

Essential Practice Tools presented by Brian Mueller

Learning to play music (and marimba) is a lifelong pursuit. There is always another level no matter where or who you are. **You have no idea how good you can be** – the only way to find out is to give it everything you've got as often as you can. The **two mistakes people can make** that hinder their progress are to either decide that they've “got it;” that they have gone as far as they need to... OR, to decide that they “can't get it;” that they'll never get to a certain level. The path toward that elusive thing we call “mastery” is unending – and can only be travelled one step at a time.

PRACTICE: What is Practice? Practice is **the act of breaking musical materials apart and then putting them back together**. Every time you put them back together they get stronger. This is the opposite of repeating something over and over again hoping it will get better.

Notes and Space – The notes are EASY! Getting to the notes is the challenge. What we do with the time and space between the notes is what determines our control, accuracy, and sound. Don't just practice the notes – practice the connections between the notes. Slow, thoughtful practice is the best way to become more aware of this aspect of our playing. Speed and control come from *understanding*, not from simply 'trying to play fast.'

- 1) *Controlled Repetition* – The “Five Times Game” or various other variations. This is the best way to test yourself, from a technical and psychological perspective. Play the material in question five times in a row, perfectly. If you miss a single note, you have to start over. This is the most focused and disciplined practice regimen that I know of.
- 2) *Mental Reset* – At any point during the above process, but especially on the last repetition, step away from the instrument (you can even put the mallets down), then re-approach the instrument and play the passage once more. This forces you to break and then regain your focus.
- 3) *Segmentation* – Break the music down into smaller and smaller units until you have arrived at a specific difficulty. Once that issue is dealt with, either add material to your segment or move to another segment entirely. A “segment” can be anything from an entire passage or phrase, down to a single shift or stroke. Practice *exactly* what you are trying to improve.
- 4) *Hand Separation* (adapted from Kevin Bobo, Permutations for the Advanced Marimbist) – Technically, a form of segmentation. Practicing hands separately is extremely powerful. Practice smaller units, as well as whole phrases or passages one hand at a time for technical development and memorization.
- 5) *Blocking* (adapted from Kevin Bobo, Permutations for the Advanced Marimbist) – Simplify the texture by converting lateral strokes into double verticals, and converting hand-to-hand motion into block chords. This is great for learning mallet and hand positions, and seeing the music in a simpler form. You can also see the piece differently by finding different “groupings” for the notes.
- 6) *Visual Controls* (adapted from Gordon Stout, Ideo-Kinetics: A Workbook for Marimba Technique) – Fix your eyes on a particular bar on the marimba, and play the passage in question without changing your focus. This forces you to see the marimba differently and develop more fine-tuned muscle memory. Another good option for a focal point is a blank music stand.
- 7) *Spatial Awareness / Timing Exercises* (adapted from Eric Sammut, “Four steps to feel well at the marimba” presented at PASIC 2005) – Take any two block positions and slowly and smoothly move back and forth, like a pendulum, with a metronome dividing the beat into slow triplets. Pay attention to the horizontal motion and the interval changes – strive to have everything working in 'sync.' When this is working well, try freezing on the first partial and moving on the second, and then try freezing on the first and moving on the third – giving you less and less time to get where you're going.
- 8) *Dynamic Reduction* – Play challenging passages at a soft volume (*p* or *pp*) regardless of the notated dynamic level. This forces you to relax and play in a gentle way – as soon as you tense up, your dynamic level will increase and your tone will brighten. Once you can control a passage at a soft volume, you can begin playing louder, maintaining the relaxation you achieved through this process.

9) *Continuous Exploration* – This is the the real-time application of the above tools in any order or combination that seems appropriate for you and the music. This is a great way to refine a passage of music by finding new challenges inside music you thought you already knew.