



John Bruschini's essay in "[Practicing Music: How the Professionals Do It](#)" (Page 40)

John Bruschini is a world-class guitarist known for his ability to traverse many genres, the only guitarist to carve his own niche within Cecil Taylor's ensembles.

GETTING INTUIT

by John Bruschini

Practice? Practicing?... *Everything* is Practice, even when you perform, you're practicing. Practicing how to breathe, how to live, how to practice. Aren't we practicing when we try to communicate with one another whether it be musically or socially? Within that context, here's what I do.

Clearing the Way

Similar to various forms of meditation, first, empty the boat. Allow the mental chatter to drift away, let it all fall by the wayside. Then start with one note, using different applications; long tones, rhythmic variations, repetition, a variety of attacks such as staccatos and legatos, playing a range from very soft to very loud. For me, this establishes a focus on tuning into myself, the Universe and the instrument.

By practicing everyday we maintain a fundamental grounding and balance, being in-touch tactilely and physiologically with our instrument. We also gain more self-confidence through committing to this daily devotion.

Tuning and Getting In-Tune with Your Instrument

Listen to your instrument and remember it's a two-way street. What is it that we want to get out of our instrument and what is the instrument willing to give? We learn from our instrument and find that we're not always the one in command. There are forces at work when we practice, both seen and unseen – the physical world and the spirit world each have their influence on what we do. It is up to us to learn how to listen with not only our physical ears but with our inner senses as well. So listen from within and without. And how you do this depends upon your personal belief system. If spirituality does not play a defined part in your life, then perhaps think of these ideas poetically or philosophically. If you do have a spiritual focus or practice, then you already have your own method and procedure into the inner realms; meditation, prayer, chanting and yoga are but a few. The very nature of making music, for me, is spiritual and a meditation in and of itself. Nothing else may be necessary to tune in to the interconnectedness of all things.

Work on *your* sound. Just as McCoy Tyner has established a very personal sound with his use of fourth chords, exploring voicings that resonate with you will help establish your sound. For musicians who play chordal instruments, I suggest experimenting with diads and triads, exploring various intervallic configurations that resonate with you. Then practice using those voicings at different chord tones. For example in the key of C, one voicing is C, D-flat, and A-flat. Then use the same configuration and start at the major 3rd of C. Then the voicing becomes E, F and C. Then to the 5th as the bottom

voice which becomes G, A-flat, and E-flat. Continue with the same configuration chromatically, keeping C as your pedal point and you will find favorites that, with practice, will find their way into your musical style.

Phrasing, listening, improvising, silence/space, tone, attack, timbre, legatos and staccatos are among the areas of concentration to consider for the musician's practice pallet.

Phrasing—An Understanding of Time

For improvisers, starting in 4/4 time, practice playing a one-measure phrase, then a two-measure phrase, then a four-measure phrase, in order to internalize the duration of time. Phrases can serve as buoys to mark the distance between one section and another. The deeper the understanding of time, the more liberties one can take to "stretch out" and create a feeling of freedom and openness while maintaining the form. Regardless of genres, I believe most, if not all music, values phrasing. Phrasing is simply the statement or expression of a musical idea. How well you execute the idea will determine how clearly the other musicians will understand and react to what you play, affecting the degree of success in implementing the musicians' roles in the composition and improvisatory process. The use of space in between phrases can greatly affect the feeling and delivery of the idea while also helping to define its location and placement within the music.

Repetition to Internalize

Repetition makes us stronger, whether it be chanting a mantra or working on a phrase. The strength I refer to is your ability to rely on yourself that develops through the discipline of daily practice. Learn to depend on yourself. Repetition is a way of learning, improving upon and internalizing an idea until you own it and then it becomes a part of you. Related to this are construction/deconstruction and reconstruction experiments that can lead to stimulating territory. Playing a phrase, building it up, taking it apart, playing it in retrograde, altering the rhythms, tempos, dynamics and modulation are some of the applications that can help our flexibility and ability to adapt to multi-dimensional realities.

Warming Up and Getting Out of the Way

First and foremost is to get grounded by warming up. Often my warm ups are rather bestial, beginning with a spontaneous tactile approach; playing notes and sounds instinctively to help guide me to where I want to go. Get out of the way. Don't judge what comes out of your instrument.

After initial grounding, which usually takes me longer than expected, (20 minutes to an hour or more) I then ask myself, is there something specific to practice for? For example, a project, a gig or starting a composition?

When embarking on a composing session, I often choose to follow my instinct, opening to that magical realm where the rational mind has no place. The rational mind will eventually burst in and will be useful if, or when, the time comes to organize, arrange and edit. I either start with one note or a tonal center. If not employing a tonal center, then single notes can infer a chordal sequence...or the intent may be to illicit a tension between notes and perhaps later assign those individual notes to other instruments, assuming there is an ensemble. Even if the piece is composed for a solo instrument, the initial phrases may suggest the next phrase or passage.

The Marriage

Practicing encompasses many areas of concentration, including working on your tone, developing your sound/voice, practicing dynamics, writing, breathing, living, how to express ourselves and how to convey our ideas. For me, practicing is a marriage in the sense of committing to a “for better or worse” relationship. Good, bad or indifferent...keep practicing! And yes, there can be value in taking a break from practicing but not for too long.

“If I don’t practice one day, I know it; two days, the critics know it; three days, the public knows it.” - Jascha Heifetz

Since we are connected to our instrument(s) physiologically, the daily physical/tactile contact with the instrument keeps us grounded, attenuated and balanced enough to avoid the need to “get back” to practicing since we’ve never gone too long without it in the first place.

Record Your Practice Sessions

Recording can be a valuable aid for keeping a log of your progress, giving you objectivity as you try to get perspective on your playing skills. It is also useful as a sketch pad for ideas and will help you decide which of those ideas are worth developing. By recording the piece of music you’re working on, you can later listen back and decide which areas you need to concentrate on more and which need to be perfected, revised or deleted from your repertoire.

Practice, practice and keep practicing. We’re human beings with feelings, emotions, perceptions and mood changes, and our feelings about our practice sessions will vary. Regardless, keep practicing. It will never end.

This reminds me of the story (which I paraphrase) of two students. While walking up a mountain they come upon an enlightened master who is also climbing, carrying a load of wood on his back. The master sets the wood down to speak with the eager students. They ask him; “Since you have reached enlightenment, what do you do now?” The master picks up his load of wood and continues up the mountain.

My main musical goal has a strong spiritual component. In continuing to develop my musical identity, I aspire to integrate heart, spirit, soul, mind and body. To be true to myself and the universe is first and foremost.

Repetition, routine and regularity can be a beautiful thing. We find it in meditation, prayer, sports and in most, if not all, forms of training and learning. In general, **discipline!** Establish your priorities and ignore distractions. Whenever possible, begin your day with practice. (After coffee, of course.)

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