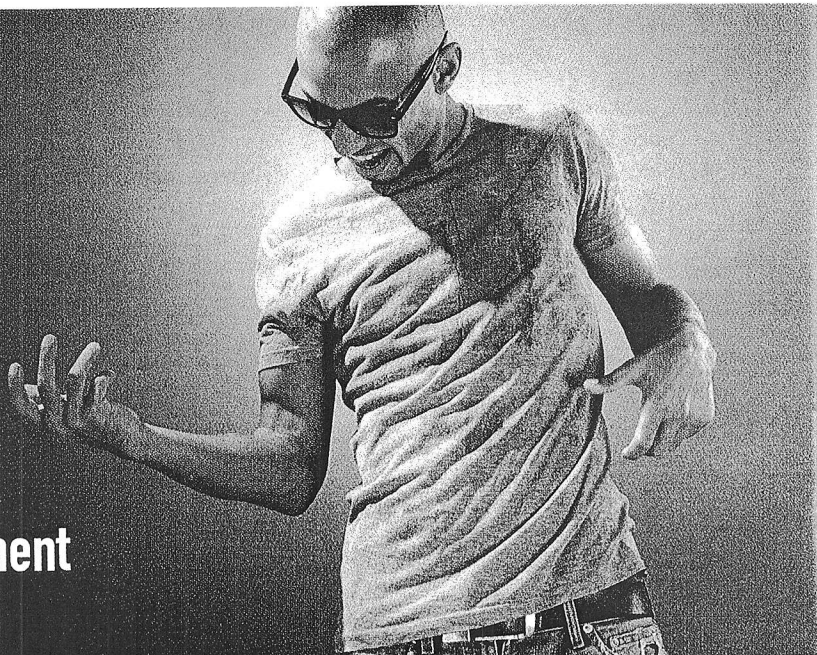


PRACTICE *without* PLAYING

Methods for Student Improvement

By Harvey Rachlin



Most students think of practicing as spending time playing an instrument to build proficiency on the instrument or to improve their ability to play a piece of music, or both. However, it is possible to achieve both these goals by not actually playing an instrument but by engaging oneself in other ways that could boost both technical and music-reading skills.

Indeed, musical skills can be developed away from an instrument, and, in fact, engaging in routines or exercises sans instrument can provide a fresh approach to learning, and invigorate enthusiasm and adeptness on the instrument. This article will present various methods for students to improve their musicianship without actually playing their instruments.

Read music like a book. We often curl up at night with a book we want to read and students may likewise do the same with a piece of music they want to learn. Reading music without paying attention to playing it may not only be edifying but can be a source of enjoyment as the music can be appreciated in ways that are different than just perfunctorily playing it with instrument in hand.

In reading music, we may hear in our mind the beauty of the notes and themes and may contemplate what the composer had in mind or wanted to accomplish; or, we may let our imagination run and embellish the written notes in creative or mellifluous ways. This might spur new ways of interpretation that we can bring to the music when we actually play it. Of course, there is the actual edifying component in which we may learn the music at hand with regard to its notes, registers, rhythms, intonation, crescendos arpeggios, codas, and much more. All this is to say that learning music away from an instrument may offer approaches and interpretations that may not be thought of at the instrument.

Envision playing the music on your instrument. In your mind run through playing the passages you are reading or know how your fingers would run over your instrument when playing the notes. Imagine your fingers playing the piece note by note, measure by measure, section by section. Picture yourself playing the piece smoothly. Indeed, this is a form of "auto-hypnosis" that some people use in various ways. For example, if someone is nervous about an upcoming meeting the person may imagine walking into

the other person's office and having a pleasant conversation with that person. This may take away some of the actual jitters when the real meeting takes place because the person had already "experienced" it in a positive way in his or her mind. The same thing goes when actually performing the music before an audience.

Confidence. Now that you have intimately familiarized yourself with a piece of music by having read it over and over in your mind you should bring more confidence to it when playing it on your instrument. Like actors who prepare their lines away from the stage, when it comes time for the actual performance you are not just reading the music but "acting" it out with passion and excitement after having made it an ingrained part of your psyche.

It should be remembered that self-assurance comes from studying whatever you're going to play. This doesn't mean briefly looking it over. Rather, it means analyzing measure by measure what you're going to play, what difficulties you will encounter in fingerings, pitch, and so forth, and with what kind of musical expression you're going to play the piece, remembering, of course, to take extra careful notice of any flats or sharps or special markings, and to know where all the endings occur.

"Air-play" a piece of music. This is another technique that can be used to "practice" your instrument. "Air guitar" has been a popular fad for many years now. It involves a person faking the motions of playing an actual guitar, and is meant to be a fun parody of guitarists. Such a "faux" venture of playing can be an edifying exercise for an actual musician, who could pretend to run through musical pieces by fingering the notes in the air rather than on his or her instrument. This might help coordination for tricky passages when actually played, for instance. It could also help the musician for purposes of lending expression in pieces that are performed.

Walk, tap and snap. Walking is a great aid for mind control of rhythm because each step is like the swing of a metronome. As you take steps on a walk you can rehearse a piece by hearing it in your mind, and perhaps coordinate it with the rhythm of the steps you are taking. You might find yourself walking at a faster pace for the quicker sections and taking a less brisk pace for the slower sections. The student could count beats to him- or her-

self that fit in with the pace of his steps. Similarly, tapping feet or snapping fingers may be ways to "rehearse" a piece making ourselves our own rhythm machines.

Sing (or tongue) the music. Singing a piece in one's mind or aloud is another way to learn it. For wind players, its benefits can improve certain aspects of their playing such as tonguing, if they tongue to themselves passages to be played that way. For all players, rhythm control can be improved by singing. It is much easier, for example, for a student to tell if he is rushing while singing or thinking a passage rather than by playing it, for when playing he takes so many other criteria into consideration that he sometimes unconsciously rushes without knowing it.

Think in tune. Another interesting aspect of the psychology in music is found in tone control. Students should think about tone control before playing as well as while playing. Sometimes, it is not enough for a student to be able to hear himself to know if he is playing in tune. He must be able to think in tune. Before he commences playing, he should be able to hear in his mind how a piece goes in perfect tune. He can do this by thinking the notes to himself in perfect pitch.

Listen to professional recordings. While listening to a recording of a piece you're preparing is not literally practicing it, it is a method of learning the piece by monitoring such elements as intonation, phrasing and expression. A student may not want to copy another performer's interpretation of a piece, but he can certainly get an idea of how the piece may sound when professionally played and try to emulate that in his or her own way.

Some student musicians practice a difficult passage over and over and improve in playing it, but don't really master it. In a broader sense, students may be able to play an entire piece well, but they play it "blindly"; that is, they take their instrument and by routinely placing their fingers in different positions, they come out with what they feel is a properly played piece of music. Hearing the beauty with which a professional musician performs a piece may help the student musician envision the piece in a more dynamic way.

Exercise. Exercise is also not an actual means of practicing, but rather conditioning, which of course is important for performance. Much like swimmers or baseball players who build their performance ability away from the pool or playing field by engaging in exercises, musicians can also improve their performance ability engaging in exercises. Physical exercise can only help with the physical demands of playing an instrument, and mental exercises can help the brain stay sharp. The physical demands on an athlete may be greater (at least in some senses) than those on the musician, but physical and mental fitness are not just important to everyone but can help the musician stay nimble and alert.

The points I have just made are universal and we are all familiar with them. Yet how much emphasis on them do we put upon our students? Music improvement does not require an instrument, for our most important resource, our brain, is more responsible for our playing than anything else.

For some students, practicing music is sitting down with their instrument and reading the music before them. There is not much "before" preparation; the practice is done in real time by playing the

music. But music can be read or studied like a book, or prepared in sundry other ways, and these endeavors might be best done away from the distraction of the instrument where concentration on the music itself could be maximized.

The next time your student makes a mistake, or, when the student is simply given a new piece of music, tell him or her put some time aside to practice without playing.

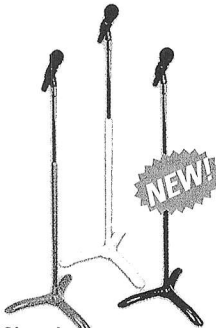
Harvey Rachlin is an award-winning author of thirteen books including The Songwriter's Handbook and The Songwriter's and Musician's Guide to Making Great Demos. His Encyclopedia of the Music Business won the ASCAP-Deems Taylor Award for excellence in music journalism, was named Outstanding Music Reference Book of the Year by the American Library Association, and was recommended by Academy Award-winning composer Henry Mancini on the 1984 internationally-televised Grammy Awards. His books have been praised by such music luminaries as Elton John, Aaron Copland, Richard Rodgers, Henry Mancini, Burt Bacharach, Marvin Hamlisch, Sammy Cahn, Jule Styne, Morton Gould, and Johnny Mathis. He runs the music business program at Manhattanville College in Purchase, New York.

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