

The Game of Practice

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BUILDING A STRENGTH AND WEAKNESS LIST

Many students work on the wrong aspects of their playing, or they do not have a good plan on how to improve a skill. I feel that the main problem is students not having an accurate and HONEST assessment of their skills. Take the time to truthfully identify your strengths and weaknesses. When you define these clearly, then you can isolate problems and determine exercises that will help you feel improvement in a matter of days, versus weeks or months. We all know the frustration that we feel when we work hard but do not realize any progress. The solution involves defining the problem, choosing the correct exercise, and making sure you do it.



Think of all the times your teacher or conductor tells you to improve a skill, but you avoid it, or you think it is not a priority. Later, a guest artist or judge at a competition writes comments on the same issue (and secretly your teacher smiles inside and wants to say, "I told you so!"). Avoid this frustration. Isolate and correct the problem now!

THE PROCESS

Start by picking a General Area of playing and then a specific Problem Area that describes the issue you are having. Choose three to five aspects to put on each side of the Strength & Weakness List. Avoid feeling overwhelmed by this process by thinking about your 25 weaknesses. There should be some balance, and keeping the list short will help focus practice time. If you feel the need, you can also put together a Waitlist of the next 2 to 4 aspects that you feel belong on your List.



Find a friend you trust (or your teacher) and ask them their thoughts on your Strength & Weakness List. Many times, people learn that the perspective behind the mouthpiece is not the same as that of an audience member. You might be surprised by some of the things other people think you need to practice.



Try to revisit and evaluate your Strength & Weakness List every few weeks (the 1st and 15th day of the month are great times to do this). With quality, isolated practice, you should sense some progress on the Weakness list each time you re-evaluate. You might be able to slightly increase a tempo or find that your range has improved by a half or whole step. If you do not feel like anything is progressing, then you need to adjust the exercises, quantity of practice, or how you practice. Overall, the progress you make might not be enough to remove an item from your Weakness list, but it might be enough to make it a lower priority or that something on the Waitlist becomes higher on the list.



For players seeking a performance career, I like to rename the Strength & Weakness List to the Hired & Fired List. There is TREMENDOUS truth in that statement, and it drives home the importance of having a successful audition.

Let's play...

Strength and Weakness Evaluation Form

Be honest and prioritize the aspects of playing that restrict your music-making. Choosing a general concept and being specific will help guide your practice and progress. If you have trouble coming up with the list, reference the *Table of Contents* as a guide. If you struggle making progress, make sure you have defined your goals and are working consistently and intelligently during your practice time.



Make a few copies of this list before you fill it out (There is an extra copy in the back of the book). Evaluate yourself every 2 to 4 weeks. Keep the lists and track your progress.

Name

Date

Strengths

1

2

3

4

Weaknesses (Use the *Table of Contents* as a guide)

1

2

3

4

Waitlist (if needed)

1

2

3



After you make your list, ask a trusted friend or teacher to evaluate you also. Compare the lists—it will be very interesting to see which topics are similar and which are different. Take heart in the honest perspectives of the people you trust. Being behind the mouthpiece is not always the clearest viewpoint.

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Chapter 1 – Dynamic Control 4

1. Different dynamics do not sound different
2. Lack awareness of how air feels between different dynamics
3. Loud dynamics are not loud
4. Soft dynamics are not soft
5. Tuning is a problem whenever I change dynamics
6. Crescendos are not effective or smooth
7. Decrescendos are not effective or smooth
8. Sudden dynamic changes (subito) are not effective or sudden
9. It is difficult to play soft in the high range
10. It is difficult to play loud in the low range
11. I need BIGGER louds and smaller softs

Chapter 2 – Articulation Variety 20

1. Lack of awareness that different articulations do not sound different
2. Staccato/Short notes are not really short
3. Tenuto note attacks are mushy and the tempo slows down
4. Short, medium, and long notes are not effective
5. Lack of awareness about different articulations strengths
6. Accents do not sound accented, just louder
7. Accents are too short
8. Unclear difference between normal, accent, and marcato
9. I think my notes are shorter but my teacher or conductor say they are medium
10. I think my notes are accented but my teacher or conductor say they sound normal

Appendix

1. Tools and Technology Guide
2. Strength and Weakness Evaluation Form