- Memory work. Memorize important passages and works.
- Sight reading. Have a sight-reading collection.
- Improvisation. Practice improvisation beyond the baroque and classical styles. Refer to Jamey Aebersold's *How to Play Jazz and Improvise*.
- Learn new solo or chamber repertoire

Having a network of musical friends (not necessarily bassoonists!) who act as advisers is helpful.

## **Slow tempos, our ego and playing faster**

Learning to play difficult or unknown music at a slow tempo is a universal practicing technique. But it is often difficult for us to make ourselves do it especially if the goal is a fast tempo. Playing fast music at a slow tempo makes us feel like beginners. We left that status some time ago and subconsciously wish to avoid it.

Working musicians have to return to some form of beginner stage whenever they learn new music. Sometimes, the beginner element will be very small, a fingering or an unusual rhythm; sometimes very large, a long solo work in an unusual style with many non-traditional techniques and complex rhythmic patterns.

Another factor is the amount of time it may take to learn to play fluently - up to tempo with expression and confidence. For some it can be accomplished quickly, but for others only after sustained effort over a long period of time.

When we are playing we carry out an enormous number of complex activities. The complexities of physical coordination and artistic expression are learned in segments. This reality is so difficult for some players to deal with that they resist learning new music and keep performing the music they feel comfortable with and know well.

Learning to play fast is a matter of efficiently combining lots and lots of small physical details. Strive to learn to play fast passages at a tempo that is slow enough to allow every note to be played accurately (see also "Priority order of learning new music").

Slice up problematic material into easy to digest (easy to practice!) smaller bits. The simile of bits and bytes in computers is useful here. As I type these words, my word processor is rapidly assembling the letters by means of the dedicated combinations of zeros and ones assigned to each letter, space and

punctuation. So it is with our practicing - we have to pay a lot of attention to many small details.

Avoid same tempo practicing. Changing tempos even slightly can relieve boredom and might give you some clues about difficulties you are encountering. My wife reminds me that it will also make you more flexible to the whims of a conductor on too much caffeine.

Sometimes you attain fast tempos unevenly - some parts up to tempo, others not. This may be a result of easier fingerings - in musician's parlance, "they lie well" - whereas, the other parts do not lie well or have other physical difficulties. In these cases, give the up-to-tempo parts less attention and concentrate practicing on the below tempo parts.

Sometimes the concern for being able to play fast enough is related to perceived or real limitations in a player's articulation. We'll tackle that in the section on articulation.

Most effective for me when learning to play faster are a variety of strategies, including:

- Practicing very short groups as fast as possible (AFAP).
- Re-phrasing, re-barring or re-beaming passages.
- Practicing from the end toward the beginning.
- Play first note of each measure, then first 2 notes of each measure, first 3, etc.
- Alternating slow / fast patterns.
- Being aware of relaxed, efficient and smooth use of the fingers and hands.
- Move metronome up 3 clicks, back 2 clicks or up 5 clicks, back 3 clicks (Also refer to "Metronome games").
- Memorize the passage for playing at any time without reference to the music.

**AVOID MINDLESS NOODLING** - always play the passages accurately!



To identify the best strategies for you, experiment with the ones in the "Practicing Strategies" section. Decide which ones work best for you.

### **How many repetitions?**

Establish a strategy for making repetitions as you practice. Simply repeating a passage until it is better is inefficient. After you have used your plan for a while and it doesn't seem to be working, adjust it until it works or try a different plan.

A strategy for repetitions of specific passages or groups within a passage:

- Assign phrasing to the passage before repetitive practicing.
- Perform NO LESS THAN THREE, NOR MORE THAN EIGHT REPEATS of any one pattern.
- Change to another pattern after a maximum of eight repetitions.
- Using various patterns, work on each passage for a short time, return to it later in the session using the same or different patterns.
- Check progress by playing the passage(s) with the rest of the music.
- Be prepared to revisit passages in subsequent practice sessions for success.

Each of us learns some new skills quickly, some slowly. Learn how you learn; keep track of the time it takes you acquire new skills for future reference.

Remember that dogged, physical repetition can lead to physical damage in the form of overuse syndrome. Separate your intense sessions of repetition with periods of very different physical work or rest.

### **Points of focus / attention**

Focusing only on just getting the notes is detrimental to musical playing. In order to determine what you are focusing on as you play, observe the following while playing some familiar music:

- Various locations of the sound coming out of the instrument.
- Sensation of fingering the instrument.
- Sensation of the instrument vibrating as you play.
- Appearance of notes on the page.
- Sensation of breathing and blowing into the instrument.
- Sensation of tonguing and position of the tongue.
- Your feelings.
- Posture.
- Lips (embouchure).
- Pulse of the music.
- Your surroundings.

Try changing your point of focus each time you play a passage. Decide which point of focus allows you to play the passage best.

### **Order of learning musical elements in new music**

For our purposes new music is any music you do not know. When learning new music, playing too fast, too soon is the most wasteful practicing habit. Apply your musical imagination to decide on phrasing, mood and emotional content of the music as soon as you have learned the pitches, rhythms and articulations. A reliable metronome is indispensable. It can also be helpful to hear recordings and refer to a full score. The following strategy for learning new music is illustrated in "Two pathways from unknown to known". It is also useful for memorizing music:

**PITCHES.** Play the pitches as even note values (for example, all slow quarters) while disregarding the rhythm, articulations and dynamics. Sing the notes, too.

RHYTHM. At a greatly reduced tempo, play the pitches in the correct rhythmic proportions. If the rhythm is very complicated, learn the rhythm BEFORE the pitches by clapping the beat while chanting the rhythm, or counting the beat while clapping the rhythm, or playing the rhythm on one pitch - or all three!

ARTICULATIONS. While continuing to play at a greatly reduced tempo, add the indicated articulations to the pitches and rhythms.

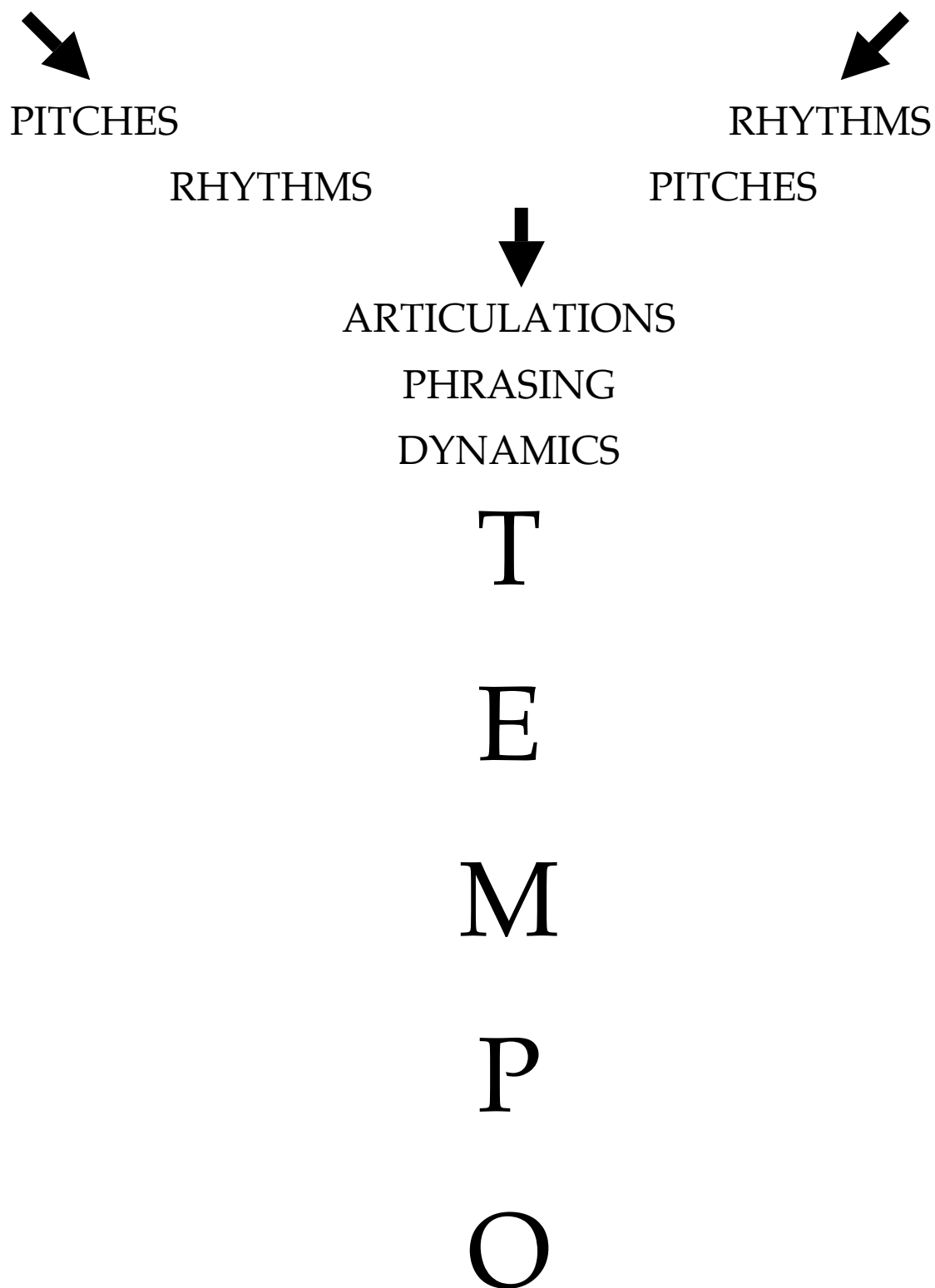
PHRASING. Once the pitches, rhythms and articulations are learned decide on the phrasing.

DYNAMICS. Continuing to play at a greatly reduced tempo add the indicated dynamics to the pitches, rhythms, phrasing and articulations. Adding dynamics may cause you to revise your phrasing.

TEMPO. After the first five elements have been mastered, work steadily toward the indicated tempo. Establishing very fast tempos usually takes the largest proportion of the time when learning new music. Use the various strategies for working toward fast tempos suggested in this book but always remember to invoke your phrasing.

**Learning any of the elements inaccurately will result in an enormous waste of time to correct the errors.**

## Two pathways from unknown to known



## Isolating the tough spots

I learned that I needed to isolate difficult places in the music I was learning. Isolating allowed me to concentrate on the difficulties and avoid being distracted by easy stuff in the rest of the work. After I conquered individual difficulties, I practiced using the complete part.

I became an obsessive excerpt writer, not just for orchestral excerpts but any difficult passage I encountered. Copying the music by hand helped me to learn the musical elements of the passage. As I did so I also became aware of how important the appearance of the notation is to my playing - messy notation seemed to encourage messy playing!

This is an old-fashioned system, but here is what I do to isolate the tough spots:

- on pieces of 8.5" X 11" ten stave manuscript paper, I hand-write as much of the passage as I need to learn. I copy on only one side of the paper
- if necessary, I write on every other staff line to leave room for fingerings and comments
- while I am practicing from them, I take the pages wherever I go so I can review them in those valuable minutes between rehearsals and performances
- after conquering the technical problems, I play from the complete part.
- I save my excerpts just in case I need them in the future.

I began this system when I was preparing to audition for the Toronto Symphony in 1968. In the weeks prior to the audition, I was on a six week, one night stand tour with the Chamber Symphony of Philadelphia. I knew that practice time would be extremely limited. I had to keep my material to a convenient and light-weight minimum, the published excerpt collection and orchestral parts were too bulky to carry.

I hand-copied single page excerpts for each of the audition pieces I expected might be on the audition. (Those were the days when orchestras did not publish the list of excerpts required for auditions.) At first I organized the excerpts into a

sequence by range and endurance that allowed them to act as a good warm up as well as an excerpt review. As the audition got closer, I also played them in random order. There were about fifty pages that fit neatly into a 9" X 12" envelope that I put in my bassoon case.

Most days we traveled all day. Practicing was only possible just before the concert. (Practicing in the morning was inadvisable while one's tour colleagues were sleeping!) When we arrived at the performance site, I'd find a location to do my work.

I played in all kinds of places: washrooms, boiler rooms, basement hallways, coat closets, stair wells, class rooms and rehearsal rooms. The variety of conditions was good preparation because I did not know what environment to expect at the audition.

My colleagues knew I was working hard on the audition. On a day off, there was a knock on my door. Two of my friends came in and said, "Play your stuff for us, Chris. Pretend we're the audition committee." They gave me some great pointers and I was very grateful to them.

Over the years I've kept making excerpts of the tough spots to practice. Nowadays, it is possible to photocopy excerpts or to write them with a music notation program on a computer, but for some problematic passages, I still like to write them out by hand.

Determine your best system for isolating the tough spots.

### **Efficient practicing**

Move toward sensible, effective practicing by considering your efficiency. One of my chamber music coaches was the late Broadus Earle, a great violinist and teacher. He related that as a student at the Curtis Institute of Music, he discovered that a lot of his required technical exercises were pointless repetitions of material that was, in fact, continuously duplicating itself. While

some duplication was necessary, he realized that much of it appeared to be unnecessary.

He carefully edited his exercises so he would cover all the important techniques in every practice session but eliminated needless duplication. He was successful in building his technique and finding more time and energy to practice the other required material in his lessons. The proof, as they say, is in the pudding: he had a highly successful career as a chamber musician and concertmaster and was an inspiring pedagogue.

- Eliminate needless duplication.
- Avoid pointless busy work and mindless noodling, practice as if you have a limited number of notes in your fuel tank.
- Are you practicing the easy stuff and neglecting the hard stuff?
- Use constructive self-criticism, avoid destructive self-criticism.
- To avoid pain, rest 5 minutes after 25 minutes of steady practicing.
- To avoid boredom, change the repetitive patterns or work on something different.

### **Various kinds of practicing**

The following kinds of practicing can take place during the main work of practicing: Learning, Reviewing, Maintaining and Specific Goal practicing. Each require different time commitments. You might have to incorporate all four kinds of practicing into one practice session, or they can be separate sessions.

LEARNING notes means encountering them for the first time - or after they have been forgotten. It may take place over repeated sessions and an extended period of time. This kind needs the most patient and detailed attention.

REVIEWING notes means becoming re-acquainted with music which has been previously learned. It may take place at any time after a period of not playing the music.

MAINTENANCE practicing is regular and frequent review of works, passages or repertoire to keep them in top shape. Use it for maintaining your endurance

and basic technical skills and for important orchestral excerpts and troublesome solo repertoire.

SPECIFIC GOAL occurs when you are working toward a specific important event such as a recital, audition or concerto performance. It will require you to keep your goal firmly in mind. This kind of practicing is similar to training for an athlete.

All four kinds of practice described above may be required at one time or another to accomplish the goal.

### **Long term preparation (training?)**

For performances, examinations or auditions requiring a lot of advanced preparation think of your self as being in training. Training is associated with athletics and the military, but the concepts behind training are useful for musicians. The two words, practicing and training, have similar meanings but training seems to imply more specific goals.

As a performance deadline approaches, it is important to play through all the works *including the rests* in the performance order without stopping to correct errors. Non-stop playing allows you to:

- Get used to performing all the music.
- Assess the physical and emotional endurance needed for the performance.
- Reduce small playing errors.

You can make a note in between movements of the places needing more repetition. Practice the places needing work after finishing your run-through.

Prior to performing, avoid eating foods that make it uncomfortable to play. I avoid dairy products, salads and beans. I prefer pasta (for the "carbs") and I like to finish the meal by one hour before the performance.



## **Defeating boredom during practice**

If boredom creeps in, practicing becomes tedious 'busy work'. Practicing is normally a larger proportion of our work than rehearsing and performing. Strive to make it as enjoyable as possible.

If you find yourself bored with what you are doing, change the work. Review your musical goals for the passage, then vary the repetitive pattern or move to other work.

To avoid tiring the muscles and the mind, rest for five minutes after every twenty-five minutes of steady practicing. Put your instrument down, move around and stretch your muscles.

Allow your musical goals to illuminate, enlighten and direct your practicing so the work is never boring, monotonous, or humdrum.

## **The enemies of effective practicing**

Lack of clear personal or musical goals.

Lack of confidence in our personal success as a musician.

Lack of confidence in our progress as a result of practice.

Boredom.

Fatigue.

Distractions.