

The quality of your practice is much more important than the quantity. The old saying "practice makes perfect" is only true if the practice itself is perfect. Here are 7 tips to help make your practice more effective and efficient.

Practice motions slowly

The muscular memory of our bodies allows us to physically carry out patterns of motion with little or no conscious involvement.

Examples of muscular memory include walking, riding a bicycle, typing, and of course playing a musical instrument.

In order to develop this memory, the muscles require training in the form of repeated conscious guidance from the mind. First the mind must learn the pattern. Then the mind must "teach" the pattern to the muscles.

The mind initially must control all the motions of the muscles. The more controlled and precise the motions, the more quickly the muscles will develop muscle memory.

Slow practice also allows the mind to teach "antagonistic muscles" to relax. Antagonistic muscles are those that move in opposite directions.

By relaxing antagonistic muscles you can reduce tension and facilitate faster and easier performance and avoid potential injury.

Practice in small cells

A "practice cell" is simply a finite series of motions. Musical cells can correspond to anything from a few notes to an entire work. When practicing, it is important to practice small cells of just a few notes. Practicing small cells limits the amount of information the muscles have to learn at one time. It also facilitates the mind's focus and concentration.

Link the end of one cell to the beginning of the next

To help the muscles develop a sense of continuum throughout the piece of music, the last motion in a cell should be the first motion of the following cell.

Practice each cell in bursts

Once the muscles have learned a pattern, they will be capable of executing it without conscious

control. Initiate the pattern through a conscious command and allow the muscles to execute it in a burst.

Don't practice mistakes

For every repetition required to learn a pattern of motion, it takes 7 times the number of repetitions to change the pattern. If in the course of your practice you make an error, stop. Review in your mind the pattern. And further reduce the speed of your motions.

Pause between repetitions

When dealing with repetitive activities, the mind is better able to focus when the repetitions are broken up by short pauses. After two or three repetitions, pause for about 30 seconds to regain focus.

Take frequent breaks and don't "over-practice"

B.F. Skinner and other experts have found that the mind's ability to learn drops significantly after prolonged intense concentration. Research shows that studying too long (i.e. more than four hours) can deplete chemicals in the brain necessary for learning.

Therefore, it is best to take frequent breaks (a 5 minute break about every 20-25 minutes) and practice no more than 4 hours consecutively.

By applying these techniques, you can dramatically improve the quality of your practice. You'll be able to use your time more efficiently and increase the effectiveness of your practice.