

## Practicing...It's Not Magic By Oystein Baadsvik

I once gave a master class in Taipei, Taiwan where I was working with one gifted student along with six others. At one point in the class we recorded the student's performance of the first movement of the Vaughan Williams *Concerto* played with a metronome. After listening to the performance, we agreed that a lot of things were good but in one particular 16-note passage the performer was obviously dragging.

"And what is the solution to that?" I asked him. Silence. "Anyone?" Everyone in the room looked at each other and wondered what kind of magic would be needed to deal with the problem of playing too slowly. They were obviously waiting for me, the "master," to say something really smart. Because the solution was so obvious, I declined to do so. After the collective quest for a solution had come to a halt, the youngest student in the room suddenly raised his hand and suggested, "Maybe he should... play it faster?" I could see the older students' slight embarrassment when they got this simple and obvious advice from their younger colleague: If you play too slow, you can fix it by playing faster. The soloist played again, and after a couple of attempts the passage was in tempo and sounded fine.

It is pretty easy and not magic at all. Most important is that the student did it himself, without any wise words from me. What do we learn from this example, and why do I even bother spending time writing about such a seemingly simple thing? Because this example describes a typical and very important challenge both for students and for teachers in music education. My guess is that if you are a teacher yourself, you recognize the situation. You spend lots of time correcting students on issues that they perfectly well could, and should, have fixed themselves. The result is that students eventually believe that they need a teacher to fix everything. The students become dangerously passive and don't develop their own ears.

### So, what can the student do him/herself?

The student should do him/herself everything they are able to detect with their ears and that they can pull off technically. That covers most everyday challenges like tempo stability, tempo changes, articulations (accents, *tenuto*, *staccato*), dynamics, correct notes, and in most cases, intonation. On the other hand, advancing skills like breathing, playing posture, tonguing, and interpretation absolutely require a good teacher. Sometimes the everyday issues are closely linked to technical skills where the teacher is needed for guidance; for example unwanted diminuendos may result from poor breathing technique.

You might claim that most students have problems noticing when they drag or rush, and therefore need a teacher to point it out for them. It is true that it can be difficult to hear your own mistakes while playing, but for most students it is easy to hear someone else's mistakes. When actively using a recording device and their ears, students are more able to spot and deal with everyday issues. Cost is not an issue. Most cell phones are great recorders for practicing use.

It strikes me even when judging top level international solo competitions that many of the candidates simply fail to play what's on the page. They might make unconscious tempo changes or miss accents, dynamics, and even notes that are written in the score. Since most students are capable of recognizing such flaws when listening to others, this tells me that they have simply not listened enough to themselves. You don't need a teacher to tell you that you are dragging, rushing, or missing articulations and dynamics. It is just a waste of your (or your parents') hard earned money and the teacher's time.

For these particular issues, spend your money on a recording device instead and spend your time on listening to yourself and practicing! The bonus: you develop your ears, your most precious asset as a musician. I sometimes ask students,

"Do you record yourself?"

"Yes, of course."

"Do you listen to the recording?"

"No..."

### **Here is how you do it.**

1. Record a passage in your piece. A line, a page, or a movement.
2. Listen to it and pick a small isolated issue that you want to focus on. It could be an interval, tempo, articulation, or dynamics. Place a Post-It note next to the spot.
3. FIX IT!
4. Record the spot again. Don't waste time recording the easy parts!
5. Confirm that you can hear the improvement. Seriously! If you don't improve, you are wasting your time.
6. If it sounds good, enjoy the success and jump to the next challenge. If it doesn't, go back to step 3.

The next day, confirm that all the fixes are still there. If not, go back to step 3. It is very normal that things you fixed yesterday will take a slight step back the next day. In the long run, it will be better. You thought that you did that *crescendo*, accent, the steady tempo, or the *pianissimo*, but you can't hear it on the recording? Chances are that you are not doing it, or doing too little. Back to step 3! Most importantly - don't stop the process before you ACTUALLY can hear that *crescendo*. And that you ACTUALLY can hear those accents in the right place. And that you ACTUALLY can confirm that you are keeping the tempo. Record yourself with a metronome to check tempo. Record yourself with a synthesized accompaniment to check intonation. The latter can be done by typing the piano part into a computer notation program and playing along with that. I will get back to interpretation in another article. At the moment, we are simply trying to play what is on the paper.

When you have handled all the details throughout the piece, cement it by repeating the success ten times a day for 100 days. Do checks with the recording machine every second week to see if you have lost any details anywhere. I can hear you say *I don't have time for all this!* Then, don't become a musician. Seriously, it does not take a lot of time. Here is an example. Let's say the piece is five minutes long. We assume that it is within your technical range. If not, choose an easier piece and continue to work on basics. You don't want to bang your head against the wall with a piece you can't possibly handle technically. Unless it makes you very happy and motivated to do so! The initial bar-to-bar work with the recording device takes about an hour a day for three weeks. Minus Sundays. The cementing takes totally  $10 \times 5 = 50$  minutes a day over three and a half months. You have now spent around four months in total, with less than one hour a day, and you will know the piece as the back of your hand. For your own sanity, make sure you play something totally unnecessary just for fun each day in addition to the hard work.

This is a very short time span in the music business. If you are a tuba student wanting to learn the Vaughan Williams *Concerto* for future orchestral auditions, this is an investment for life for a very modest price. It will not cost you only time, sweat, and dedication.

Since you will become your own teacher during this time, you should keep in mind that everyone is different. If you know that you are the lazy type, like me, you might need to kick yourself in the butt now and then to keep up the discipline. If you are very self critical, you should make sure to give yourself a pat on the shoulder when needed.

### **A note on practicing technique**

You don't practice to fill the practicing hours, nor to make your teacher happy. You practice for a single reason- to become better. Not next year, not next month, but today! There is no reason to wait. You are supposed to play with better dynamics in that hard passage now than you did yesterday. You are supposed to keep the tempo better at letter G in the third movement now than an hour ago. When working on that tough accent bar, you are actually supposed to hit more accents now than five minutes ago. Even the tiniest of improvements is a victory. If you just play a single *crescendo* better than you did a minute ago it is a victory. And I cannot stress enough that whether you think that you do the accent, the *crescendo*, or keep the tempo is totally irrelevant. The only thing that matters is what the audience can actually hear. That is why you need to record yourself and listen from the outside.

**The bad news:** You must take more responsibility for your own development. You have little excuse for not playing what's on the paper. You cannot practice without ears and brain anymore. You will need to make time for real practicing. In addition, at first glance this might seem like a slow learning method.

**The good news:** Learning a piece of music is not magic. Not only can you handle most everyday issues yourself, but in fact, you are the only one who can. You develop the crucial art of listening. It is fun to notice immediate improvement and this is the absolute fastest method if you seriously want to learn a piece of music.

### **The imagination**

I find that all musicians have a pretty clear image of what they can do technically, but more importantly and sadly, what they cannot do. They have defined themselves to be on a certain step of the skill ladder so to speak. When giving master classes, I often find that the students can play on a much higher level than they thought they could. I often ask the student who their musical idol is. A trombonist might say Christian Lindberg. Well, how would Mr. Lindberg have played this phrase, I ask him. All of a sudden the student plays much better than before, lifting the trombone, playing out to the audience, and shaping phrases. All because he is now has a clear image in his head of how he wants it to sound.

But immediately afterwards, the student falls back to his old level again.

It is almost as if some people prefer to stay on a lower step. Maybe out of convenience, or fear of the pressure that comes with high expectations. When practicing, it is almost impossible to reach a higher step on the ladder than you can imagine yourself. So, in order to reach far, you must start with your imagination. You must create an inner image of yourself on a higher level than you are now. Your ideal image of your own playing. A goal to reach for. If your attitude is "we will see what happens," it is very difficult to go far. If you say to yourself, "this is what I want to happen," you have a much greater chance of success. This is true in the long term planning as well as in the minute to minute practicing.