

# How to Practice

A music teacher is very important to anyone who is trying to become a better musician, but a teacher cannot make you a better musician; a teacher can only tell you how to improve. The actual improvement has to be done by you, and on your own time.

A private or band lesson is a time to show the teacher what you are doing at the moment, the teacher will then tell you what to work on, and how to work on it. You don't have time to practice during a lesson; you are there to get the insight needed in order to improve. Individual practice is absolutely necessary if you want to improve and become a better musician.

It is important not just to practice, but to practice properly. To make the most progress in your individual practice time make sure to include the following:

## Individual Practice Should Include:

- Setting goals
- Setting practice times
- Warming up
- Working at it
- Sight-reading
- Cool down
- Evaluation

## Set Goals

Your practice should have long-term, medium-term, and short-term goals.

What are your long-term goals as a Piper? Do you want to compete as a soloist? Do you want to compete with the Band? Are there particular pieces of music you'd like to be able to play? You need to know where you would eventually like to end up setting medium- and short-term goals. Your medium goals may be to find less difficult pieces to play in order to prepare you to play the pieces you can't play yet. You may need to improve your tonal quality, your tuning, or finger technique. Your short-term goal may be to work slowly through one line of a piece of music with correct finger technique. Your short-term goals should be very specific and something you can achieve. Whatever goals you choose, we're here to help you achieve them.

## Set Practice Times

How often and how long should I practice? Practicing often is much more important than having lengthy practice sessions. How long and how frequently you practice is a matter of preference, though the greater your commitment, the greater the benefit. It's not the quantity of practice time it's the quality of the practice session which will make the difference. Some pipers play 10-15 minutes every day. Others like to set aside longer blocks of time – perhaps 30-45 minutes three or four times a week. Even three weekly sessions of 15 minutes each will make a noticeable difference in your playing ability. As Lou Holtz used to say, *"Practice doesn't make perfect. Perfect practice makes perfect."*

The better Piper or you become the more you have to practice in order to continue to improve. Practicing every day is ideal. Skipping a day occasionally won't hurt, and may even rest your muscles. But after skipping a day, you will start the next practice session further behind than you were on the day before you skipped; skipping a day more than once a week will make progress difficult. If you don't have time one day for a full practice session doing warm-ups or cool-downs is better than skipping a day. Whatever schedule you devise, either rigorous or more relaxed, choose one you can maintain comfortably for an extended period of time without being bored. Initial progress will be slow as you learn the notes and decide which exercises suit you. With time and proper instruction, you will develop a routine and your preferred exercises will become committed to memory. Small improvements are significant.

## **Warm Up**

Playing an instrument is the same as being an athlete. Don't play the hard stuff cold; you won't be playing to the best of your ability, it's a waste of time, energy and can be very frustrating. Warm ups may seem like they have no value but they can be some of the most productive minutes of your practice time. What are warm ups - If you are having problems playing a particular movement in a tune remove it from the tune and play it slowly and precisely from every note of the scale. If your long-term goal is to play the big tunes or get into the top bands; you have to have your scales down cold. Warm ups should be easy – you're getting your mind and body into the playing groove – in order to have a great practice start with the easy stuff. Sure it's only scales but playing them with the best technique and best musicality you have will lead to big payoffs later. So take a few minutes and play some exercises slowly and precisely.

## **Work On It**

Once you have warmed up get out the stuff you want to work on. Some tips for improving as fast as possible:

- ALWAYS play to a metronome! A metronome will help instill your piping with rhythm and tempo and help keep you on the beat.
- Keep it simple. Complex exercises and tunes are not necessarily the best. The simplest exercises are often the most useful.
- You can't practice everything in one session...don't even try. Focusing on one exercise or one movement and one tune is more effective than a shotgun approach.
- Play with focus. If your mind is wandering as you play the exercises, take a break. You'll make the most progress when you play with concentration.
- Practice makes permanent. Don't practice it wrong! Don't play wrong notes, leave notes out, or play wrong rhythms. This just teaches you to play incorrectly.
- If you can't play it right, slow it down enough that you can play all the notes correctly and in rhythm no matter how slow you have to go.
- Once you can play it slowly, speed it up a little, but never to a speed that you can't handle.
- Play through your music then skip the easy parts; they're easy! Concentrate on playing the hard parts, slow them down and practice them until you can play them with the correct technique and the right tempo.
- If there is a note or a movement you are having trouble with make it part of your warm up exercises and practice it every day.
- Easy does it. Exercises work the hands hard. When played too much, they can strain muscles. If your hands feel sore after practicing, take some time off and ease into the practice sessions.

## **Sight Reading**

The ability to play music that is put in front of you, with few errors, the first time you see it is one of the most useful skills a musician can have. Like any other skill, practicing it specifically develops the ability to sight-read well. Each practice session should have time spent reading through and trying to play a section of unfamiliar music. If large portions are too difficult for you to sight-read, begin with something easy and over a period of months, try to work up to reading more complex passages. Talk to your instructor for recommended tunes or download them from the Band website.

## **Cool Down**

While practicing the difficult parts of your music, you may have become tense, frustrated or slipped into bad technique or lost your musicality or tone. Always end your practice session by playing tunes you like and are easy for you. Relax and perform it for "yourself", play it with the very best technique and musicianship. This part of your practice helps develop a "repertoire" of music that you will always have ready for a performance.

## **Evaluate**

To help set goals for future practice sessions, evaluate each session. Don't be hypercritical but be objective.

- What progress did I make today on the difficult stuff?
- What is still giving me trouble, can I address this in warm ups?
- What should I work on in my next practice session?
- Am I trying to play something too difficult?

If it was going to be easy everyone would be doing it!