

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 experience. 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.”

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

Practice practicing

My biggest struggle is to keep practice at its proper priority level, protected from the other responsibilities in my life.

Practice is mental

Although playing taiko is obviously physical, taiko practice is primarily “brain work”. It requires coordination rather than strength. Foster *mental* improvement in practice, for strength, go swimming.

Practice is solitary

Practice alone, where you can focus on exactly what you need, at exactly the right speed. Then bring these skills to group *rehearsal*, where the focus is the ensemble.

Foster obsessions

Knowing what to practice is difficult; shime vs nagado, choreography vs timing? Try to nourish an obsession and use that motivation to deeply practice a particular topic.

Make practice enjoyable

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

Only practice what you want.

Avoid monotony

Trick yourself into staying engaged during repetitive drills. When that fails, stop. Making a commitment enjoying practice will have greater long-term benefit than gutting out a particular drill.

Focus on engagement, not practice time

Time practiced is less important than the impact of our practice. 30-seconds of total engagement with a drill will often have more impact than extended repetition.

A 5-minute practice counts as practice

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

Avoid comparing practice time to others', except when it inspires you to more practice.

Use video

Make and save video recordings of yourself. Slow and incremental improvement will be revealed by old recordings.

Mix practice into your daily life

Put a practice pad and batchi in plain view on your desk. Put another pair of sticks in your car. Put a pair of shakers in the bathroom. Sing through a current composition immediately after waking up.

Practice the hard stuff

Avoid playing only comfortable rhythms.

Treat deficiencies like discoveries

I used to dwell in the unpleasantness of discovering a weakness — "Why can't I play this?!" Now I rejoice: "I know exactly what to work on!"

Start drills at a ridiculously slow tempo

When playing something challenging, resist the urge to speed up. Start at a tempo so slow that the drill seems silly. Speed up from this place of total control.

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 improvement in my abilities. Some things 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 rehearsal, every workshop, have a taiko question ready.

Don’t beat yourself up over *not* practicing

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. The goal is to find the proper balance of taiko practice in one’s life, and find ways to carve out more taiko time without tipping the balance.

Share your tips!

Do you have other practice tips? Please share at <http://onensemble.org/2008/10/essay-thoughts-on-practice/>