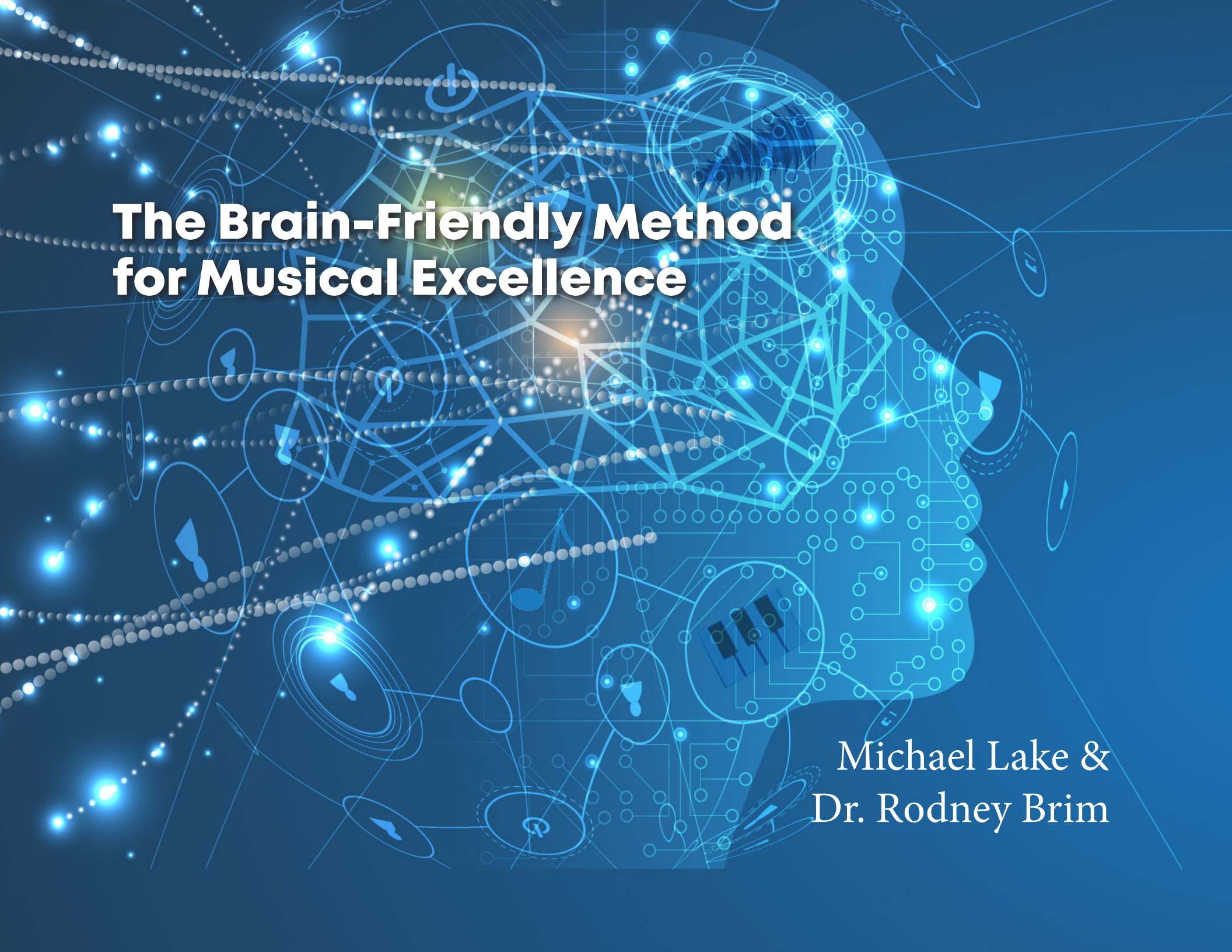




The Brain-Friendly Method for Musical Excellence

Michael Lake &
Dr. Rodney Brim



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I want to thank Dr. Rodney Brim for his great insight into the workings of the brain, and how those workings effect musical instrument performance. Dr. Brim is a Psychologist, Performance Improvement Expert, and multi-instrumentalist.

Dr. Brim came to my attention after he bought my book Trombone Improvisation Savvy and wrote me that I was on to something different. We struck up a conversation and friendship, and found that we had much in common, not the least of which was trombone playing.

One more piece of credit for Dr. Brim is the idea of “Brain-Friendly” for the title of this ebook. He used that term to describe an activity that accommodated the nature of the brain. That accommodation allows the brain to be optimally efficient and therefore, in it’s highest and best state for doing and learning.

If you can become brain friendly at an activity, you will more quickly conquer that skill and climb to the limits of your imagination.

Michael Lake
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My name is Michael Lake. I am a Grammy nominated trombonist who started out playing piano when I around 10. I play trombone professionally as well as write and record music. I've coached musicians both locally and long distance and have written several books on trombone, improvisation, rhythm, ear development and other musical topics that have sold throughout the world.

Over the past several years through my playing, teaching, and writing, I've been thinking a lot about musicianship. Why do some people become good at playing their instrument while others don't develop their music skills as well or as quickly as they want? Well, I think I've got some answers to that question and I believe that they might help you play your instrument better quicker – whatever instrument and whatever level you currently find yourself.

My original idea for the content of this ebook was a video script for a more general look at helping musicians improve their playing – in several areas: ear training, developing better rhythm, improvisation, and how to practice. But as I thought more about it and thought about how much I had to say just about practicing, and seeing so many players not really knowing how best to practice, I decided to create this content on how to become a better player through improving one's skill at practicing.

You've probably heard the phrase, practice makes perfect. Well, that's not necessarily true. It depends. It depends on how and what you practice. Practice can actually make you worse if you don't know how to practice, so for anyone learning to play a musical instrument,





learning how to practice well is a critical skill, but one few people teach.

This ebook is for anyone learning any instrument. Whether you are learning piano, guitar, sax, or bagpipes, I'll show you how to best use your practice time to play as well as you want to play. I won't be showing you *which* notes to play since there are tons of great online courses and private teachers that can show you that.

Instead, I'll show you how to use your brain more effectively to more quickly play those notes with more ease and musicality. The best musicians don't need to think so hard about the notes they're playing. The music is under their fingers from years of hard practicing. So, my objective is to help you go from your current skill level to that of how you dream of playing.

The focus of this ebook is how to practice. Practice so that you get the most out of your limited time. What currently takes you weeks, you can accomplish in days, maybe even hours. You will learn how to have fun practicing because, as I'll discuss, if you are bored, your brain shuts down and you will stop getting better.

As you'll see, practicing is much more than just running exercises or playing songs over and over and over and over. It's a discipline of intense concentration, setting and meeting specific goals, constant self-evaluation, flexible use of strategies, and seeing the big picture. You'll also learn how to prepare physically and mentally so that you'll be stronger and in a better state to play.

Think about this: tiny improvements in your practicing habits over years will result in huge improvements in your playing – more than the sheer numbers of hours you put into it.



This ebook is organized into 10 short sections. Here's what we'll cover throughout those 10 sections.

Section 1: *What you do with your brain is ten times more important than what you do with your fingers.* The importance of your brain in practicing relates to everything else in this subject. Once you align your practicing with the best workings of your brain, you become so much more effective at playing or doing anything well.

Section 2: *"Getting into the right frame of mind to practice well"* You may warm up on your instrument before you play, but do you know how to prepare your brain before practicing?

Section 3: *"What should you practice?"* Seems like a simple question, but most people don't know how to spend their practice time the right way to meet their objectives..

Section 4: *"When. How long, and how often should you practice"*. More practicing is not always better and in this section I'll talk about how to craft your unique practice schedule.

Section 5: *"Structuring a productive and enjoyable practice session"*. The previous section showed you when and how much to practice. This section will show you how to make the most of those hours, days, months and years you spend playing and practicing your instrument.

Section 6: *"Brains just want to have fun"*. You don't learn when you're bored. We'll talk about things you can do to make your practicing fun.. or *more* fun than it is now.

Section 7: *"Can you hear yourself?"* I'll have one brilliant suggestion for this topic. You own what you need for this but probably don't use it. You will know what it is.



Section 8: *“How to pin point the exact right things to work on”*. The previous section helped you hear yourself better. Here’s what you do with that new insight.

Section 9: *“Your brain never stops”*. Your brain is always on, and there are things you can do to make sure that it’s always working *for* you instead of *against* you.

Section 10: *“What did you learn?”*. Here, I’ll recap the important points made throughout the ebook.

We’ve also included two worksheets at the end:

Most important Goals I Wish to Reach Through My Practicing - A worksheet you can complete to gain clarity on your musical goals, both short and long-term.

Practicing Worksheet - An excel sheet for you to list your most important areas for practice over a 30-day period.

So let’s start by learning why what you do with your brain is ten times more important than what you do with your fingers...



1. What You Do With Your Brain Is Ten Times More Important Than What You Do With Your Fingers

In the introduction, I said that practice doesn't necessarily make perfect. Good practicing is much more than running through etudes, scales, playing fast, playing high and so on. In truth practicing well is both an art and a science. So throughout this ebook, I'm going to share my thoughts on both the art and the science of practicing well.

Let's begin with a critical question to ask yourself: *Why* are you are playing and practicing an instrument? Do you have any specific goals in mind outside of "I think it's cool to play an instrument."? Just having fun playing is great, but is there any more that you want out of playing and can you be more specific about what that is?

The more detail you can provide yourself, the more effective your brain will be in helping you reach your goal. Studies show that those who know upfront what they want to do long-term with their playing do better than those who viewed their playing more casually and less long term. Wanting to play long term has more to do with playing better than the number of hours put into their practicing.

So, rather than a broad and nondescript goal of "I just want to play better" a better more specific goal might be: "I want to play these Green Day songs to impress my friends." Or "I want to play piano in order to relax myself." Or "I want to play guitar well enough to get into a band."

Those more specific goals will direct your brain and your activities toward attaining that outcome. So at the outset of this course, I recommend that you list a few specific musical



goals to direct your practicing. In the course materials for this lesson, I've included a worksheet at the end for you to list a few goals for your practicing. I've also included a list of possibilities if you're stuck trying to figure them out. You've probably heard that writing down goals helps you reach them quicker – or reach them at all, so use that worksheet to write down your musical goals.

Now that you know *why* you're practicing, let's talk about how.

Playing your instrument well requires a complex coordination of mental, physical and psychological skills, they're working in perfect harmony. It's amazing playing a musical instrument is even possible. So, to begin, let's start with a simple description of what practicing is and how to think about it. Trust me, this will really pay off for you and it is probably very different from how you currently think about practicing.

Practicing requires a lot from our bodies. Finger dexterity, breathing, adjustments to lips, throat and tongue for wind instrument players, arm movement, rhythm, memorization, hearing pitch and intervals and chords, sight reading – just to name just a few. But here's what I want you to understand. It's all rooted in the brain.

Essentially, effective practicing does two things. It builds new circuits in your brain and strengthens existing circuits - these are circuits that control all our other functions – many we're not even aware of. And here's what's even more important: you can build good connections in your brain or crummy ones – ones that help play or ones that keep you stuck. It's all up to you and how you practice.

Lots of research has been done on the differences between highly accomplished musicians and average players. And it is those who are more effective at their practicing who ended up being better at their instrument – more than the number of hours they put in or any innate talent they possessed. The better players were those who knew how effectively practice.



There's a lot to share with you that will dramatically improve your results after practicing, based upon what we know about the brain. But let's first build a foundation for it all by covering two necessary brain conditions. And that's in the next chapter.

Dave Liebman on Michael Brecker

Everybody has a way of working that is more natural to them than other ways. The same with one's method of development. I like to talk about learning to learn. I tell the kids that if you know how to take new material and make it your own, you've got the keys to the kingdom. You won't have to depend on anybody else.

I remember when Michael Brecker bought my loft from me in 1971 and I went to visit him. He had music paper on the floor like patterns and some of my stuff. He was obviously very organized at that time and was going through his musical development in a very direct way and tackling it that way.

That's how he got so great because his strong points was technique and for that you must practice. I mean, you can't just wake up and blow a couple of long tones and call that practicing your instrument. If you choose to be a virtuoso which obviously Michael did, you have to put in the work and be smart about it.



2. Getting Into The Right Frame Of Mind To Practice

To be most effective, you want to practice in a state of being present. By present, I mean as opposed to thinking about yesterday or tomorrow, or being distracted by fleeting random thoughts.

So, before starting to play or practice, first relax yourself for the work ahead. Don't worry, we're not going to go into any deep meditation. I just want to you to silence some of the things racing through your head so that you can hear more clearly and concentrate on the music and your playing. So, take a full breath, let it out. Do it again. Close your eyes if it helps and be hyper aware of your surroundings.

Without any judgment or evaluation, what do you hear in the room right now? Stop reading for a second and listen. What does your body feel like? Feel your feet on the ground. If you're sitting, what does your butt feel like on a chair or bench? Can you feel your heartbeat? Do this for just a minute or so. Now open your eyes if they were shut and become aware of your surroundings. Use this exercise to be more centered, relaxed, and present. I promise you'll do your best practicing or performing when you're in this state. Try doing this before you practice or perform.

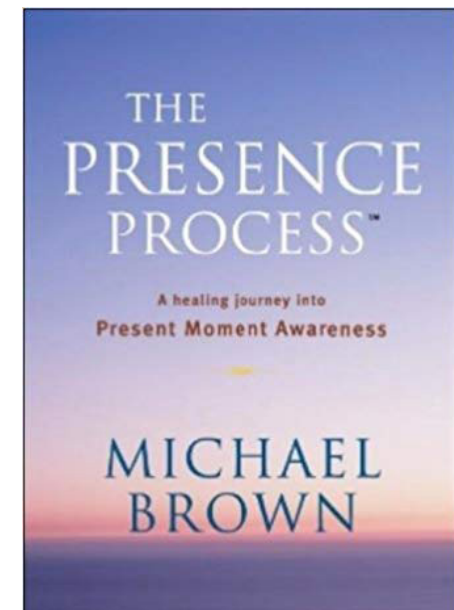
The second condition is what I'll call intentional focus. By being present, as we just learned, your focus will be much sharper. By practicing more in focus, your brain will build and strengthen the circuits it needs to improve your playing. Focus helps your brain make the small adjustments to help you play well.

Let me put this another way: repeating mind numbing and mentally unfocused drills that

you aren't fully engaged in, or practicing music that is too fast or too hard for your current skill level won't build positive connections in your brain.

In fact, it's likely to reinforce bad connections – connections you want and need to unwire, because who wants to reinforce missed notes or poor fingering or bad tone? But your brain will ingrain bad habits as effectively as it will good habits, so train that brain of yours in the right way. Any practice without intentional focus will make you worse over time, and will frustrate you and put a limit to your playing. I'll cover all of this with more examples in the chapters to follow, but now that you know the best mental state for effective practicing, let me show you in the next chapter how to practice in a way that supercharges the time you spend practicing your instrument.

If you are intrigued to learn more about the benefits of present moment awareness, *The Presence Process* by Michael Brown is an excellent book.





3. What Should You Practice?

Malcom Gladwell wrote the now classic 10,000 hour rule in his book *Outliers*. He wrote that proficiency in anything occurs after about 10,000 hours of doing it. And Malcom calls those 10,000 hours “meaningful work”. But what is meaningful in the case of practicing? You could spend 10,000 hours going through the motion of quickly running scales up and down and muddling your way through various songs, hoping that after enough sheer repetition, you’ll sound good. But as I wrote in chapter one, what you do with your brain is much more important than what you do with your fingers.

So don’t assume that what you do with the muscles in your fingers and hands is enough to become an accomplished musician on your instrument. It’s not. There’s a methodology to mastering an instrument and most of it has to do with your brain.

There are three critical points you need to understand about what to practice:

One, you should vary what you practice. In fact, periodically changing what you practice as you practice is something I’ll discuss later regarding sustaining your focus.

Every practice session should have multiple activities. Include different areas to practice based upon your goals and also based on your interest and length of time you are able to stay focused in an area.

Think about the various things you can work on throughout your practice time: Tone for wind instruments, muscle strength in fingers, arms, mouth, lungs, and so on, sight reading, memorization, developing your ear for chords, rhythm, intonation and on and on. And more depending on your instrument and musical objectives.



Second, you want to spend the majority of your time practicing material that is challenging but not too far from your current abilities. On the one hand, if you spend your time practicing over and over something that you can easily play, your skills won't grow as much.

On the other hand, if you spend your time struggling over something way over your current abilities—something on which you play the same mistakes over and over, and you suck at it - you won't grow much either, and even worse, you'll cement bad habits into your playing. Remember the talk earlier about building brain connections? You want to make sure that your brain is building connections in various skills and that those connections are ones that you *want* to make into habits.

Find something that you don't play as well as you wish, but something that feels attainable in a reasonable amount of time. In time, you'll know if you chose well because you'll either be staying at the same proficiency or getting better. But as you work on it, slow can down the passage or song or exercise until you play it well and then gradually speed it up to full tempo. Maybe just work on a small part of it until it sounds good at full tempo. Practicing like this also benefits you by feeding your self-confidence. "Hey, I can play this. I sound pretty good on that."

People who progress the most operate with a careful ear for reviewing what they are placing, catching mistakes that they make and going back repeatedly focusing on those sections until they are satisfied or run out of interested focus. Careful attention to the small things and consistency of your musical results, will help you develop the quickest.

Third, have fun practicing. In the next chapter, I'll talk about how to make practicing fun, but for now, realize that when you are having fun at something, your brain is more engaged and is better able to absorb and retain a new skill.



If your practicing is routine and boring, you'll find yourself going through the motions and eventually giving up. 10,000 hours is a long journey for anyone, so you're much more likely to stick with it if you have fun practicing which will build a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment. Wouldn't it be nice to look forward with anticipation to your practicing?

Dave Liebman on Practicing

I knew I could practice from now until the cows come home and I'll never be as good as John Coltrane. I graduated college and the next day, I went upstate New York near Woodstock. There I spent six months doing whatever practicing I ever really did. That was it. Right after graduating. I drove a cab in New York for about a week just to make enough money to live from June to Thanksgiving, and that was my only organized practice.

I realized much of what Trane did was the result of deep practicing. You have to know that. He didn't just come out of the sky.

And Miles, who I got to know, never touched the horn in between gigs, at least not in my time with him.

So I had two choices: either practice six to eight hours a day for an extended period like Michael Brecker, or treat this more as a natural extremity of life and do what you feel today and what you want to play today. Your practicing is not measured by what you cannot play but instead by what you can play.



4. When, How Long, And How Often You Should Practice

It is true, within certain conditions we're learning here, that the more we practice the better we'll get on our instrument. And to get good requires that a lot of time be put in, but it's the quality of your practicing that determines how much time you need in order to get the results you're after. Malcom Gladwell's 10,000 hours is simply a generalization looking over a broad spectrum of skills.

How much time is required depends on you. It depends on your objectives and the quality of your practicing. If you are already at a certain level of playing and all you want to do is maintain your skills on the instrument, your practicing routine will be very different from a college student planning to light the world on fire with her dream performance at Carnegie Hall.

I am somewhere in the middle. I'll estimate that I am still 85% of the trombone player I'm capable of becoming. I perform, record or practice pretty much every day for a couple hours and I continue to get better. I am playing better today than I did even six months ago. YOU have to determine what you want to accomplish musically and how soon you want to get there.

I say, as a general rule, you should practice for some length of time every day. Even if for only 15 minutes, just to keep the muscles and the muscle memory sharp. That's much better than practicing 5 hours every Saturday. Pablo Casals practiced 4 to 5 hours every day his entire life. Now, if you are concerned about the limited time you have to dedicate to practicing, realize that the more effectively you practice, the less time you'll need to improve or maintain your playing. And that's why you're reading this ebook!

If possible, try to keep your daily amount of practice consistent. As a brass player whose lips



are sensitive to drastic changes, going from one extreme to another throughout a week makes playing more difficult and less satisfying.

The question of *when* to practice is probably the most subjective aspect of all. Some musicians like to practice first thing early in the morning. Some like mid day and others like night. If you are learning an instrument for fun, maybe playing after your day of work is relaxing and enjoyable – then again, maybe you're too tired. So find your good time, and maybe experiment with different times to see what works better for you. As I'll mention in the next chapter, enjoying the process of practicing makes the time you spend doing it more effective.

Finding the Time To Practice

Think of your practice time as if it were money in the bank compounding interest. As long as your practice time is quality, every little bit you do adds up to improving your skills. A little bit deposited every day will result in a sum larger than the individual hours.

It is sometimes difficult to know for certain the improvement we are making over the long-term. Just like money earning interest in an account we forgot about, listen to old recording of yourself and you may be shocked at the progress you've made over time—progress you were unaware of in your day to day playing.

So as you think about your practice routine, try practicing some amount every daily, practice as long each day as you have time and desire, and try to be consistent with the time and length – no matter how long or short.

You'll find that whether your practice for 30 minutes or 3 hours, you should only practice any areas for as long as you can hold focus, and for some areas that may be as little as five minutes, e.g. you'll likely find yourself switching between practice tasks frequently no matter how long you have to practice.



5. Structuring A Productive And Enjoyable Practice Session

In chapter 3 I talked about what you should practice. I said that it largely depends on your musical goals and I mentioned working on difficult but attainable things. But let's talk about what your practice session might look like.

Start with the warm up. Whether you play piano or French horn, warming up your muscles helps you get the most out of them and also helps prevent injury. Notice that professional athletes don't just get to the stadium and immediately jump into the action going full out. They start slow and work their way up to full engagement. Whatever that means for your instrument, start slow by stretching muscles and playing softer and slower than you would for normal performance.

You might find that starting out more gradually than you normally do will help your hands and/or mouth operate better for you. If you normally just sit on your stool and play the guitar full out from the very beginning of picking up the instrument, try doing some slow finger stretches and more slowly going from one chord to another. Listen for accuracy or good sound or whatever you want to hear.

What you practice next depends on your musical objectives – those things you wrote down on the Practicing Goals worksheet on page 32.

Maybe you want to improve your time and rhythm, so you spend some time playing with a metronome app. Maybe you want to learn a song, so you work on that for a while. Maybe you want to play chords, so you work on playing chords for a while. How long do you spend on each activity? Good question. It can depend on urgency. Do you have an upcoming performance you need to be ready for? Then learning that song takes priority and you might



spend your entire practice time on just that. Schedule enough time on each activity to hear some improvement. If you don't have that amount of time, schedule fewer things to work on.

Pacing yourself throughout your practicing is important so that you don't prematurely burn out or get bored. Your pacing will be very different if you play guitar versus playing a brass instrument like trumpet or trombone where we need to take frequent breaks to rest our lips and mouth, and to prevent injury. But our ears also get worn down after a while and stop hearing the nuances of our playing and then we practice less effectively. So even if you feel like you can play piano forever, do take breaks to give your brain and ears a needed rest.

Once you have played for a while and are feeling good, I recommend testing some upper limits in order to stretch your technique. In an earlier lesson I said to work on things just above your abilities but not so far from what you can accomplish with a reasonable amount of practicing. That advice is for the core of your practicing, but it is good for you to stretch for a bit. Play high notes. How high can you squeak it out? Play fast two handed scales on the piano. How fast can your fingers go even if you're not perfectly accurate? It's like taking the car out on the autobahn and seeing what she can do. Hey, missing a few notes in an exercise won't kill you! And it's fun.

Maybe you do well planning to practice certain things on Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and other things on the rest of the days. I was never that organized, so my practicing involves a variety of things each session. I largely play it by feel. If my tonging feels sluggish that day, I'll get out the metronome and work on tonging. If my high range feels especially good, I might play with that for a while in order to build on it. I always work tone, and I try to do some improvisation each day along with exercises in various keys, for example spending time in the key of E or D or Gb. If I have a recording or a gig coming up, I'll work on those pieces to make sure I'm ready to perform them well.



You might need more structure to your practicing. Have a goal for your practice session. Make it concrete. e.g. I'm going to warm up for five minutes on lip slurs, then I'll work on intonation exercises for 10 minutes or until I lose focus, then I'll work on chord changes on a solo I want to improve on, then listen and incorporate Wayne Shorter's ideas on a solo over Footprints, and so on.

Intentional focus is critical, so as soon as you find yourself repeatedly losing focus, it's time to move to next in your scheduled item. Your brain will always learn best when your focus is highest. Structure your practice session to cover the variety of skills you need in order to play your instrument well, and do so keeping in mind what is working well that day and what may not.

Richie Beirach on Practicing

Working on your technique is important to do as the very first part of your practice routine. As far as what time and how long, that's personal. But in general, I think the best thing is to get up early. Get up at seven, have a shower, and a good breakfast. Turn off your phone and practice your pure technique. No playing songs. Pure technique. Slow. Careful.

If you have two hours to do this, great. If all you have is one hour, fine. But an hour is the minimum.

Now, when I say practice an hour, I don't mean you sit there for a 60 solid minutes. You must take frequent breaks to keep your muscles loose and also to keep your mind focused on what you are doing.



6. Your Brain Just Wants To Have Fun

As I wrote in the last section, none of us learn when we're bored. Just putting in your time with playing songs over and over, scales, exercises, and memorized etudes will won't make you much better. Practicing like that will ingrain bad playing habits and will lull you into a boring routine that won't make you much better. You'll be putting in the time but not getting much satisfaction from it. Here's the key to getting better: having sustained focus to hear yourself and to make the adjustments necessary to play better.

But how do you sustain a focus throughout your practice session? We all have different levels and durations of focus. You'd probably be amazed at how fleeting mental engagement is.

Our brains are wired to be on the lookout for new and interesting things, so we can become distracted very easily. Whether it's distraction by random thoughts or time traveling. Again, time traveling is thinking about yesterday or tomorrow instead of focusing on right now. Remember the relaxation exercises we did earlier in order to become present?

So how do you maintain focus? One good way is to have fun at the activity. We tend to stay present and engage deeper when we're having fun and are motivated. Our brains function better when we're enjoying the activity. If playing your instrument is fun, you'll look forward to playing or practicing rather than dreading it and coming up with excuses as to why you can't do it today. So let's talk about how to make your practicing fun – how to keep your brain fully engaged.

Here is a list of ideas. Not all of them will help you. We all call different things fun. Because many of them may seem odd – new and different – don't immediately dismiss an idea. Give them

honest consideration. Partly because you're going need ideas that keep things interesting. Even something that is fun for you right now may in time become boring.

Some ideas on making practice fun and keeping you motivated:

- Choose pieces to work on that you love. Most of the world's music is just a browser click away.
- Change *where* you practice. This depends on your instrument and how many options you can find. I am lucky. I live on a big hill overlooking a valley. So I have fun blasting trombone into the void. No one has yet called the police on me! So go outside or to another room or to a place with funky acoustics like a church or an airplane hanger. (I just played a gig in a hanger and all that reverberation was great.
- Change *what* you practice. We can easily fall back into practicing the same etudes or exercises just because they are familiar. Open up your method book to a random page



and start playing. If you are a classical player, go to Youtube, find a jazz play-along track and start improvising. It doesn't matter if you don't sound like Miles Davis or Herbie Hancock. Just play with it and have fun. No one else is listening, right?

- Find new music to play with. Playing along with music or tones can be more fun than playing in silence. Play-along tracks like music minus one or Jamey Aebersold can be great fun. Sometimes when I travel, I'll turn on the radio to a station that plays interesting music, and I'll improvise along with the music.
- Give yourself a goal and the promise of a reward for accomplishing your goal. The reward could be ice cream, a nice dinner out, or some personal nick knack you've been putting off buying. Maybe even a new instrument. Just something that motivates you.
- Change the way you approach a section or phrase, play it forward play it backward, start on the 3rd note, then the 5th note of the phrase and play it back to the starting point, play the phrase entirely in swing dotted 8ths, in triplets, etc.
- To add on to that last point, gamify it. Give yourself small goals and after achieving each one, give yourself points. Enough points earns you something you want. Have fun with it.
- Use technology like a metronome app or a tuning app. Again, it makes it more enjoyable to play along with something.



7. Listening To Yourself

This might seem like an odd lesson topic, but the skill of truly hearing how you play is both critical and difficult – more than you probably think. When I’m teaching, and the student plays something, the first thing I usually ask is, “What did you hear?” I could jump in and explain everything I just heard but that prevents the student from developing a better sense of their own playing. After all, most of your practicing is done when you are alone. Your teacher is guiding you only during your lessons. And if you’re taking an on-line course, there’s usually no one there to provide you feedback. You’re on your own.

Now, by feedback, I don’t mean just negative. Purely negative feedback ingrains a negative self-image and we talked about that earlier. A lot of players have an overly critical view of their playing and that prevents them from hearing when they played something well that they can build on. Instead, reflect on what you hear, both good *and* bad. Be objective. Helpful self-feedback sounds like: “I started out well, but as it got more difficult, I slowed down.” Or, “My intonation improved as I went along. I need to start out more in tune.” Or, “I was very happy with how expressive I played that. My dynamics were good”, or “I’m not hitting every one of the chords evenly in my left hand.”



The brilliant suggestion I mentioned in the introduction is: record your practicing. These



days, recording yourself can be as simple as a free recording app on your phone. Don't worry about recording quality, just make sure you can hear yourself well enough to evaluate what you hear. If you are playing with another musician or another sound source, position your phone or recording device so that you can hear a balance of both you and the sound source. And if you want to record with quality, there are a lot of good inexpensive digital recorders out there.

You can get a good enough recording quality by simply using a good quality USB mic (Yeti Blue) attached to your iPhone, and then bluetooth to external speakers from my iPhone, while using the Voice Memo app.

Musicians sometimes object to recording themselves because they don't like hearing themselves play. Well... get over it. It would be like learning to paint but being unwilling to look at what you ended up creating on the canvas. The recording is an true reflection of your playing at that moment. It doesn't sugar coat. That's why it's hard for some people to listen to recordings of themselves. Because it's naked reality.

I don't think anyone ever listens to themselves for the first time and says, "Oh that sounded much better than I thought when I played it." But the closer to the truth we are about our skills, the better we'll know what is improving and what needs further improvement – maybe something we hadn't heard before.

So, here's what I want you to understand, recording is only as valuable as you take the time to listen and incorporate what you hear. That may mean you only record one verse of a song, or one phase, before you stop the recording, and listen to the playback and incorporate (change what you are doing based on what you heard) what you heard as a verification of when you're producing the results you want.



I compose and record almost daily and can tell you that my first performance take on a new piece is usually ripe with things to improve. Intonation, articulation, the overall feel of the phrasing, and so on. But without hearing that after playing it, I wouldn't eventually become satisfied with the result. Sometimes it takes a while. But recording yourself is critical.

One other thing. Listen back to the recording of what you just played and critique it out loud. Clarity is key, and forcing yourself to do the analysis out loud makes more of an impression on your brain. Just reacting emotionally to the recording isn't nearly enough. In the beginning, I talked about being clear on how you want to sound as a musician, and this type of ruthless clarity about aspects of your playing is key to you becoming the musician you want to be.



8. Isolate the Practice Spots

Find a scale or an etude or song you want to learn that you cannot at the moment play well at full tempo. Find the point at which you stumble a bit. Focus in on that part and isolate it. I'll use that word "isolate" a lot throughout this chapter because practicing well requires that you hear the moments in your playing where you make mistakes. Isolate the fingering, or breathing or tonguing or whatever is not going well in that moment. This is where your ability to concentrate and focus that I mentioned earlier plays an important role.

Once you've identified a problem spot, play only that portion. Slow at first, then gradually speed up. Then add the notes before and after in order to bring that difficult portion into the larger part of the music. As mentioned before, play the section through in different ways, forward, back, different starting points and with differences in note duration, to force your brain, fingers and embouchure to really establish competency with the section being worked on.

That's very different from the typical approach of playing an exercise or song from beginning to end and stumbling through portions of it. You keep playing from beginning to end, thinking that those rough areas will eventually work themselves out as you play it enough through sheer repetition. This is common for jazz players learning to improvise over chord changes. They may be playing with a play-along track or band. They barrel their way through the changes and when the difficult part comes, they stumble through it, happy to eventually get back into the part they play well. They play this way over and over every time they practice the song, wondering why that difficult part never gets better. Well, it's because they didn't isolate the problem spots in order to work on it.

This is critical. You must recognize and fix the areas that aren't as good as your best. That's the key to speeding up your progress.

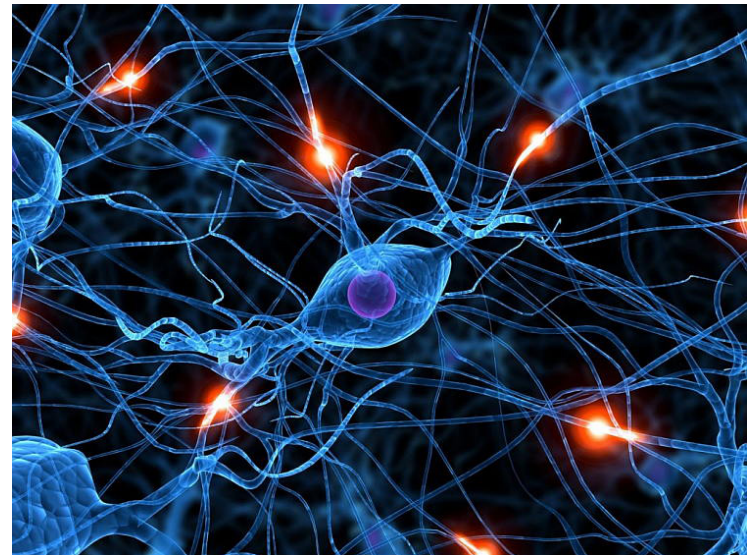
So isolate just that portion of difficulty, slow down, and work it out before speeding up and playing it with the rest of the song or exercise. If you're thinking, "It's *all* difficult.", then just start at the beginning, but as I said earlier make sure you're not working on something too far above your abilities.

Your brain – all of our brains – have a limited capacity for retaining information. Here, try to remember this number: 468924073. Look away and repeat that number. But if I say, remember this number: 468, you can easily repeat those three digits. So what does that have to do with practicing?

Well, it tells us that to learn something new, we need to approach it in bite-sized chunks. So if you stumble over those same three notes, isolate them and play just those three notes until you can play them well. If you are learning to improvise, and you stumble over the bridge in *Have You Met Miss Jones*, stop and isolate precisely the chords giving you trouble.

Take just the first four bars of the bridge and arpeggiate the chords or play just those four bars on the piano until they flow and you have them better in your ear. Next, do the same with the next four bars. Put those sections together and hear if you can now flow through all 8 bars. If not, isolate the problem, go back and do it again.

On-line instructors often make the mistake of playing an example that they want you to repeat, but they play it so fast or play such a long segment that

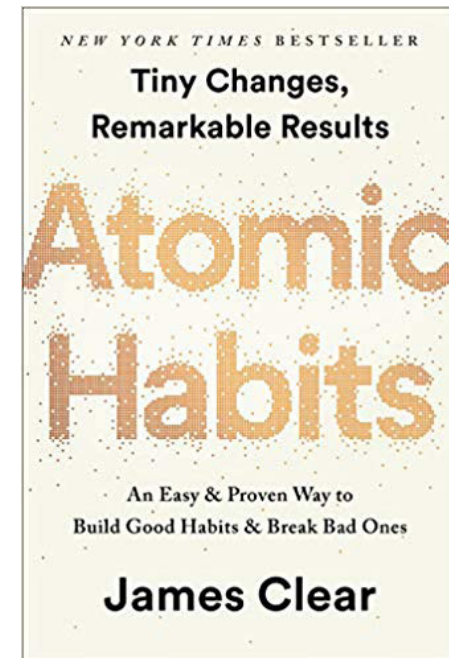


Brain Synapses

you have no change of repeating it back. If you are trying to memorize something or learn a complicated musical line, break it down into small manageable chunks.

That is why I recommended above that instead of tackling the entire bridge to Miss Jones, that you break it down into four bar pieces. If four bars is too much, break it down into two bars or just one bar. Once you gain proficiency with those smaller chunks, add to the segment gradually without going beyond what you can play well. Remember, playing over and over beyond your abilities builds bad pathways in your brain and builds bad habits that become difficult to undo.

Atomic Habits is a potentially life-changing book that will help you understand the power of habit, how to develop good ones, and how to eliminate bad ones.





9. The Right Way To Program Your Brain

Your brain is working twenty four seven to be as efficient for you as possible. It's building connections with every new experience so that the next time you do that thing, it will be easier – more efficient for your brain. The first time you play something new, a small electrical charge fires across nodes in your brain. Do it again and again and again and your brain builds pathways. Continue doing it and your brain will create a protection around the pathway called the Myelin Sheath for maximum efficiency in storing that series of minute movements into your motor cortex to be recalled anytime you wish..

On the other hand, if you build that solid connection around mistakes you'll cement *them* into your playing. So build pathways in your brain while you play the right way, not the wrong way. That's why starting off with a teacher is a good idea so they introduce you to good playing habits that build the proper pathways in your brain. And those connections include not just fingers on the instrument but proper posture, good hand or mouth positions, and positive Self Talk.

Wait a minute. Self Talk? What is that? Playing an instrument well involves more than just how to physically play your instrument. Proficiency also requires good mental habits and one of them is how you think about yourself and your playing.

As you perform or practice, what is the dialog going on inside your head? We all have one. We're constantly interpreting and evaluating what is going on with us and around us. As you practice and struggle a bit, which is perfectly normal, do you tell yourself how badly you play, how you'll never learn to play this instrument, how much you hate the struggle and so on. Or do you encourage yourself by reminding yourself of the improvement you hear, the fun you're having as you develop, the anticipation of how you'll someday sound?



Remember the quote attributed to Henry Ford: “Whether you think you can, or you think you can’t—you’re right”

Your brain hears your self-talk and treats it as truth – as programming. It’s literally being programmed in whatever you’re reinforcing. When you tell yourself “I’m a terrible piano player.”, your brain will do its best to make that true. I told this to my teenage son once who was struggling with soccer, and he said, “But Dad, if I tell myself I’m a good soccer player, I’ll be lying.” So you don’t need to tell yourself that you are a great pianist. Instead, tell yourself that you are becoming better and better all the time, and hopefully you’re actually hearing that in your playing. Hopefully that is true because you are developing good practice habits and you are gaining the ability to eventually play as well as you envision.

Those things are true and they’re much better than, “I’ll never learn to play this guitar”. We all get frustrated. So in those times, take a break. Maybe eat something. Walk around the block. Get present – remember that exercise earlier? Something to release the frustration, because you will not be at your best when you’re angry or frustrated.

Have you ever heard of muscle testing? Look it up. It’s using your body’s muscular resistance to confirm how you react to suggestion. It demonstrates, for example that you’re stronger when you say something you know to be true rather than false. For someone playing an instrument, it proves that you’ll play better with a positive or optimistic state of mind. Really. Look it up.

Whatever your reasons for learning a musical instrument or wanting to improve your skills, I hope that this ebook has helped you. Everyone has a different reason for playing and for practicing. Perhaps just for the fun of playing a little bit, for learning songs they can play for friends and family, or for lighting the top-40 world on fire. Whatever your reason, I wish you the best.



10. What Did You Learn?

We covered a lot of stuff. Good for you for making it through the ebook. Let's review what we covered:

- Having clarity about your objectives for practicing will help you reach your musical goals quicker. It's like any journey: knowing where you want to go will get you there much quicker. If you haven't done so, write down some goals on the provided worksheet.
- Before practicing, do some relaxation exercises to turn off the "time travel" in your mind so you can be more present. Clearing your distractions will allow you to hear the details of your playing more clearly and be more effective at practicing.
- How you practice matters. Your brain wants to be efficient, so whatever you repeatedly do will form connections in your brain. You can make connections that reinforce good playing or make connections that reinforce bad playing. Whatever you do over and over is what your brain will take as programming for your musical imprinting.

Therefore be careful to not repeat mistakes or weak areas, but instead stop, isolate them and work them to raise your skill level. Incorporate your section on isolating tough spots a couple of pages back.

- Within the goals for your practicing and the different activities you wish to include, vary those activities as needed so you'll have fun which will keep your brain fully engaged and prevent boredom and build the skills consistent with your goals, ex. to be a jazz musician.
- Choose exercises or songs that are enough above your current skill level so that they are attainable within a reasonable amount of time. If you are just starting out on piano, don't try chipping away at Beethoven Piano Sonatas. Instead, find something you anticipate yourself playing within a week or so of practicing.



- Practice at least a little every day. That is much better than a lot every once in a while.
- Structure each practice session to include warm-up. Warming up your muscles makes them more effective and prevents injury. Mindlessly playing your instrument for an allotted time is not a winning practice approach
- After you've been playing for a while that day, go ahead and challenge yourself. Play exercises as fast as you can with just a few mistakes, or if you are a wind player, stretch your upper range and play as high as possible, or loud, or super soft. Find those upper limits and work them for a bit. Stretching your limits playing fast and high without perfect accuracy is good for you as long as you eventually return to the core discipline of good technique and accurate playing.
- Your brain is more effective when you are having fun doing something. Integrate some of the fun suggestions I mentioned into your practicing in order to keep your brain engaged.
- Record and listen back to elements of your practicing so that you can more accurately hear how you sound and to better hear the things you need to work on. Your phone recording app will work just fine. Recording quality is not most important. Clarity of how you are playing is.
- Recording yourself gives you better insight into how you play, and therefore, the things you are doing well and things you most need to work on. Use the recording as you play songs or exercises, isolating areas needing the most work and practicing just those areas. Slow them down or remove elements of them like the left hand on piano, and work on just those areas.
- Be aware of your Self Talk. Catch yourself making negative global assessments that are phrased like, "I am...". You can be critical of a particular skill needing improvement, but be careful not to label yourself as good, bad, hopeless, a poor improviser, etc.



Most important Goals I Wish to Reach Through My Practicing

#1

#2

#3

#4

#5

If you are having difficulty determining goals for your practicing, here are some long and short term possibilities:

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. Play in Carnegie Hall | 9. Play folk guitar well enough to impress my friends and family |
| 2. Learn to play Beatles (or other artist) songs on the piano | 10. Learn more chords and about music theory |
| 3. Develop a better sense of rhythm or groove to my playing | 11. Master a specific piece of music |
| 4. Be the lead guitar player in a band | 12. Improve my tone |
| 5. Play better in tune | 13. Improve my flexibility on my instrument |
| 6. Play my instrument faster | 14. Learn to sight reading better |
| 7. Make memorization of music easier and quicker | 15. Play higher (wind players - probably trumpet!) |
| 8. Learn to improvise better | 16. Learn to play my instrument in the New Orleans style |

Practicing Worksheet

Here is a worksheet that you can use to track your various practicing activities over 30 days. Once you double-click the Zip file that you download, it will open up as an Excel file that you can modify as you wish. The default activities listed on the sheet correspond to exercises within Module 3 of the Improvisation Savvy course, but, again, feel free to replace them with the things you wish to track within your practicing.

[Click to download the Practice Worksheet](#)

Exercise Practice Tracking Sheet for Module 3

Start Date _____

		Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8	Day 9	Day 10
Practice Activities	Lesson										
Jazz Patterns for ear	Video 2										
Standard Tune Phrases for Ear	Video 2										
Call and Response notes	Video 3										
Call and Response phrases	Video 3										
Note Discovery Progressions	Video 4										
Piano Comping Savvy	Video 5										
Stella in 12 Keys	Video 5										
Stella Chords Stop Harmony	Video 6										
Stella Note Discovery	Video 6										

		Day 11	Day 12	Day 13	Day 14	Day 15	Day 16	Day 17	Day 18	Day 19	Day 20
Practice Activities	Lesson										
Jazz Patterns for ear	Video 2										
Standard Tune Phrases for Ear	Video 2										
Call and Response notes	Video 3										
Call and Response phrases	Video 3										
Note Discovery Progressions	Video 4										
Piano Comping Savvy	Video 5										
Stella in 12 Keys	Video 5										
Stella Chords Stop Harmony	Video 6										
Stella Note Discovery	Video 6										

		Day 21	Day 22	Day 23	Day 24	Day 25	Day 26	Day 27	Day 28	Day 29	Day 30
Practice Activities	Lesson										
Jazz Patterns for ear	Video 2										
Standard Tune Phrases for Ear	Video 2										
Call and Response notes	Video 3										
Call and Response phrases	Video 3										
Note Discovery Progressions	Video 4										
Piano Comping Savvy	Video 5										
Stella in 12 Keys	Video 5										
Stella Chords Stop Harmony	Video 6										
Stella Note Discovery	Video 6										