Fundamentals of Practicing Tuba and Euphonium

For High School and Undergraduate College Students

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**INTRODUCTION**

You’re reading this because you want to be a better player. Congratulations! That’s a great first step. This guide is designed to walk you through the steps that we all have to take in order to make progress as musicians. The best way to achieve the “next level” as a player is through **daily, consistent, focused practice**. This is a rule that stays the same throughout your musical career, whether you’re trying to improve on the assignments given in your lesson, challenge the person in first chair, audition for college, get ready for a recital, or audition for a summer festival.

**THE WEEKLY LESSON**

For centuries, Western classical music has relied on the weekly applied lesson format in order to train successive generations of up-and-coming musicians. If you are a younger high school student interested in becoming a performer, it is vital that you **take weekly lessons with the best teacher you can find** on a consistent basis. A great teacher assigns you music to work on that is tailored to your needs, provides you with technique suggestions, relays musical ideas, monitors your progress, and guides your career. It is next to impossible to succeed as a young musician without an excellent teacher. So, the first step of any aspiring musician’s career is to ensure that you have an applied lesson teacher.

Let’s say you just finished a lesson with your teacher. At the end of the lesson, he or she assigned you a lot of music to work on over the next week! How are you, as a student, going to practice all of this music so that it’s up to the level of your teacher’s expectations? The answer is through intelligent, organized practice.

**PLANNING YOUR PRACTICE**

You’ve got your assignments and you’re ready to go! Before you simply “plunge in” to a practice session, it’s very important that you know what you’re going to practice, when you’re going to practice, and the length of time that you’re going to spend on the material.

Here are some questions that you might be asking yourself:

**The What**: You’re going to spend time working on the assignments from your lesson. Do you practice all of that in one big long practice session or do you spread it out over the day? Perhaps you should spread it out over several days? Also, what about warming up?

**The When**: Are you just going to put off practice until the end of the day and then go hard for three hours? Are you going to divide it up evenly throughout the day?

**How Much Time**: Does your day allow for four solid hours of practice? Or do you have a day where you only have an hour to make some progress? How are you going to prioritize your life so that you ensure you get enough time to continue improving?

Let’s use an example that involves a typical week’s lesson assignments to answer the above questions. For this week, you’ve been assigned:

* Three to four pages out of the Arban Complete Conservatory Method
* Two Kopprasch etudes
* One Blazhevich etude
* One Bordogni / Rochut etude
* Two movements of a multi-movement solo work (concerto, sonata, suite, etc.)
* Two to three orchestral / band excerpts (usually starting junior / senior year of high school)

How do we get through all of this in the most productive and efficient way possible?

**Cyclical Practice (what to practice)**: It’s generally wise to space your practice sessions out so that you “cycle” through everything you need to get done. To that end, you can plan out your practice in the following way:

Day 1: Warm up, Arban 1 – 2 pages, one Kopprasch etude, the Blazhevich, a movement from the solo work, two orchestral / band excerpts

Day 2: Warm up, Arban 1 – 2 pages, the other Kopprasch etude, the Bordogni / Rochut, the other solo movement, one orchestral / band excerpt

In just two days, you’ve cycled through everything you need to practice! Plan to continue this cycle throughout the week; you should spend more time practicing the music that is more difficult or giving you a lot of trouble.

You can use this cyclical method to practice just about anything, even if you’re preparing several professional auditions and a recital. If you have a lot more music to practice, turn it into a three or four day cycle.

**Scheduled Practice (when to practice)**: You should plan to practice over two or three sessions throughout the day. It’s done this way because our minds usually have trouble focusing for more than fifty minutes at a time. By taking time away from the instrument, the next practice session in the day is approached with a fresh perspective.

If you must practice in one large three or four hour “chunk,” make sure that you allow for breaks every forty to fifty minutes. Take real breaks: get up, step away from the instrument, and read a book or walk around and stretch.

Regardless of how you break up your practice, make sure you always know ahead of time when you’re going to practice. Don’t “wing it,” as this leads to unfocused practice sessions and thus produces poor results. Plan out your practice the day before so that you have a clear idea of what you’re going to try to accomplish the next day.

**Maximizing Your Time (how much to practice)**: You should plan to practice as much as possible every day. If you want to succeed one day as a performer, that means that your practice sessions come first and you plan the rest of your day around them. Got school in the morning? Wake up earlier and get a good warm up and practice session in before school starts. Got activities and homework in the evening? Practice right after school is over or plan to practice later in the evening. It’s this kind of dedication that results in a student getting into his or her first choice of school, winning a competition, or giving a great recital.

With regard to the actual time spent practicing, **you should generally be practicing for three hours each day**. If you’re lucky enough to succeed as a professional, life gets much, much busier and allows for less time to practice as your career achieves new heights. That means you need to do your practicing now, as a young student.

Allow these three hours of practice a day to vary depending on your schedule’s flexibility. For example: If you have ten hours of classes and four hours of homework one day, practice only for 75 – 90 minutes that day. If you have nothing on your calendar the day after that, go ahead and practice for four hours. As long as you’re practicing every day and averaging about three hours a day over a week, you will improve steadily.

**MATERIALS NEEDED**

A good metaphor for practicing is camping. You wouldn’t want to forget certain things before going camping; if you went without them, you’d have a bad time. For example, if you are going camping in the Rocky Mountains and forget tent stakes, a can opener, lighter fluid, rain gear, sunscreen, and / or bear repellant, it probably won’t go so well. The same holds true for your practice session: you can get through a practice session without all the necessary tools and it might go okay, but you really need all of your tools and materials to give yourself a chance at having a great session.

**Here is what you should bring to every practice session**:

* All instruments and mouthpieces required for the music you’ll be practicing
* Sheet music
* Tuner (can be a phone app)
* Metronome (can be a phone app)
* Mouthpiece visualizer
* Pencil to mark breaths, other notes
* Audio recording device (preferably a professional device)
* Breathing devices, if applicable
* Mutes, if applicable
* Mirror, if unavailable in practice room
* Instrument stand, if applicable

**A note about sheet music**: for goodness’ sake, print out your music! Far too many students come to lessons relying on their tablet to hold their music. First, the tablet is unreliable in that it may have technical problems, low battery, etc. Second, it may not display the music well if it’s a poor quality PDF. Third, it’s likely you’ll have to turn each page more than once as most tablets can only show so much of a page at readable quality. PRINT OUT YOUR MUSIC.

**PRACTICING TECHNIQUES**

The key to steady self-improvement in your practice sessions is consistency. Practice every day. Warm up for at least ten minutes every time you practice. Work on trouble spots in a piece every time you play it. Let’s explore these and several other ideas:

**Practice every day**: Yes, every single day. Do not skip a day unless it’s a major holiday. Don’t have a place to practice? If it’s warm outdoors, go and play in a park or a large parking lot. If it’s not warm enough to do that, see if your local church or parks and recreation department has a space you can borrow. Most people are happy to support enthusiastic, enterprising young musicians.

**Warm up every day**: The muscles in your face are a microcosmic version of the musculature of a professional athlete. A pro football player would never start doing explosion drills after sitting for three hours straight; he or she would spend several minutes warming up through stretching and easier cardio work. Doing otherwise risks injury. Likewise, a young musician should never just start practicing challenging music without a proper warm up.

A good warm up typically consists of slow, easy drills to get the facial muscles relaxed and pliable. You can find any number of warm up drills online for free or for purchase. Among these are long tones, range extensions, lip flexibility drills, articulation exercises, mouthpiece and / or visualizer buzzing, dynamic extension, airflow work, etc. Your teacher will guide you with regard to the specific warm-ups you should be using each day. Make sure you do them consistently.

**Slow practice**: Far too many students simply launch into an etude or solo at the tempo marked the first time they attempt to play it in the practice room. Before they’ve gotten two lines into the piece, they’re making mistakes, stopping and starting again, getting frustrated, etc. The result is an unproductive session where they learn the music incorrectly. Don’t be one of those students; when you’re learning a new work, practice S L O W L Y. Any student, no matter their age, can learn a piece and perform it well if they start at a slow enough tempo. Be that student. You will spend less time “banging your head against the wall” in the practice room and more time getting satisfying work done. In the end, you might even finish your practice session several minutes early, giving you more time to do something else.

**Isolation**: Any time we work on a solo, etude, or excerpt, there are certain aspects or sections of the music that will be more challenging for us than others. Figure out what those sections are and practice only those sessions, slowly, until they’re correct. Then, work that section back up to tempo and play the music around it until you don’t hear the mistakes any more. In doing this, you will eliminate the mistakes permanently, either in that practice session or over the next several practice sessions. If you leave the trouble spots to be simply glossed over, they will never be fixed.

**Practice performance**: There’s an old saying that practice room time should be 80% - 90% practice, 10% - 20% performance. A tried-and-true format is: run through the piece at the beginning of the session, practice trouble spots slowly, ensure trouble spots are improved upon, run through the piece again.

**A note about stopping and starting**: don’t do it, ever. By stopping and starting, you’ve made several mistakes: you’ve made the original mistake, you’ve stopped your run-through, and you’ve glossed over the problem by playing it “right” the second (or third, or fourth) time. Rather, you must run through the piece without stopping and, if you make a mistake, keep going. As you play, mentally note where the mistake took place so you can go back and work on it when you’re done with the run-through. In this way, you’re honestly confronting your problems as a player and ensuring that they get fixed over the long term.

**Get away from the instrument**: try playing the piece on the piano so you can hear it in a different way. Try singing it. Buzz it on the visualizer, buzz it on your mouthpiece. Make a beautiful sound when buzzing so you make a beautiful sound when playing. Vocalize your articulation away from the instrument. Sing the rhythm with a metronome. Try subdividing while singing. All of these ideas are here to make a point: practicing doesn’t have to be one hundred percent playing. Getting away from the instrument leads to a more productive and creative practice session because you approach challenges from different angles.

**Recording**: use a professional recording device so you can hear yourself. What we hear while blowing into the instrument usually doesn’t match what we hear on the other side of the bell. So, it’s important to get this perspective as well. Record yourself at least once a day for several minutes to hear what you sound like.

**PRACTICING OUTSIDE OF THE PRACTICE ROOM**

**Listening**: one of the most overlooked aspects of practicing is the art of listening to the piece you’re working on. Listen to the music several times a week so that you can mentally absorb what it’s supposed to sound like. In this way, you’ll have a better idea of whether or not what you’re playing is close to what the piece is supposed to sound like.

**A word about free online recordings**: only listen to recordings on YouTube if the recording is by a professional musician or group of professional musicians. Unless there is literally no other recording available, there is always a better recording of a piece than whatever’s been recorded in a practice room by a student (or for a youth orchestra recorded with a handheld camera). It’s great that these musicians are proud of their work and that they want the world to see them, but it is by no means a good example for any aspiring professional.

It’s always smart to purchase the best recordings of each piece that you’re learning. Most are available online for $0.99 per movement (assuming each movement is under ten minutes). At most, you’ll pay $15 for an album. That is still extremely reasonable and it guarantees that you have the best example possible. Consider it an investment in your future.

**Other ways to practice**: Got a tricky double tonguing passage that you didn’t have time to work on in the practice room? Practice vocalizing it on your way to class. Want to feel like you know the piece better? Memorize it, and then be able to sing it while you’re at home. Be creative.

**Be musically curious**: Have you listened to the piece you’re working on? Have you listened to it without any distractions? Have you listened to several different recordings of the same piece to get an idea of different interpretations, tempi, etc? What about different works by the same composer? If you’re working on a concerto, have you listened to great performances by other instrumentalists (violinists, cellists, pianists) to get an idea of how to play expressively? Can you sing the accompaniment when you’re not playing the solo line or the melody if you’re playing the non-melodic part of an excerpt? What part of the chord are you playing in the chorale you’re working on? What’s the musical history of this piece? Of the composer?

All of these are questions that musically curious people ask themselves. Be one of those people. Explore the music you’re practicing, and then explore other ways to understand and interpret it. In doing so, you will become a much more well-rounded musician.

**WORKING WITH YOUR TEACHER**

You’ve worked hard during the week and now it’s time for your next lesson. This is where your hard work pays off! In order to maximize your lesson experience:

**Bring everything with you** that you would bring into the practice room (see list above).

**Bring some something to document the lesson.** You can record it using a professional recording device or a voice recorder, or you can take notes in a dedicated notebook. Do not take notes on loose leaf paper or on your phone.

**Perform everything that you’ve prepared.** When you play in a lesson, your teacher is expecting a performance. Play through the entire work without stopping, unless your teacher asks you to stop.

**Listen to your teacher.** He or she is giving you guidance based on his or her professional opinion developed over years of experience. The more you interrupt your teacher during lessons, the less you get out of the experience. You may ask your teacher for clarity on an idea or instruction if you don’t fully understand the topic. Likewise, you can ask for more assignments at the end of the lesson if you feel like you need more to work on. Bottom line: plan to talk less, listen more.

**CONCLUSION**

That’s a lot of information! Don’t worry: you don’t need to be doing all of this tomorrow to succeed as a classical musician. Keep this guide on hand and start doing the most basic aspects of it (finding a weekly teacher, planning out your practice session, nuts and bolts of practicing). Once you’ve incorporated those aspects into your routine, start to add more. Continue over a period of weeks or months until you’ve gone over everything in this guide. By doing this, you will become a more disciplined, creative, and organized musician who will be maximizing every practice session and lesson.