

Sandy's Suggested Steps for Practicing

The following are ideas for practicing when you come upon a section that's truly difficult to play well, or hard to play up to tempo. They are bits and pieces learned and developed after many years of practicing and teaching. By using **all** these suggestions on your problem area, you can be sure that you've spent enough concentrated and focused time practicing – and improvement is guaranteed. These suggestions also help us to remember to **listen** for good tone (good air! good embouchure!) as well as accurate notes, articulations and rhythms. Rather than always playing your piece from start to finish, it is helpful to take time to focus on just a few measures here and there which are sloppy or hard to play. *Happy Practicing!*

First, and foremost, keep in mind – that nothing replaces **repetitive, accurate, SLOW practice**. Julius Baker, Sir James Galway, Geoffrey Gilbert, William Kincaid, and Tom Nyfenger . . . and oodles of other great flutists and teachers seem to always mention – if you never make a mistake, you *never will* make a mistake. Learn the notes accurately from the very beginning with SLOW controlled practice. (Ask me about my junior high xylophone solo! ☺)

Woodshed:

_____ **Slur all** the notes - at a variety of speeds: slow to faster; always with metronome; don't go faster if you're making mistakes. Keep your fingers light, coordinated & fluent. Go as long as a deep breath will last. Use a tuner and make sure each interval (pair of notes) is in tune, and the transitions are smooth, with good tone.

_____ **Tongue all** the notes – Single AND Double (and/or triple, if appropriate and able) - at a variety of speeds: slow to faster; always with metronome; don't go faster if you're making mistakes. Keep your fingers light, coordinated and fluent. Check your embouchure and air supply. Are the notes even? Air aimed low? Good tone?

_____ **Change the rhythm:** play the passage in all 8th notes, then triplets, then 16th notes, then super long-short (double dotted 8th & 32nd), and finally short-long (32nd & double dotted 8th) with a variety of articulations: tongued, slurred, tongue downbeats only, slur 2; etc. Use a metronome: Start at a slow speed, then repeat the passage again faster in all the variations (as long as it's accurate!), until you've reached your goal tempo. This is a great way to train the eyes and the fingers.

_____ Repeat the rhythm procedure above starting on the 2nd note of the passage and also the note before your passage (which 'offsets' which note is the downbeat)

_____ Practice in "**chunks**": put a rest in-between each group/beat of notes; keep it rhythmic. Also start with the last note of the previous chunk and land on the next downbeat to practice "hooking" the beats together.

_____ *A variation:* play each passage 3 times (super slow, slow, and super fast); repeating this, until the super fast version is fluent; (maybe you have to decrease the size of your chunk to 2 notes to make this happen); repeat as needed; gradually adding more notes to the length of your chunk.

_____ Play the passage ultra soft (*ppp*) and very loud (*fff*): tongued, slurred, and as written

_____ "**HA**" the passage - a breath pulse for each note with good embouchure/air support – but no tonguing; (maintain embouchure – with no "chewing" in-between notes).

_____ **Practice backwards.** For example: play count 4; then play count 3 and 4; then play count 2, 3 and 4; then play count 1, 2, 3 and 4; etc. so the end of the phrase gets more attention.

_____ Play the passage **as written** – with all dynamics, articulations, correct notes/rhythms, breathing, good tone and vibrato, etc. Find the speed where you can be absolutely accurate and comfortable. Then go one metronome notch faster. Are you still accurate? Repeat at this tempo until you are. Try and get 2 or 3 notches faster each day.

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Here are some more “crazy” ways!

Though perhaps unusual, these strategies often help students overcome playing problems or help them to diagnose any issues, so they can become their own best teacher! The throat, air, and embouchure must all be doing the right thing in order to be successful.

_____ Slowly **sing and play** (hum, with lots of air!) It’s ok for the voice to act as a drone; follow the shape of the melody; and-or match the actual pitch.

_____ **Flutter tongue** all the notes (with and/or without articulations/dynamics)

_____ **“KAH” or “KOH”** articulation. Set metronome to an 8th note, subdivided, speed, and begin each note with a “K” syllable. Regardless of the printed note length, play each note quite distinctly and short (the ‘beginnings’ of each note). Listen to make sure the note speaks instantly with no fuzz or scoops. Repeat with a “T” articulation.

_____ **Stand on One foot / Squat to a sitting position** while doing a run-through of a passage you’ve practiced. (This offers a distraction to a finger problem; and/or insures you are well-balanced and engaging your core muscle group.)

_____ **Diva Style!** Play the passage *ffff*, all slurred with molto-MOLTO vibrato on each and every note. Breathe as needed – but constantly maintain the intensity!

Listen LOUDER than you play, and notice what happens as you play – review/evaluate/congratulate when things go well! When you are successful, notice how your body feels, in hopes of recreating this effort!

After a week of practicing all of these variations you will have made true progress, that stands up to the pressure of a performance.

Be creative and inventive – come up with other unique strategies that work for you!

*You bring **all** your practice attempts on stage with you when you perform – so make sure you’ve done your best work beforehand.*

Good work!

Here are some thoughts from students:

- “I like practicing in DIVA mode because it almost feels like a “full body workout” and when you return to the normal way it feels very effortless in comparison!”
- “I think the crazy ways are really helpful because by focusing on doing the flutter tonguing and everything else, you don’t realize you’re getting used to the notes and rhythms from playing it so much. Personally, I think the diva style does a lot for me, because there’s something about playing really loud and dramatically that really just gives you a lot of confidence, which is useful for me.”
- “Engaging your throat with singing and playing or flutter tonguing (in my case at least) makes it a lot easier to relax your throat when playing it as written, which just makes your sound so much better.”
- “It works because all of the techniques make it harder to play your instrument overall so it feels like you have a lot of control when you return to playing the normal way.”

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General Tips:

- Be able to play the toughest areas of your piece from **memory**.
- **Practice Relaxing** – Your fingers can't move fluently if you're stiff, gripping the flute too hard, or letting your fingers fly off the keys! You won't sound your best either if there's any tension in your throat, neck, tongue, shoulders, etc. *Relax* – it's beautiful music! It's fun to play the flute! Yawn! Stretch!
- **Record Yourself** – (audio and/or visual) Be your own best teacher when you listen and honestly critique your own playing. You'll be able to fix many things before lesson time! Yea!
- **5 Penny Practice** – Play your troublesome area. If it sounds good, reward yourself with a penny! Keep repeating this – and give yourself a penny when you play well. Remember, if you make a mistake you have to take away all the pennies away and start all over ☹️. (Once you've earned all 5 pennies, perhaps you can trade them in to a parent for quarters/dollars/or some other treat 😊 !)
- Don't ignore technique practice. Scales and arpeggios are the foundation to everything. Solid technique makes everything easier to play and sound better. **Love your scales!**
- If rhythm is the issue: **practice subdividing** all the long notes into 8th or 16th notes; re-articulating any tied notes (or subdivide into triplets - depending on what notes surround the longer notes). Clap the rhythm, while counting out loud and tapping a steady beat with your foot.
- It's hard to be musical when poor technique interferes with your playing. Your ultimate goal has to be to communicate your interpretation to the audience in a convincing and heartfelt manner.

Sometimes it's helpful to think about playing in layers:

1. Play once (layer 1) – did I play the right **notes**?
2. Play again (layer 2) – did I play the right notes at the **right time** (rhythm)?
3. Play again (layer 3) – did I play the right notes, at the right time, with a good **sound** (tone) vibrato/intonation?
4. Play again (layer 4) – did I play the right notes, at the right time, with good tone, and **tongue/slur** (articulate) appropriately?
5. Play again (layer 5) – did I play the right notes, at the right time, with good tone and articulations, and appropriate **dynamics** (either printed/phrasing-musicality)?
6. Play again (layer 6) – did I play the right notes, at the right time, with good tone, articulations, dynamics and **breathing**?
7. Play again (layer 7) – did I play the correct notes and rhythms, with good tone, articulations, dynamics and breathing at the appropriate **speed** (tempo)?
8. Play again (layer 8) – add a phrase before and/or after the 'target passage'. Did I play the problem area correctly '**in context**'? Etc, etc, etc...

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