

A Guide to Practicing Tuba and Euphonium
By Aubrey Foard

INTRODUCTION

Why do you practice? Why does anyone? The simplest answer is: **we practice to make ourselves sound better**. In doing so, we advance as technicians, musicians and performers. You won't become a better player if you don't spend at least some time practicing. So, that's the simple answer.

Now, ask yourself: "Do I want to be just okay, really good, or one of the best out there?" If you want to be one of the best musicians in the world, **you will require a really intelligent approach to practicing**. A lot of people make the mistake of saying, "I want to be the best, so I'm going to spend every unoccupied hour of the day practicing." Yes, this will most likely make you into a better player. But, I can guarantee that you won't get the best results. Why? Because you're not using the best practice techniques.

By following this guide, you will have the **tools** available to **practice in a satisfying, efficient** way that is **mentally and physically healthy**. You'll also **accomplish more** in just two to three hours of practice time through application of these principles than you will just by "banging your head against the wall" for eight hours.

PLANNING

In order to be an intelligent practicing musician, it is **absolutely necessary** that you do some **advance planning**. This is typically done the day before the practice session in question, but can be done further in advance.

Ask yourself these questions:

- 1) **When** am I going to practice tomorrow? Block out the times during the day that you'd like to accomplish your practicing goals.
- 2) **How long** am I going to practice? A lot of this depends on your goals. A big goal such as winning an audition will usually take up the majority of your practice time. However, remember that even without an immediate goal, there is still **plenty of music to fill up your practice time**.
- 3) What **goals** am I working towards? If you have a recital or audition, you're probably thinking about practicing so that you'll perform that event to the best of your ability. However, if you don't have anything on the horizon, it's probably time to think about working through the weaknesses in your playing.
- 4) Logistics: **is all my stuff in one place**? This is a big one for tuba players. If you need to practice F tuba and it's at school while most of your stuff is at home, do you need to run over to school to get it? Is your music in your locker on a different floor? Plan to gather all of your essentials together **before you sit down to practice** so that your session stays streamlined.
- 5) **Do I have everything** I need? Make sure you have **all of these**: valve oil, slide oil, music to practice, recording device, instruments, metronome, tuner, pencil, notebook.
- 6) Is my practicing environment **distraction free**? Computers, TV remote, video games, books should be out of reach. Make sure you're practicing in a quiet place where friends and colleagues are unlikely to interrupt you.

WARMING UP

It's best to develop a **simple warm-up routine** that allows for **no distractions** and **addresses your weaknesses**. I strongly recommend exercises that focus on sound production, articulation, dynamics and embouchure flexibility. A good warm up should take you no more than half an hour. (See Appendix A and B below.)

Why should you warm up? Why not just dive right into the repertoire that you're practicing? Playing a brass instrument involves the manipulation of many tiny muscles in your face, the proper use of air, and that you produce sound without adding unnecessary tension. By warming up, we get our embouchure muscles **loose and relaxed** and we also remind ourselves how to **use our air efficiently** and **keep our bodies at ease**.

THE MEAT OF YOUR PRACTICE SESSION

What you practice next primarily depends on what you're preparing for.

For practice with a goal of general self-improvement, I recommend that you:

- 1) Work on at least **two etudes** of varying styles, tempi and articulations so that you address several fundamental aspects of your playing on a daily basis.
- 2) Practice **two to three band or orchestra excerpts**; you're going to want to keep these fresh. Never know when an audition pops up at the last minute!
- 3) A **solo work** that you'd like to teach yourself or polish since the last time you played it. For example: just because you don't have a recital coming up, doesn't mean it is bad to expand your repertoire. This way, you're more prepared next time you decide to perform a recital
- 4) **Challenging aspects of orchestra, band, small or large ensemble music** that you're performing in the near future. Playing Brahms' Second in four weeks? Won't hurt to take a look at it now.
- 5) **Grab bag**. Could be anything: another excerpt, a pop tune, a Clarke method you haven't looked at, etc. You name it.

For practice in preparation of an upcoming event - such as an audition or recital - I recommend that you assess how much time you will need to spend practicing to achieve optimal results. Bear in mind that you should not over-practice, or else you will end up feeling physically and mentally tired and thus sabotage your chances at achieving optimal results. Rather, plan on taking it a day at a time; **moderate, intelligent improvement** over a longer period of time **will beat short bursts of intense work** in the vast majority of performance situations.

- 1) If the material you're practicing leaves you even an extra five or ten minutes a day, I strongly recommend that you practice or run through **one etude each day**. Practicing a certain type of music day in and day out (just excerpts or just solos) often leaves your face feeling physically stiff; you train your muscles to perform one kind of music and that's all they'll know after awhile. Practicing an etude, **helps to keep your muscles flexible**, which enhances the ease of the primary material.

- 2) What are you working on? Several solos in preparation for a recital? **What needs the most work?** You should always try to spend a good chunk of your practice time **working on your weakest material**. This brings it up to the standard of your stronger material.
- 3) Isolating trouble spots: is a section of a piece “tripping you up” every time you play it? Does one section of a movement sound noticeably weaker than the rest? **Don’t just keep running through the music – practice it!** Figure out exactly where the trouble spot is and then practice it and the music on either side of it until you can’t play it wrong anymore.
- 4) **Slow practice:** this is an aspect of practice that has been frustrating teachers for generations. Do you keep running a piece, but the intonation, technique, rhythm, etc. is spotty at best? **Set the metronome to half tempo and practice it SLOWLY.** It’s amazing how much better students sound when they do this and baffling how horribly mediocre they sound when they don’t.
- 5) Rotation: typically, you don’t want to try to fix spots in every piece every day. Rather, try to keep it so that you **work through the entire list of music in a two or three day rotation.** This helps to keep the material fresh.
- 6) **Metronome, tuner, recording device.** Are you using all of these on a daily basis? If not, you’re not going to achieve your best. That’s a guarantee.

POST-PRACTICE

Did you achieve all that you wanted to? Then you had a great practice day. **Did you achieve a lot, but not all that you were shooting for? Then you had a good practice day.**

We as musicians tend to be idealists: we shoot for the stars when it comes to planning out our practice. Don’t beat yourself up if you don’t do every single thing you planned on doing in a two hour time frame; most practice days are good practice days. As long as you’re making **moderate to good progress every day, learn from your mistakes and are organized about planning the next practice day,** you deserve to pat yourself on the back.

A note of caution: be very careful about not pushing your physical endurance too frequently beyond its maximum. A good way to tell is to look in the mirror: if you see the skin on your embouchure starting to peel a bit, then you might consider scaling back in the amount of time spent practicing with the horn on your face. You can spend as much time “practicing,” but try singing through the material, playing it on the piano, or listening to a recording you haven’t heard yet. By doing this, you’ll avoid injury but still be improving as a musician.

Also: did you practice in an engaging way? Did you put down the horn for more than five minutes at a stretch? **Did you get distracted?** In this day of social media, it is super easy to say, “I’ll just check my Facebook news feed.” Then, before you know it, twenty minutes have flown by. **Don’t fall into this trap. Focus on getting the job done.** Then, when you’re finished, you can write “OMGZ LOLZ” or post inane nonsense to the Reddits to your heart’s content.

RECORDING

A special section about recording: **DO IT**. Do it every day. **No excuses**. In this day and age, there is a built-in voice recorder on **every smartphone**. Use it to **hear what you sound like**. The sound may not be great on these phones' speakers, but you will be able to tell what your rhythm, intonation, articulation, etc. is like immediately.

You really want to succeed? **Go buy a professional, portable recording device**. Zoom, Roland Edirol are the most commonly used. You will then be able to hear yourself exactly as others hear you. This is extremely important if you are going to succeed as a musician.

THE VICTORY PRINCIPLE

The Victory Principle is a method that many successful people use to eliminate all weak aspects of their art. The idea behind the victory principle is that we're all naturally suited to doing some things better than others. **By focusing our work on improving the things we're less skilled and/or talented at, we bring those aspects of our art up to the level of the aspects that we're more proficient at**. This makes those who practice the Victory Principle into extremely powerful forces to be reckoned with when it comes to competitive situations.

Musically, it's best to apply the Victory Principle to the various aspects of your playing.

Example 1: Are you a naturally musical player who has difficulty playing in tune with yourself? Then you should probably spend a large chunk of your daily practice time focusing on your intonation.

Example 2: Are you a player with incredible technical prowess that has trouble making styles between different pieces distinguishable? Then you should spend some time recording pieces of varying styles and listening back to see if each one sounds like the style it was written for.

The point of the Victory Principle is that you take the worst aspects of your playing and bring them up to your best. Don't spend a lot of time practicing your best aspects – they probably don't need much work! Instead, **dedicate yourself to the idea of making your worst into your best**.

APPENDIX A

Typical Practice Session with a Goal of General Improvement

- 0:00 Warm-up. Long tones focusing on sound, no tongue. Long tones soft-loud-soft. Slow scales. Soft articulations.
- 0:20 Etude #1: Blazhevich etude. Run through with a metronome, work trouble spots. Record, listen back. Repeat.
- 0:45 Excerpts: Record Fountains of Rome. Listen back. Repeat steps 1 – 2. Run through, practice, run through Die Meistersinger.
- 1:00 Break, return for a second practice session later in the day.
- (After a significant break)
- 1:00 Etude #2: An etude that contrasts with etude #1 in style, tempo and/or articulation. Rochut etude. Run through. Practice trouble spots. Run through.
- 1:15 Solo practice on F tuba. Bach Minuet I and Minuet II from Cello Suite No. 1 in G Major.
- 1:35 Practice upcoming ensemble music. Stravinsky's Rite of Spring.
- 1:55 "Grab Bag." Playing through and improvising with songs out of a Real Book.
- 2:05 Practice session finished for the day.

APPENDIX B

Typical Practice Session With a Goal of Optimal Performance (Recital)

Let's say the program for this recital is:

Plog: Three Miniatures

Grant: Three Furies

Shostakovich: Adagio from The Limpid Stream

Hindemith: Sonata

Jan Bach: Laudes (Brass Quintet)

- 0:00 Warm-up. Long tones, no articulation. Lip flexibility exercises. Scales, focusing on intonation.
- 0:20 Grigoriev etude. Most of what is being practiced today is loud, so play a softer, melodic Grigoriev for contrast and flexibility.
- 0:30 Today, the object of primary concern is the fast technical exposition in the third of Grant's Three Furies. First, record the section and listen back for any flaws. Then practice these flaws. Still not right, so turn the metronome on, set at half tempo and practice. Gradually increase the tempo by about 4 BPM at a time until original tempo is achieved. Re-record and note any remaining flaws. Continue to work on these flaws in another session.
- 0:55 Run through Shostakovich with metronome to improve rhythmic consistency.
- 1:10 Break, return to practice at a later hour.

(After break)

- 1:10 Record a run-through of the Hindemith. Listen back and note any flaws to be worked out in a later practice session
- 1:40 Mvt. 1 of Three Miniatures with a tuner and metronome
- 2:00 Record tuba part of Jan Bach mvt. III. Listen back and fix any mistakes.
- 2:20 End of practice session for today.