



## A Rational Approach to Practice

We've all felt discouraged, confused or just plain burned out on music before. It's a common problem. Some people take a week or two off and come back fresh and renewed. Others get so down on themselves, they quit forever, or chalk it up to some excuse like, "I'm just not very musically talented." And, yet there are others who never seem never to get burned out. They seem to practice and improve at twice the rate you do, and without all the drama and self-loathing. So, what makes them different?

The answer is simple. These people know how to leave their ego and their emotions at the door when they enter the practice room. By adopting a **rational** approach to practice, they remove emotion from the equation completely. Now, I know what you are thinking. "But, music is all about emotion. How can you separate the two?" Yes, it's true, music *is* about expressing emotion, but only the performance part. **Practice is not about emotion.** This is an important distinction. Practicing is most efficient with it is done in a methodical, logical and scientific way. Save your emotional reserves for performance time.

This concept isn't something I came up with on my own. Far from it. It is derived from perhaps the most important thinker in psychology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Albert Ellis. His "Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy" has been tested and proved countless times and is now a foundation of modern psychology. Through trial and error, Ellis learned that almost any aspect of human behavior can be improved by evaluating it in a rational way, and then changing that behavior through diligent practice. (I don't want to try and reduce Ellis's teachings down to a soundbyte. I urge you to enrich your life and check out his book, "A Guide To Rational Living.")

So how does this relate to music? It means you must take a **rational, not emotional** approach to your practice routine if you want to make any sort of serious improvement. When it comes to practicing, emotion just gets in the way. Instead, think of your practice time as a scientific experiment. In science, the results determine the course of action, not emotion. If something works, you continue testing that theory. If it doesn't, you formulate a new theory. Either way, you can't take the results personally because, after all, it's just an experiment. Just chalk it up to the scientific method and keep on looking for the correct answer.

But enough metaphors. How do you actually apply this rational approach to practicing? Let's make up an example. Let's say you're in the middle of a practice session. You've been practicing out of a specific method book for a long time and you just don't seem to be making any progress. Here are two ways to look at the same situation. (You decide which one is more productive.)

## **Option 1: Emotional**

Thought Process:

I've been working on this for forever and it's sounds awful. This sucks. I've wasted several weeks of my life and have nothing to show for it. This just goes to show I'm not cut out for this. I'm obviously either too stupid or untalented to get this, so I should probably quit playing altogether and save the world the anguish of hearing the soul-crushing sounds that come out of my instrument.

Result:

- sense of defeat and failure
- an excuse to quit practice (After all, you just aren't cut out for music. It just isn't in your genes.)
- dark attitude for the rest of the day/week
- drinking, wife-beating, etc.

## **Option 2: Rational**

Thought Process:

Ok, I've been working out of this method book for exactly 5 weeks. This method book says I should have seen results by now, yet I don't seem to be improving much. Obviously, something is wrong. It could be that the method just doesn't work. However, several people I trust swear by it, so I doubt that is the case. The more likely reason is that I am not practicing it correctly. I think the best course of action would be to take a lesson from a teacher who specializes in this method. That way, he or she can tell me if I'm doing this right. And if that instructor can't help me, I can either try someone else or just try a different method altogether. But even that isn't so bad. Worst case scenario, this method just doesn't work for me. But my time wasn't wasted. It was absolutely necessary to go through this test period to determine if this method would work for me. It didn't, so now I can now mark it off my list and move on to something else.

Result:

- a sense of optimism that you will eventually reach your goal
- a (justified) sense of accomplishment because you have tested and ruled out this particular practice method.
- a renewed desire to keep practicing
- energy saved on AA meetings and restraining orders

Of course, this is only one example. The same holds true if you are having a good practice day. Let your emotions take over, and you may end up thinking you are the

greatest player in town. So, you spend the rest of the rehearsal playing something you have already mastered just to hear how great you sound instead of addressing and working on your weaknesses. Not to mention, getting overly confident inevitably leads to a hard fall and a lot of self-loathing when you have a bad practice session or performance. But when you adopt a rational approach, you take both the good and bad in stride.

**Here are some other bits of wisdom I've stolen from smarter musicians than myself:**

**1. When it comes time to perform, hold nothing back.**

We've talked a lot so far about being "rational," so I want to reiterate the fact there is a time to turn it off: during performance. In fact, rational thought has as little place in performance as emotion does in practice. In practice, emotion gets in the way. In performance conscious thought gets in the way. By the time you perform, you should have rehearsed/shed what your playing to the point that you can simply turn off your conscious mind and rely on instinct and emotion. This is the time to let out all of that pent-up emotion that you've saved up (and not wasted in practice.)

**2. Never set time limits for yourself.**

There are a million factors into how quickly you improve as a musician, of which "talent" is only one. These factors make it nearly impossible to know exactly how long it will take you to master any given skill on an instrument. By setting super specific goals ("I'm going to be able to hit a double-high C in six months."), you are just setting yourself up for failure. Instead, strive to improve as much as you can in that amount of time. Players often make incredible headway in short amounts of time, but because they set an unrealistic goal for themselves, they feel as if they failed when they should be celebrating.

**3. Jump on any opportunity to play any kind of music.**

I'm not talking about learning to play all genres of music (classical, jazz, etc.). Everyone knows the merits of that. I'm suggesting you take the gigs with the lame music (as long as the pay is right, of course). I used to get dark when I had to play cheesy commercial gigs like wedding bands or shows with really trite or poorly written music. It always felt like an emotional and musical drain to play music that I hated. Now I realize the only reason I used to feel so drained after playing those gigs wasn't that the music was so bad. **It was because I had spent the entire gig lamenting about how the music was bad.** At the time, I had a full-time job and could afford to turn those gigs down, so I did. As a result, I started having endurance problems because I wasn't playing enough. Now I realize that any opportunity to play the trumpet and get paid for it is a good opportunity. Lame gigs aren't only useful, they're necessary, both to be a good technical player and to pay the bills. Now, if I get hired for a gig with really bad music, I think, "Ok. This music is terrible and it isn't something I can put much heart into. But, it does have some tricky passages in it, so I'll try to play them as perfectly as I can, not because I'm into the music, but because I want to use this

gig to my advantage. I'll think of this bad music purely as a technical exercise." When I look at it this way, it's like I'm getting paid to practice!

#### 4. **Practice humility.**

Of course, everybody knows being humble is a noble trait in and of itself. But, it also has a more practical purpose. It makes you a better musician. All of the greatest musicians I've ever talked to **consciously strive for humility** because they know it is essential for musical growth. A musician who can put his ego aside will find he can learn something from almost anyone, even those players he is far superior to! As soon as a musician gets cocky or thinks he knows it all, he stagnates. When he hears another musician, he strokes his ego by paying attention of all the things he can do that that person can't. "Man, I can play changes better than that guy. Plus, I swing harder and have more chops. If he comes and talks to me, I'll kind of vibe him to let him and everyone else in the room know I'm on a much higher level than he is." But, a humble musician will do the opposite and find the one thing that the less-skilled musician can do better than him. Then he'll learn from it. "It's true that trumpet player doesn't play jazz very well, but what a beautiful sound. I think I'll go over and buy him a beer and ask him how he developed that dark tone." The egomaniacal person alienates people and learns nothing. The humble musician develops learns valuable musical information and develops a contact that might recommend him for gigs in the future.

#### 5. **ALWAYS be professional and friendly**

I'd venture to say this has as much or more to do with getting gigs than your musical ability. I've lost count of how many bandleaders I've talked to who have told me they only hire people they like being around. Bandleaders have enough to worry about without having to put up with someone who is late, rude or inconsiderate. They'd rather hire a competent, professional, friendly musician who does an adequate job than a moody, disheveled musician who shows up late and gets drunk but plays the music really well. There is one exception to this rule. If you are a real undisputed genius or musical revolutionary like Charlie Parker, people will put up with whatever crap you throw their way. But, most of us aren't geniuses. (And, if you think you are, you probably need to get out more.) If you want gigs, show up on time, with a good attitude and play to the best of your ability. The same goes if the bandleader is being rude to you. The best thing you can do is to bite your tongue, make it through the gig, and remember not to take any more gigs with that person again. If you decide to "keep it real" and give him a piece of your mind, it will probably end up biting you in the @\$ later on. Starting an argument (even if it's justified) will end up the same way, with you never playing with that person again. Only, in this scenario, he'll spend the next month badmouthing you to everyone in town he meets. Of course, there should be a limit to your toleration. By all means, don't let someone walk all over you. But most of the time, it's best just finish out the gig and move on.