

Pedagogy article for ITEA Journal  
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## S.M.A.R.T. Practice

**S**pecific

**M**easurable

**A**ttainable

**R**ealistic

**T**ime bound

I admit it. I love to practice. I look forward to days when there is nothing to do but sit down with my tuba and a stack of music or a new etude book. But for most people (including myself), that kind of day is few and far between. In this article, I would like to offer ideas for organizing and increasing the efficiency of your practice time. For me, the most productive practice sessions tend to be around 45 minutes in length and spaced throughout the day. I often schedule four or five, 45-minute practice sessions per day. Strive to be efficient and creative when you practice, thus improving focus, overall training, and achieving balance in all that you do.

A great performance is the result of proper and thoughtful practice. In the business world, management consultant Peter Drucker is often credited for coining the concept of S.M.A.R.T. goal setting, in order to achieve top results. Although, the first time the acronym is seen in print is in the book *Leadership and the one Minute Manager* by Kenneth H. Blanchard.<sup>1</sup> As musicians, we can apply the S.M.A.R.T. acronym to our music practice in order to achieve more efficient and effective results.

### S - Specific

Be specific; when, what and how. Designate a specific time for *when* you will practice. Define *what* you will practice in a given session and decide *how* you will accomplish each goal. In order to improve on your instrument, daily and consistent practice is most important. If you make it an official part of your day, you're more likely to make it happen. Keep a practice log or notebook. In your notebook, plan your daily schedule the night before. Write down *when* you will begin and end each practice session. Use a timer during your practice session to stay on track. It is the consistency over time that is most important and you cannot accomplish everything in one practice session. Just as an athlete would train on a daily basis, so can we as musicians. For example:

Practice Session #1 – 8-8:45am – Basics; long tones, lip slurs, scales and arpeggios

Practice Session #2 – 9:30-10:15am – Etudes - Bordogni #3(in three octaves), Blazevich #5, Kopprasch #7

Practice Session #3 – 11-11:45 – excerpt practice (Ride, Meistersinger, Mahler 1)

Practice Session #4 – 12:30-1:15 - solo practice

And so on...

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth H. Blanchard, *Leadership and the One Minute Manager* (Harper Collins Publishers, 1985).

## **M - Measureable**

Measureable skills are exercises by which you can track personal improvement of technique via speed and accuracy. When building technique, using a metronome is essential; slow practice, incrementally increasing the metronome, with thoughtful repetition. With each repetition, set a goal for improvement. For example, say to yourself, "In this repetition I will improve the smoothness of the passage." Make note of your beginning and ending tempos, in order to assess progress on a daily basis.

## **A - Attainable**

Are your goals attainable? Consider the date of your next performance and begin with the end in mind. Think about the date you intend to achieve the goal and then work backwards, planning the preparation that is necessary for a successful performance.

1. Date of the intended performance
2. Your current ability to play the repertoire
3. Days or weeks of preparation time
4. How much time you will need to dedicate each day
5. Endurance – performing all of the prepared repertoire at one time
6. Rehearsal time with other musicians

## **R - Realistic**

Be realistic about the goal and everything that goes into achieving that goal. It is possible to accomplish any goal, given that it is realistic and that you have allotted enough time to prepare. Most often, we wish we had allotted more time.

## **T - Time-bound**

If it seems like you never have enough practice time, then efficiency is of the essence. Zero in on the passages that are difficult. Avoid repetition of the easy parts, just because you like to play them and you sound good on them. Strive for perfection and consistency in your playing. Repetition is key, however "spaced repetition" is best. For every repetition, rest for a few seconds, and be mindful of what you want to accomplish in the next repetition. Practice in smaller chunks. 20 minutes playing, 10 minute break.

First and foremost, we are musicians who happen to play the tuba or euphonium. Your end goal should be to make beautiful music and to love being a music maker! When you've exhausted all of the ways to practice something and you still haven't mastered it, try one of these S.M.A.R.T. practice ideas:

### **S.M.A.R.T. practice ideas:**

#### Improving Tone Quality

- Define a clear concept of sound, listen to recordings or live examples of good tone.
- Form "OH" in the oral cavity – experiment with various vowel shapes (AH, EE, I, OO, OH) in the oral cavity to achieve the most resonant sound on the instrument.
- Play long tones with dynamic motion. Begin with air, no articulation, as soft as possible. Crescendo to "f" and decrescendo to "p" over eight counts.
- Use more air and play with bit more volume.
- Drop the jaw and allow for a larger aperture, allowing a thicker stream of air to pass through the lips.

- Buzz the mouthpiece - Constant buzz, constant air, resonant sound. Sit at the piano (for pitch reference) and buzz through a low legato etude. Or buzz simple melodies with a drone tone.
- Lip Bending - go chromatically through each note, beginning in the middle of the note (f or g just below the bass clef staff). Bend each note down and out of focus and then *let* the pitch come back to center.
- Use a practice mute and play forte. Remove the mute and play with a full tone, using equal amounts of air as used with the mute.
- Half valve – play a passage half valve to produce a more vibrant and full sound. Depress all of your valves half way down and blow/buzz through the passage with all valves half way down. Match pitch as best as possible. Blow forte through the resistance. Transfer back to playing normal.
- Use a breathing tube to simulate an open the sound. Place breathing tube between lips and teeth, tongue moves down and back. Breathe in a half note, out a half note. Repeat with quarter notes and eighth notes. This encourages an open oral cavity.

#### Smoother playing

- Buzz the passage – listen for a continuous buzz and constant air flow.
- Half valve – press all valves down half way, blow through (buzzing) mf-f. Buzz the passage this way. Then play normal, with valves using equal amounts of air.
- Flutter tongue – flutter tongue through the entire passage using fingerings and flutter, then play normal, matching volume of air.
- Slur the whole passage. If it is written articulated, slur it, slowly. Then add legato tongue, very smooth. Then play as written.
- Firm valve press - fingers are often lazy and pressing the valves more firmly helps smooth the passage.
- Play on a single note - "super legato" - where each articulation of the note runs into the next, then apply it to the passage you are working on.
- Play the passage down one octave or two octaves when possible, to increase flow and the smoothness of the notes, when brought back to the written octave the awareness is placed on the amount of flow that the player is using.
- Use a buzz rim tool – buzz the passage with the buzz rim.

#### Improving a technical passage

- SLOW, repetitive practice. Begin practicing at half speed, play the passage 3 times perfectly at that tempo. Increase the metronome 2 clicks, play the passage 3 times perfectly at that tempo, etc. Keep slowly increasing to marked tempo and work passage to 20 clicks beyond the marked tempo.
- “Chunk it” – take small parts of the passage and repeat slowly. Play another chunk of the passage slowly, put the two together.
- Change the rhythm – dotted eighth/sixteenth, sixteenth/dotted eighth, triplet, play first and last notes only of a grouping, play the in between notes only of a grouping.
- FAST practice (only after slow practice) – play it crazy, fun and fast, eliminate the fear of playing the passage, give yourself the green light to play crazy fast! Then come back to tempo and put in context.
- Play it backwards, adding one note at a time. Play the last note of a passage, then the last two notes, the last three notes and so on. Apply the same concept working from the beginning of a passage.
- Slur it all—if you are trying to go quickly through fast technique and get the right pitches with your embouchure at the same time it may be too much at once. Go slowly through a technical passage until it sounds and feels effortless, then start adding articulation.
- Work away from the instrument. Sit at the piano and sing/buzz the part. This helps internalize the rhythm, pitch, and feeling of the work.

### Improving range

- Play slow harmonic slurs beginning with lowest note and ascending.
- Buzz the mouthpiece, glissando, into upper register and into lower register.
- Play etudes down the octave.
- Play etudes up the octave.
- Spend time on etudes that utilize the low register. Likewise, spend time on etudes that utilize upper register.
- Play scales – one octave, then two octaves, then three octave, and so on – expanding range slowly.
- Long tones in all registers—focus on relaxation and resonance with each note—for upper range, be aware of tension and relax into the sound.

### Improving Musicality

- Listen to recordings of great artists and emulate (other than tuba or euphonium players, for example singers and string players)
- Imagination - think of a story or an image or write words for the piece.
- Experiment with different dynamic shapes (hairpin, reverse hairpin, etc.).
- Use vibrato – experiment with jaw v. diaphragm vibrato. At certain times one type has a more musical effect than the other and vice versa.
- Sing the passage with expression and emotion, transfer to the instrument.
- Associate different colors with certain phrases/musical ideas.
- Add your own phrase markings to the music.
- Sing and conduct - use large gestures to express the music.
- Attend live performances and notice how other musicians express themselves.
- Use word association – such as “angry” or “lovingly” or “joyfully” - choose a word and convey that emotion in the music.
- Record yourself – for awareness, listen to the recording to determine new ways of interpreting a passage.

### Improving rhythm

- Vocalize the rhythms, then vocalize and conduct the rhythms.
- Practice speaking subdivisions with a metronome (one, e, and, a, two, e, and, a).
- Change the rhythms – if you have a passage of all sixteenth notes, play them as dotted eighth sixteenth instead, then change to sixteenth dotted eighth.
- Play the challenging rhythm on one note.
- Use an egg shaker in your practice. Shake subdivisions while singing your part. Or, shake along with the radio and sing along.
- Using a Dr. Beat or Garage Band program, create a drum beat to use with scales or etudes.
- Incorporate a percussion rhythm book into your practice, such as the Louis Bellson’s *Modern Reading Text in 4/4*.

### Improving time

- Work away from the instrument – march in time, or dance.
- Use body percussion to create rhythms and subdivisions using a metronome.
- Put certain motions to certain beats within a measure (the student assigns the motions).
- Use an egg shaker - shake the egg to the beat with a metronome; then switch hands; then finger along on the instrument and shake the egg with the other hand.
- Use the metronome clicking every beat—then switch to cut time—then switch it to one beat a bar—then switch it to one beat every two bars –etc.

- Conduct with a metronome.
- Using drumsticks, alternating hands for each note – with a metronome play quarter notes, eighth notes, sixteenth notes, etc.
- Use an app such as *Time Guru* to program creative time sequences.

To conclude, a great performance is the result of proper and thoughtful practice. Be S.M.A.R.T. about the way you practice, and have fun along the way!

#### SHORT BIO

Dr. Deanna Swoboda is Assistant Professor of Music at Arizona State University where she teaches tuba and euphonium, music entrepreneurship, and coaches chamber music. She has enjoyed a vibrant career as performer, educator, and entrepreneur. As a performer Deanna played tuba with the internationally recognized Dallas Brass and Western Brass Quintet. Prior to her appointment at Arizona State University, she served on the faculty at Western Michigan University and University of Nevada Las Vegas. Deanna is creator and performer of a band recruitment DVD, entitled “Band Blast Off.” She has performed hundreds of concerts and presentations around the US, supporting and enhancing public school music programs. As a recording artist, her CD’s include *Deanna’s Wonderland* (Summit), *Shamanic Journey* (Potenza), and *Games for Brass* (Summit), and *Table for Three* (Summit). She is Past President for the International Tuba Euphonium Association and is a Miraphone tuba artist.