

How to Practice: A Lecture

BY PATRICK O'BRIEN

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Editor's Introduction

Patrick O'Brien delivered this lecture to a group of attendees at the JLSA Summer Seminar in 1982. This live lecture focuses on how to prepare to practice. It may be a unique perspective on the preparatory foundation of practicing that is rarely addressed. Patrick's approach tends toward the spiritual. It should be apparent that he raises issues which we all have to think about and decide for ourselves—not only for practicing but for organizing our lives in general.

The Purpose of Practicing

[The audiotape begins in mid-sentence. The lecture's introduction is missing.]

PATRICK O'BRIEN: What is the aim with which we practice? Most of us don't really know, we don't think about what we're trying to do. We know we're filling time. We know we're supposed to do it, but we're not sure what we're trying to do. We don't have very specific goals.

When my daughter was about four years old, she came in and watched me playing scales for a few minutes, trying to figure out what this activity was called, whether it was interruptible or not. She wanted to find out what kind of activity it was, linguistically. Into what kind of category did it fall? She watched for a few minutes and finally, perplexed, she came over and pulled on my sleeve and asked, "Dad, are you playing or working?"

Most of us don't know when we're doing either. There's a vast difference between playing a little concert for yourself and practicing. Most

of us don't know the difference, don't define it, don't care to actually deal with it. Which is fine if you don't want to get any better. The foremost thing you have to remember is that what you're trying to do is make something better tomorrow than it is today. You're not going to do whatever you did yesterday over again and hope by magic that it's going to get there. With that kind of procedure you will probably just make the same mistakes today that you made yesterday. You should pick one mistake and say, "I'm going to get that one."

How to Master Fast Runs

For instance, there is a category of cheap tricks that one can use in practicing that in a very small amount of time will take care of a large problem. There must be dozens of them.

When you have a difficult run, a cadential figure of some kind that plows up the neck at high speed and must be done with a great deal of panache, you may keep finding yourself marching into it and then breaking down in the middle of it. You never quite get through it the way you want.

I was taught by a jazz drummer that what you're supposed to do is practice it backwards. You set yourself up and play the very last note rhythmically. You count the length of the bar, or whatever the unit is, and play the very last note. Then you try and find the next unit before that in whatever the meter is, be it two, three, or four notes before that. You try and play the two notes before that. Pa pa pom, two three four, pa pa pom, two three four. You do that, say, eight times in a row, till you know it very well.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: You're not talking about playing in reverse?

O'BRIEN: No, I'm talking about working back from the end. Then you go back two notes more, you play the four last notes leading up, and then two notes more, and so on.

What will happen is that you've practiced the end of the run many more times than the beginning. It will gain strength, confidence, and security as you play it. If you need a run that goes [he sings] pom, dada-dadadum [very quickly], that's how you practice it. That's a cheap trick. It can take care of any run really fast. If you practice it that way carefully for a day or two, you'll always have it. There are lots of ways you can do that. That's one of the simplest. You pull out something that's giving you trouble, and you work at it from an odd perspective.

Often for a very strong section of the piece—the very end where you always seem to break down and not make the last couple of chords—what you must do is practice the coda or the last section backwards. You start by playing the last chord and playing the last two chords and then the last three chords. Most really fast cadential figures have a habit of starting a little slow and ending faster, a sort of *accelerando* effect. And, in fact, you can get that kind of effect by practicing that way.

There are many techniques. How often do you talk to another musician about the techniques of practicing? Do you pay any attention to it? Do you actually set any store about how you go about your practicing methodically? You spend a lot of your life at it.

Practice a Piece Correctly Every Time

There is another process about practicing. Your first object is to make something work better.

Therefore it is self-defeating for you to march into the room, pick up your instrument, sit down, and just roll into the thing. What you're hoping for is like being a compulsive gambler. You're hoping you can put heavy money down on a long shot, and God will come down and touch your brow and say, "You got it!" You're hoping for something for nothing. And you're setting yourself up, like a compulsive gambler, to be a victim. You're waiting for the first mistake to happen.

You should instead attempt to sit down with the full intention of playing the thing through from beginning to end correctly the very first time. Now, that takes a lot of preparation. We can talk about different steps of preparation till you're ready to do that. But your basic procedure when you walk into your practice session should be to sit down and play through something perfectly the first time, however slowly, however carefully, to get yourself very loose. You may have to go through several stages of warm-up and limbering yourself and so on before you get there. But once you approach a piece, you should attempt to play it correctly the first time, just for this result: that the next time you walk in and sit down in front of the stand, you can remember that last time when you played it correctly.

You can actually set that up. You can increase the statistical likelihood that you will do it correctly. You can certainly increase your sense of security emotionally. You can feel that every time you go through and look at this page, you will go through it correctly and make all the moves right rather than looking at it and saying, "Oh boy, look at that, I always miss that," and starting to get tight just as you approach it.

There is a system of behavior modification, what you're trying to do, to do it absolutely correctly. Very few people practice pieces correctly. They would rather just noodle around and hope it's going to go right, and they'll get something for nothing. So they'll play it five or six times wrong and hope it's going to go right by magic once.

The other way of looking at it looks a little more like work, I guess. What you're trying to do is increase the likelihood that you do it correctly. You have to do certain things very specifically when you begin to practice. One of the things you have to consider is your reaction time. What are you trying to do? You're trying to make things work better. You have to allow for the fact that some of your practice is going to be very slow and intermittent, that you might make one stroke on one beat and then wait several more very slow beats before you make one more stroke.

For instance, looking at one finger and how it works and how it sounds, you have to leave yourself enough time between events to notice what happened, to decide whether it sounded good, whether it felt good, whether you could do it again. To try to remember what it felt like, and prepare to do it again. To give yourself time to imprint that memory, to evaluate and find out what you did and see [whether it] is worth doing again and come up with a solution.

Most of us go at our practicing far too fast. We go through a mistake, and then once it's happened, we look back at it. We don't do anything in the way of planning ahead or going back and doing it so slowly that we can see what went wrong and react to it.

Time and time again the most obvious mistakes happen. Someone has a failure to get from one chord to another, and I'll see this sort of thing. They'll play one chord, and then they'll go like this [demonstrates]. Their whole body will veer, their shoulder will go up, they'll lose everything, and they'll get a horrible sound on the next chord.

Did they ever stop to look at that? I wonder how they could not see it. Did they ever give themselves a chance to look into what they're doing? Did they ever put a mirror in their practice room and just watch what they look like? You have to give yourself time to see things. You have to agree with yourself that you will move slowly enough that you can watch the process. You shouldn't be defining your practice by the bottom line, with a goal of, "I'm going to get there no matter how I have to crawl to get there." You're trying to find a way that is rather pleasant and comfortable, that is emotionally such a thing that you could look forward to. You're trying to find a way of getting there that you can live with. You measure it against yourself and your own needs, not necessarily the needs

of the music, not trying to get to the bottom line at all costs, thinking, “I must play this at this speed.”

We’re not bold enough sometimes to take these things and measure the attempt by ourselves, to measure them against what we need. It’s just a question of whether you got the sound out on the beat somehow, no matter how. We live in a society that gears us that way. It doesn’t ask us what the quality of the experience of playing that note was. It just wants to know whether you got it out.

What happens in terms of the quality of experience of playing a note is that if you don’t pay attention to how your body feels—[whether it] feels secure and relaxed, both physically and emotionally—you burn out. There are a lot of young players who play very hard for a few years in college and then stop playing because they don’t build a life-giving process, a way of dealing with it each day that feels comfortable and nice, that ensures a certain amount of success. They’d rather go out and play craps with the universe and see if they just give it a whirl, maybe the earth will move.

When and How to Practice

One of the first things you have to consider regarding your own needs in practicing is when you actually do it, where you do it, how you go about it physically. A classic situation, for instance, is that we don’t measure practice against our own needs. Here’s a phrase I use with students constantly: “If you have a very busy day and you only have forty-five minutes in which to practice, you’ll get it done. If you have the whole day off, you won’t get anything done.”

We don’t normally choose to practice when we want to. We don’t stop to consider, “When would I *like* to play? What’s my best time of day?” Some people practice in the morning, some practice at night. Some people practice alone—most do, I guess. I practice very late at night, after the phone has finally shut up for the day and everyone else has gone to bed. Some people practice early in the morning for the same reason. Some people feel fresh in the morning, and they figure, “I’ll get up half an hour earlier before I go to work.” And the very fact that they’ve gotten up a half hour earlier and they’re working against a deadline and they’ve got to get something in makes them work in the wrong way. Sometimes people need to feel an open-ended space of time.

You have to have quiet. You have to be able to hear yourself. But you also have to be quiet inside yourself. You have to be prepared to listen to what you’re doing. You can’t really do it with seventeen other things

on your mind. Forced practicing that a musician does in a hotel room before a concert when he doesn't know a piece is not what we're talking about. We're talking about what you do every day of your life voluntarily because you enjoy it, some process that makes your life contain more good stuff tomorrow than it did today. It's not something you do because you have to. You have to avoid the feeling of anxiety. You have to sit down with the intention of doing things correctly, trying to find the easiest way, the most secure way, the loosest way. Not because the world wants to hear the notes you play but because it's going to feel good for you to play them. You have to define it inside yourself in terms of what it means for you to do it.

Ergonomic Requirements for Practicing

There are a lot of physical details about how you practice. How many of you don't have a proper stand for your music? How many of you don't have a proper chair, and so you put your music on a desk while you sit on a bed? How many of you have your music in some sort of phenomenal disarray and horrible Xerox copies falling all over the place and you can never find the last page of that piece? Or you always have to turn that page over because when you Xeroxed it and put it in the binder, you had the two pages 1 and 2 and you didn't put them on opposite sides [of two sheets] so you always have to turn between those two measures. And you go on for months without making three more holes and turning the thing around so you can play straight through it. You've all done these things, simple, dumb things where you didn't take the situation in hand and do something about it. The simplest thing: rewriting a piece if you can't read it. The light might not be good. You can find yourself very uncomfortable because your seat isn't correct.

For instance, you can work on a chair with a footstool like a classical guitarist, and your chair or footstool might slip on the floor where you practice. You will have your knee out there and the thing will want to slip away. So you will hold your leg in with a little bit of tension and hold yourself up a little bit, a little tight, [and] you'll hold yourself there for hours rather than doing something about it. Put some rubber under the feet. But we'll practice like that, sometimes for years, without taking care of the physical situation, just the simplest details.

What you're trying to do is to make this activity pleasant for yourself, it's a part of your life. It has to fit into your life, it's not something you shoehorn in there between other things. It has to be something you leave time for because you prefer to leave time for it. Not something

you've got to do after everything else. It should be a ritual, whatever it has to be to make it be the right thing. Do it in the morning, in private, whatever you have to do, whatever physical or mental state you have to be in to do it.

And take responsibility for it. It's easy not to [or] to say, "I couldn't find the last page for a couple weeks," or not to correct the faint page. Sometimes if you write out the fingering for a whole piece, you realize how vague your thinking is about it. If you write out every finger[ing] for the first half-dozen pieces you learn, it's a tremendous education. Pretend that you're teaching it to someone and you wrote compulsively a right-hand and left-hand fingering for every single note. Then read it very carefully as though you were trying to explain it to someone. Talk your way through it. You'll be amazed, when you look at it, that you'll write down three 2s in a row, on three different notes, and not realize you did that. Time and time again I will say to someone, "Do you realize that you just repeated that finger eight times in a row?" And they don't, they just never looked.

Physical Considerations

You can do physical procedures like that, recopying a piece and fingering it as though you were going to make a professional edition of it. Find out how to stabilize your fingering. Primarily, you're supposed to be looking at your personal goals. In the first segment of your practice each day, you start inward and work outward. You think about your body, you relax your neck, your shoulders, you loosen up with some simple exercises. You think outward from there to the lute. How do you hold it? How does it feel comfortable? Your posture, your chair, your music, and so on gradually come to your notice as you move outward, one circle at a time. You should stop at the point of just You and the Lute. Just observe your body and the lute itself. And spend a lot of time on your personal goals—before your musical goals.

Your musical goals should have a form such as improving your tone or playing legato or something like that. Your musical goal should not be by any means, "I've got to play this piece." Your personal goals, which come first, are watching what your body does and feeling if it feels good, relaxation, perhaps the disarticulation of motion such that one thing moves independently of another, [making] yourself more secure and more centered and relaxed, trying to move from place to place without moving your whole body to do it. You can gradually move outward from there, but you really start by centering on your own work.

Beginning to Practice: The Right Hand

For those of you that don't have teachers, I usually recommend that you start with the right hand each day. Once you settle your body down, I'd like for you to start just on your tone and your articulation. The first thing for me in the long run is how the body works. There are certain principles that I feel have to be adhered to.

One of them is disarticulation, whereby you move one finger independently of another, or at least you are capable of doing it if you need to. For instance, if you have to play an index finger and your middle finger follows it every single time, then it's not going to be ready to play on the next beat. You should be at least theoretically capable of moving each finger independently. There are some situations wherein they do move in tandem, obviously, but there are particular goals.

Feeling How it Feels to Play

I don't start from the standpoint of thinking of what the audience hears. I start from the standpoint of how it feels to play. If you observe the playing of very fine players, you find that their playing is very different, very individual, sometimes highly idiosyncratic, and that the most successful players by and large are serving their own emotional needs, very honestly. They are playing the way they feel. They're playing very intuitively. When all is said and done about all the intellectual processes that go into determining how they're going to play, they're basically following their own needs, they're living their own lives through an instrument. They are being themselves.

The result is that I don't think you should make a great attempt at first to emulate the way someone you admire looks like or sounds like and whom you're watching on the stage. I think you should interpret things far more personally than that when you start.

An example: You can focus on one finger, once you've built a system, just one finger and the lute. Try and play one tone and listen to it. A classic Hopkinson Smith quotation from a master class has to do with someone who didn't play very well asking fervently for some kind of hint for how to make these two notes legato in this phrase. "I want to play them very legato." Hoppy sort of sat back and said, "Well, that presupposes that you are capable of making two tones in a row beautiful enough that they deserve to be joined."

You have to start somewhere. Probably you start from the sound, from what it sounds like and what it feels [like] to make it.

You can start with one finger, move very slowly, observe how you play, and perhaps set a beat, very slowly, and play one note periodically, and listen to it, and feel it: [he demonstrates] two, three, four [plays another tone], just listening to it and seeing what it sounds like. Try all kinds of ways of plucking it. [Plays one tone badly, the audience laughs.] You will find if you watch, say, Nigel [North], and Paul [O'Dette], and Jakob [Lindberg], they all have a very highly individual style. None of their styles would necessarily work for any of you. If you got to be as good as they are, you would have your own style.

So you're going to have to focus on what happens to you. You have to give yourself time to practice individual strokes very slowly, several on each string. Once you allow for the reaction time, the essence of practice time is repetition. You're going to try it again. You're going to try to improve it, you're going to try and observe it, try and make it more regular and dependable, until you have tremendous confidence in it under any circumstances.

You start just with one finger. It's very interesting to observe what you do in terms of training any physical system. You try and relax the largest joints you have, loosen up. And you will find that most people neglect—in the direction they're supposed to practice—they neglect to use anything but the most immediately connected joints to the job. In other words, they try to start from the tip of the finger, sort of like that [he demonstrates curling the tip], rather than attempting to distribute the job among several different joints. It takes you a while, in terms of reacting and watching what happens, to see what's actually happening and to figure out what kinds of procedures you might use. There are an awful lot of ways to pluck a string.

The processes you go about evolving may be very different, but the means you use to create that evolution are probably going to be very similar. You start very slowly, very relaxed. You give yourself a lot of reaction time. And you watch to see if you played that stroke loosely. You watch to see if your shoulder went up when you played it, you watch to see if all your fingers move together in a chunk, and so on. And you listen to the sound. You give yourself a good long four beats to listen to how the note [was] attacked, how it sustained, and how it decayed.

Using Each Finger Independently

There are certain technical things that you're trying to go for when you do that. There are anatomical things. For instance, if you tighten the tip joint of any finger, the adjacent finger will tend to follow it. If you

can do any particular job with the other joints instead, you can move more independently.

There are other things as well, like the excursion of the string and its mechanics. My most likely analogy for the excursion of a string and how you're trying to set it in motion is that you can picture it as a child's swing. You can walk up and hit the swing with a baseball bat and go "whack" and make a lot of noise, jump up in the air with a very rapid motion, and the whole chain will hardly move at all, just flip up in the air and slow down very quickly. You'll set it in motion very quickly, but it will slow down to a very tiny point rather quickly. You can also, for instance, grasp a swing, raise it as high as you can, and let it go very gently. The chain will swing in a very long arc and continue swinging for quite a while.

If you move a string very slowly, press it down and get out of its way and let it pop up at its own speed, it tends to react like this. You press it down, then as soon as you get out of its way, it recovers in one piece, or pretty nearly one piece. It is also possible for you to strike with so much acceleration at one point of the string that you get one part of it moving before the rest. Parts of it will move opposite from one another a great deal more. So you can affect the kind of excursion you get on the string by the speed at which you hit it. You have to consider what it is that you want. Do you play for a lot of attack, [or] do you play for a lot of sustain? What is it that you want? What is it that expresses how you feel? Players really play themselves.

The thing that you'll find if you study with different instructors at a seminar like this, the same people for three years in a row, is that very often they'll say the same things to each student. They'll repeat certain themes that are the most important things in the world to them. Some people want a tone that sustains and don't want much attack on the tone. That's how they feel, that's who they are. Some people like a lot of attack and don't worry about the sustain.

Practicing Slowly for Speed

In terms of specific goals, what are you practicing for at this moment? Are you practicing for one kind of sound or another, or for relaxation, or disarticulation? Or for speed?

When you practice for speed, do you back up and practice slowly and attempt slowly to create a microcosm of what happens fast? You can be quite self-defeating in terms of practicing slowly. For instance, I can set the metronome very slowly and then play repeated strokes, [with] the

niciest sound I can, with thumb and index finger on the second string [he demonstrates awkward long strokes], wildly [moving with] a jerk as fast as I can. That's not a microcosm of what you do fast. If I took a high-speed photograph of what happens when someone plays fast, it would look like this. It would be a continuous slow motion. You can therefore practice slowly in a self-defeating way.

One of the things about practicing slowly is that you don't just play the notes infrequently—you move slowly in all ways. You release and move very slowly and form the chord in the air as you move the tone. You do everything in slow motion. If you can create a certain beat, a certain number of repercussions on the note with the slowest possible motion of your arm, that will still get you past the string in time to make those notes, [and] that is in fact the microcosm of what you do at high speed. Playing at 90 miles an hour straight down and waiting at the bottom and then playing 90 miles an hour straight back up and waiting at the top is not what you do at high speed. That means you're tying very infrequent notes to the maximum speed of your body, rather than tying very infrequent notes to the minimum speed of your body.

Even practicing slowly is not enough. You have to do it in a certain way. You have to do it with the intention of finding out exactly what you really do. That's a cheap trick for practicing for speed. That's one of the simplest observations you can make. You can use that very easily to get a certain kind of speed. What everybody always wants [are] magic tricks. How do I make my practice efficient, how do I learn something very quickly?

Staccato Practicing—The Quick Release

A classic example is another cheap trick. You can poise your hand over a certain phrase that always gives you trouble, staying very still because at high speed you would be very still over this phrase, not moving very wildly. You can play one note at a time and release each one as suddenly as you can. The weak link in playing that fast is not how fast you can ram your fingers down—they are very well designed to do this. We don't do this [demonstrates lifting a finger], human beings that we are, we don't do this very well. We grab a lot better.

The release is usually too slow. You can at any speed play very quick, loose notes [he demonstrates playing quickly and releasing quickly]. Those notes are of a very short duration, very individual motions in the fingers. Now, if I packed all of those notes as close together as I could get them, they would be a very fast phrase. Often what you do for

a division is that you practice very infrequently, doing exactly what you must do at high speed. If you play that phrase eight times through, for instance, very slowly like that, trying to make the notes as short as you possibly can, loosening up and relaxing, placing your hand down early and relaxing as soon as you can, by the end of the eighth time you can usually with absolute security play it at double the speed you just played. Now, if you can play it at double *that* speed, probably you can find that you can play it very staccato even there, which means you could play it even faster.

Any time you're working on a division like that, a little phrase like that, there's a cheap trick: you can play it very staccato a few times like that such that you know you are able to engage the note and release it quickly enough to combine that group of notes at a still higher speed. Any time you can cut down the length of the notes to half the time in question, you can play twice as fast. It's really the release, the letting go that you have to find.

This is a way to boost speed very quickly. Playing scales very, very disjointedly in that way, and then learning that you can play them much faster immediately afterwards. It's a way of giving your playing a shot in the arm, of putting any phrase together when you absolutely must.

Paul O'Dette Practicing

There are a million tricks like that. Did any of you ever think to ask Paul O'Dette how he practices? He works harder than almost anybody. He's a tremendously efficient practicer, maybe the most efficient user of time that I know. He does not spend a lot of time going over his previous errors and making them again. He fixes things right away.

Focusing on Details

The kinds of procedures you need to institutionalize in your practice probably involve taking things apart, getting away from the bottom line, and zeroing in on certain individual aspects of your playing. You work with an individual finger for a while. You work with another individual finger for a while. You get each one working individually quite well before you attempt to integrate the two. However, you must at some point integrate the two. You must find a compatible way of working. You can't have one way that this one works and another way that one works. Somehow you must have a way that they fit together. The literature has to teach you that. You have to see what things work together.

Playing Opposition (Simultaneous Notes with Thumb and a Finger)

Here's an example of a glaring oversight in practice. We learn to play scales, single notes. We learn to play chords, which we will very often roll because we can't play them simultaneously. Because we don't have a synthesis of directions for our fingers where they will all work in the same place, we have to tilt in various different ways as we go through them.

The most common single type of playing in any solo piece is called opposition, where we play with thumb and a finger simultaneously. I've been to about half of each of two master classes, and in each a very important point was the fact that people with guitar training could not come in and play notes simultaneously.¹ They had a case of what we in the guitar world call "Segovia disease," which is playing every pair of notes separately, not being able to play them simultaneously.

Now, has anyone ever asked you to practice opposition? For instance, once you've worked on these individual fingers and you've worked on your thumb individually, and you've even worked on thumb-index alternation. Have you worked on playing both these notes simultaneously? Now you have to think about how to engage each one in exactly the way you want so that the notes come out simultaneously. Very few of us can actually play two notes simultaneously. It's very rare. You can try playing thumb and middle together, and thumb and index together. Here the music has to teach you how to play. You have to observe the music and see that this is a texture that comes up and you must be able to do this thing.

Still, these are mostly right-handed things. Once you develop a synthesis whereby several of your right-hand fingers can work effectively together, you usually go on to your left hand. The plucking hand is more important and it's usually where you begin. It's the soul of the activity, really. The sound you make is who you are. You are what your tone is. That's what the world perceives. If you're an aggressive person, you'll probably play a real nasty, angry tone. Your personality comes right out. It's not necessarily what your personality is or has to be but what you force it to be because of the constraints you think you're under, what purpose your playing serves in your life.

Whenever people come to me with a physical problem—they've hurt themselves playing—I will ask, "How did you hurt yourself?" They'll answer, "Playing this piece," and put it on a music stand. And I'll ask,

¹ The master classes to which Patrick alludes may have taken place during the same 1982 Summer Seminar.

“Why are you playing this piece?” And the next phrase will always be the same: “Well, see, I’ve got to have this ready for an audition next week.” It’s always, “I gotta, I have to do this.” But do you actually want to? Do you even like the piece? Why do you have to play it? Their whole attitude in terms of their feelings about the piece is portrayed in what they do with their body as they play it. Before they start practicing, they don’t decide whether they should. Should you do this thing at all?

Left-Hand Basics

When you get to your left hand, the most important thing to know is that gravity should press down the strings. The weight of your arm presses down the string, not the pinching in your hand. You don’t squeeze the neck, you relax your arm and bear the weight, which means that we can do some very unusual things to begin. Place your finger on a string, the second finger, perhaps, which is the center of gravity. The thumb is more or less behind it. Take your thumb off the neck, just relax it and let it sit back there. Just feel the weight of your arm on the neck. Once you have the feeling of that weight, try putting down another finger, pressing down very gently until the weight feels secure on that finger, and then release the pressure. Don’t pick it up, just release it. Try trading the weight back and forth from finger to finger. That’s the way great players play. They don’t perform a series of discrete events. One event flows into the other and they telescope together.

What you’re trying to do in this way is institutionalize a certain kind of thinking. The relaxation of your arm therefore has a purpose. You know what you are trying to achieve with that relaxation. It’s not just one more thing someone tells you to do. You have to have a specific goal in terms of why you are relaxing. You want to use the weight of your arm as much as possible and to use as little stress as possible. Therefore, it pays big dividends to relax your shoulder.

It’s really fairly simple. You can look up the anatomy of the hand in an anatomy book and find out what the muscles are. What do your fingers do? How many people can name the motions of their fingers and tell me what they are called and what accomplishes them? And if you have just been told what that is, think about this: why didn’t you ever ask that question before? With regard to having an anatomy book, I tell people to look in one to find out what muscles and tendons and ligaments and whatnot they have. If you bought an appliance, you would demand an operating manual and guarantee. Here you have this machine, you’re all stuck inside it, and you don’t demand an operating manual, you don’t

demand any basic knowledge of how it functions.

Everyone put your hand out. [He extends his arm and holds his hand palm down.] Your hand is prone. Turn it over. It's supine. They don't mean the same thing. Lying on your stomach you are prone, lying on your back you are supine. When you turn the palm down, it's called pronation; the opposite is supination.

Your hand, your fingers, can do four things. They flex, controlled by muscles over here [the palmar side (inside) of the forearm through tendons]. The fingers extend [by the use of muscles over the dorsal side (outside) of the forearm through tendons]. They move the fingers apart like this [he spreads his fingers]. It's called abduction, which is controlled by muscles up here [called the dorsal interossei, located on the back of the hand and extending up to the base of the fingers]. And they move the fingers together, which is called adduction, and is controlled by muscles in here [the palmar interosseous muscles located in the palm of the hand and extending up to the base of the fingers].²

If you don't know what the machine is, you can't make rational judgments about what it can and cannot do.

Finger Placement

When I practice for my left hand, one of the first things I do is to see if I am pressing down as efficiently as possible. I don't want to be lifting up a finger in an extension way out there [he probably demonstrates straightening the finger]. I'd rather lift it straight up [a short distance off the string], which means I'd rather come down straight on a string rather than at an angle.

In terms of the force, if you have some kind of impact on something with your finger, and part of your finger bends that way [diagonally], then some of the impact goes out that way. So if you put eight ounces of force into the motion, four ounces go one way and four ounces go the other. A great deal of the force that you put on your fourth finger is usually wasted by pressing along the string sideways, like that [demonstrates at an angle]. Now, you can control that finger and put it down straight, it's not hard to do. It can usually be learned in a matter of a couple months.

When practicing, one of the things I am thinking about is whether I am doing each action in the easiest possible way. I also pay attention

² Cordial thanks to longtime LSA member Michael Peterson, MD, a surgeon who has helped to elucidate Patrick's anatomical references and terminology in this paragraph and numerous other passages in this issue.

to whether I customarily seek the easiest possible way to do things. I frequently get students who make everything as hard as possible for themselves. They find ways to make excuses, a series of things that take away responsibility from themselves for doing it well. You probably can think of someone you know who makes things difficult for themselves by constantly picking the wrong instrument.

Instrument Selection

Once you decide that you do not want to put any barriers between yourself and the instrument, such as choosing an inappropriate instrument for a certain literature in the wrong tuning, you may put up other barriers. You may make yourself practice at the worst time of day or in a frenzy, not zeroing in on any one thing while practicing but rather spreading out wide. The unconscious mentality behind this is sometimes to absolve oneself of responsibility for not doing well.

Usually if you examine your motives, you find out what you really like to do, which may not be what your teacher says you should do.

A particular problem people have in terms of practicing is that they don't form a general knowledge of the instrument. They are trying to struggle through the few notes that are written on this page. They don't teach themselves harmony on the instrument, figure out how to resolve each chord in each position and go to wherever they're supposed to go musically. They are only concerned with getting this one piece done. And for lack of that general knowledge, they don't get a very good sense of balance, of where the music is going. They don't see the musical direction of a phrase, and they shove something over there at the last minute, finding fully half their body going curiously away from where they are going to go.

How much of the time when you're trying to get somewhere do you spend a lot of energy going in the opposite direction? This is a classic example. [He gestures.] Ever seen that one? [He gestures again.] Obviously that's where you want to be. You might possibly even stretch away and hold on for those notes if you want to go in that direction, not away from where you're going.

Planning the Practice Session

The process of practicing is terribly complex. I find I have to make a plan very carefully in my mind for what I want to do, and I have to revise it minute by minute. For many people it helps to write down what they are attempting to do. You can sit down with a blank

piece of paper on your stand and write down the first thing you do. Try it. Then write down what you do next. Keep a list of what you do on a given day. Then look at the list at the end of the week and see how much time you spent doing what. You'll be terribly shocked within the first fifteen minutes. And immediately you'll start to do everything very differently.

One of the worst things about that kind of artificial procedure is that you'll start worrying about what it looks like on the page: "Oh, it looks like I'm an idiot, I'd better try doing something else"—not because you feel it, but because you think it looks better—"I may not get to my goal, but it looks like I'm trying harder."

If you begin to monitor how much time you practice, you will ask how important is this thing in your life and do you treat it so, or is it in fact the last thing you get around to after everything else? How many things like this do you have in your life and of what value is it, proportional to the other things you have to do? Is it important enough where you can make the time and say, "No, I can't do that now, this is when I practice because it's my time, when I have to do the thing that I want to do"? You can stake out a piece of territory physically and temporally and make a boundary for yourself of some kind.

Starting from the Center of Oneself

There are myriad other ways of looking at it, and I tend to make up different ways with each student. But perhaps the most important element is that you attempt to start in the center, in yourself, consider how you feel, what you want to do, consider the condition of your body, its physical environment, and work outward very slowly.

The last thing you really get to is the audience itself. If you don't feel very good about what you're doing, the audience isn't going to care for what you're doing. You have to take care of the center first. That's where it comes from.

Now, Besard says, "Choose one lesson by self."³ This is very important: One lesson. By self. Don't choose it because Paul O'Dette plays it incredibly. You need to choose the piece because you like it and it sustains you well enough that you will want to work on it carefully.

"Further," Besard says, and Dowland translates, "according to thy

³ Jean-Baptiste Besard, lute-playing instructions in Latin from his *Thesaurus Harmonicus* (1603), translated into English and republished by John Dowland in his *Varietie of Lute-Lessons* (1610).

capacity.”

You don't play a piece to compete with somebody else but to enjoy the experience of playing it. You have to frankly admit what your level of playing is. It's not what you can barely scratch through, it's what you can have a nice experience playing. What can you do that's unique that no one else can do, that's specifically yourself, that is satisfying?

What is your capacity, what should you be playing, what's your reason for playing this piece? Does it fit in your plan to teach yourself about the literature, to try and find out what techniques you need to develop? Does it happen to use a certain kind of fingering combination that you wanted an excuse to learn and balance on and learn how to play securely?

Does it use a certain aesthetic effect of nuance of time or dynamics that you want to learn to control better? Does it say a sort of thing in a literary or spiritual sense that is terribly important to you? Why are you playing the piece? Should you be playing it? Frankly, can you control it well enough that you should be playing it? Do you really enjoy playing it that way? Does anyone else enjoy it?

You have to discipline yourself enough that once you admit you like this piece, you are going to take the responsibility to learn it well, in a well-organized fashion, with enough respect that you're going to treat it decently. It's not a vehicle for your ego.

Sight Reading

I differ from Besard in this respect: When he says that you should not read through a piece at first sight, I wonder about that. I think that you can permit yourself to know how a piece goes all the way through. But that's a very difficult thing. Some people ought to pass an absolute rule that [if] they can't do it, they should give the book to a really good player, and ask him to read through a few pieces so they can hear them and decide if they like them and can play them. Because once you open this Pandora's box of plowing through a whole piece, you tend to plow through it again.

You have to start with individual sections. You have to look at how it should be fingered. Try combinations of rhythms, attempt different things, write them down. Use whatever organizational system you need graphically to remember what you intend to do.

And you have to work through each part very slowly, playing each part in slow motion, not in a series of infrequent jerks, at first slowly and carefully and smoothly, trying to feel the condition of your entire body as

you do it. When you can do the whole piece that way, you've actually got the whole thing. It's a very succinct piece of advice about practicing that Besard gives here, I don't know of anything better in the whole literature, nor in fewer words.

Defining Practice Goals

Primarily what I've tried to say here is what you need *before* you actually get down to the bottom line of what you're going to play and how you're going to play it. What you first need to know is why you're practicing and what you're trying to accomplish in a general sense. I say of course "about specific goals," and I don't tell you necessarily what they are. That's something you need to determine on a one-on-one basis. But the kinds of specific goals you are looking for are aesthetic and not bottom line, such as "I just want to play this piece faster." You have to take apart in a piece what's working individually and find out what parts you have the most trouble with. You can even consider two ways of playing a piece. If there is a little *gruppo* in the piece that you cannot possibly play fast enough, you have to slow down the whole piece to play it.

It's perfectly reasonable to say, "Now I must go and woodshed this thing, I must go and practice that technique. But right now, if I have to perform that piece, I'm just going to leave that out. I'm going to alter it to a simpler ornament and play something stylish and well and not destroy the whole piece by playing the whole thing at half speed."

You have to look at an awful lot of solutions like that, in terms of what happens with the bottom line once you pull the thing apart and look at it realistically.

You are applying yourself to a very specific goal. You have to consider if that should be a part of your plan at all. Should you be performing [publicly] now? Or by performing, are you in fact perpetuating the level of your own playing? Whenever someone gives you a really good observation—you look at Paul and the lessons when he is teaching somebody something, and you say, "I want to try that, I really need that." And then you say, "I've got to play Thursday night. When I get home I'll try it afterward." And then you forget it. And another year passes and you haven't done it. Perhaps you have to look at the idea that practicing, your learning process, your growth, can be more important than performing when the performing is counterproductive to your further growth. It really is only something you should do if it fits in with your plan, such as playing a particular piece. You should not give up the responsibility for your own growth and put it into the hands of someone else.

We're professionals because we take money. But it does not necessarily mean that you have the right goal in mind. You're playing from one little performance to another, and you'll take any gig that somebody calls up with on the phone rather than saying, "Here's my practice procedure, I've outlined certain goals, and this gig does not fit within my goals. It is going to be counterproductive. It doesn't compensate me for what I need to do at all." This dude is calling me up and saying, "It's good exposure," but it's very little money. But how many times do you aim yourself at a rather tawdry gig and find yourself going from one little tiny gig to another?

That's very short-sighted, perhaps even aiming yourself to one monster gig that I call the *hors d'oeuvre* of the century: senior recital syndrome—putting off everything in your life until you get done with that senior recital, until you've gotten so used to putting off everything in your life that you can't figure out, [and] once the recital is over, how to pick up the threads of the rest of your life.

If you look at it in a certain way, it is easier to organize yourself because you feel part of something, a movement, perhaps. You have to keep some sort of contact with others that gets you outside yourself so it's not just your ego on the line. You are part of something larger than yourself, which sometimes makes it much easier for you to see what your goals are or should be. Ironically, you can treat yourself somewhat better in that way because you are not focusing on your own ego but on what a whole number of us are trying to achieve.

I have gotten that kind of experience from quite a number of different people, notably from our obviously absent friend David Phillips, who passed away this winter.⁴ I spend a lot of time trying to be better at this than I am, and I have for years because I knew David expected it of me, other people expected it of me. It helps.

David would look at me being rather petty and getting annoyed with someone who was slighting me in some fashion, and David would say, "Well, of course you know it is insecurity that makes them do that sort of thing." I knew nothing of the sort. But he did that with such a light touch that I didn't feel like I had to apologize for being such an idiot.

Improvisation

⁴ David S. Phillips (1938?–Nov. 25, 1981) was an avid amateur lutenist who attended multiple LSA seminars beginning in 1976. He was also an Eastman-trained professional contrabassist with the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra and electric bassist in progressive or art rock groups such as Sigmund Snopek III.

That's the view from the inside out, or as jazz players would say, from the inside to the outside, of how and why you go about it. From the inside to the outside is a sort of attitude I learned from certain jazz players, a way of looking at what they do in the world. David was of the generation of John Coltrane and Ornette Coleman and people like that, so they thought in that way. Mostly improvisers think that way, which we should all be. It's very interesting, when you put the immediate body on the line, how it changes the way you think.

The last thing about how you should practice is how you go about cultivating spontaneity. It's probably the most left-out thing in terms of practicing. You ought to teach yourself or somehow learn to improvise, to make things up immediately. You must organize things in certain ways and see patterns and so on when you improvise. You have to prevail upon a whole set of feelings that are very different from what it is to prepare something from a fixed page. Ability to improvise is one of the most healthy measures of whether or not you can actually do a thing.⁵

⁵ See the article on learning to improvise by Patrick O'Brien, which he wrote for the *LSA Newsletter* in February and November of 1980. It is reproduced in this issue of the *JLSA*.