

Thoughts on Practice

Rev 4

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Practice is profound.

I came to taiko relatively late in life, at the age of 18, with no percussion or dance experience. When I think back to playing taiko for the first time, I only remember being overcome by the music, but apparently I was particularly bad at it. One of the Stanford Taiko members who evaluated my audition now says, “After the first day, I was sure we were going to cut you.”

In the 14 years since, I’ve thought a lot about practice. I’ve come to consider the ability to practice my most critical skill as a professional musician, and my practice successes and failures mirror my personal strengths and deficiencies.

The following tips and techniques have helped me practice. I hope they are helpful for others too.

Practice practicing

There is a simple truth of practice: the more we practice, the better we become. Our path to improvement is straight-forward — we will be rewarded for our work — but we will *only* be rewarded for working. Practice is strict and stingy, doling out measured rewards for hours of trouble. And it is fiercely single-minded, with no regard for life’s other responsibilities. Combined with the fact that the other responsibilities in my life tend to be more formalized, with due dates, impatient bosses, and financial necessities, my usual struggle is to keep practice at its proper priority level.

Practice is mental

Although playing taiko is obviously physical, I think of taiko practice as primarily “brain work”. Taiko requires coordination rather than strength, and playing the drums is more like juggling than weight lifting. When I practice taiko, I try to create situations that foster *mental* improvement. When I want to exercise, I run.

Practice is solitary

I practice alone and in small groups, where I can focus on exactly what I need, at exactly the right speed. Whereas group rehearsal is the place to

run pieces, develop drills, and collaborate on new ideas, I do the every-day, methodical, detailed practice of technique on my own.

Foster obsessions

We taiko players are faced with a panoply of challenges — rhythm, movement, improvisation, different drums and playing styles — and it's often difficult to know what to practice. I focus on whatever interests me most and try to nourish a passion for a particular technique. I go through phases, spending a few years on one drumming style or technique before being inspired by the next. Thankfully, everything is related.

Make practice enjoyable

Practice should be fun. Learning how to make practice fun has had the most dramatic impact on my abilities. When practice is fun, it is more effective and I stand a better chance of doing it often and for longer periods.

Practice is a life-long endeavor. All of our efforts should go toward making practice a healthy, fun, and sustainable part of our lives.

Be selfish

I only practice what I want.

Avoid monotony

I move on to something else as soon as I get bored. I think a commitment to enjoying practice will have more long-term benefit than “gutting out” any particular drill. That having been said, some drills are inherently repetitive and I try and find ways to keep myself engaged. When I fail at that, I do something else.

Measure improvement, not practice time

The amount of time we practice is far less important than the quality of our practice. Instead of counting the number of times I do a drill, I do it as long as I can stay interested. Sometimes this is only 30 seconds.

5 minutes is enough

Sometimes I can't motivate to practice for an hour and so I won't practice at all. Instead, I try and tell myself that 5 minutes is enough.

You are your own measure

I also try to avoid comparing the amount of my practice time to other people's. I compare my current abilities to older video and audio recordings.

Mix practice into your daily life

During a small-drum technique phase, I put a practice pad and batchi in plain view on my desk. I put another pair of sticks in my car and found myself disappointed when traffic jams started moving again. I put a pair of shakers in the bathroom. The first thing I do when I wake up is sing through my current composition hoping for new ideas.

Practice the hard stuff

Avoid playing only comfortable rhythms.

Treat deficiencies like discoveries

When I discover a technique that is particularly vexing, I try to be happy for its discovery. I used to dwell in the unpleasantness of the shock — “Why can’t I play this?!” Now I rejoice. “I know exactly what to work on!”

Start drills at a ridiculously slow tempo

Resist the urge to speed up when playing something challenging. Start at a tempo that is so slow that the drill seems silly and speed up from there.

Practice relaxed

Tension is the enemy of practice.

Honestly, practice relaxed!

When I first moved to Japan, I set a number of ambitious practice goals for myself and I diligently practiced every day for two hours. After three months of this, however, I could not see much improvement in my abilities. Some things even seemed to be getting worse. I was extremely discouraged; my most scrupulous practice was proving ineffectual.

I now understand my error. I had let myself practice tense. When my arms would start to tighten up during an extended drill, I assumed I was building muscle and that this was good for me. I figured, “when I go running my legs burn, why is this any different?”

Drumming dexterity is a function of the brain’s ability to control the array of muscles in the arms. When we practice tense, we’re effectively training our brains to arbitrarily tighten all the muscles at once — we have stopped practicing.

Have a question ready

At every lesson, I try to have at least one question for my teacher.

Don’t beat yourself up over *not* practicing

Unquestionably, to become great taiko players we *must* practice. In fact, we would be our best if we dedicated every waking minute of every day toward improving as taiko players. But no-one does this. We all take time to study other things, to accomplish other goals, and to relax. We go through cycles of heavy practice and down-time. My goal is to find the proper balance of taiko

practice in my life, and find ways to continue adding more time to taiko without tipping the scales out of whack. When I'm busy with a family emergency, when I'm exhausted, or when I find myself engulfed in an unrelated but exciting non-taiko project, I *shouldn't* be practicing taiko, and I should let myself feel okay about that.

Share your tips! Do you know other practice tips that have worked for you? Please share at <http://onensemble.org/2008/10/essay-thoughts-on-practice/>