

Eric Berlin's Workshop

Practice Space - Mental Space

In the first Practice Space article, we talked about setting up your physical practice space. In this article we begin to discuss where the real practice begins - your mind. The purpose of practice is simple: to improve the process of getting the sound inside our heads out through our chosen tool (in my case the trumpet), so that it can enter the listener's ears and we can share that sound together.

With our lives increasingly busy, we tend to cram practice in the midst of other stresses. Real practice takes a focus and clarity of thought that demands our complete attention. Finding the time is hard enough. Once you have time scheduled, make sure that you get the most out of it. Find a way to leave all other thoughts behind. It is often easier to find this focus when you have a regularly scheduled practice time within a well-budgeted calendar. Optimally, find several shorter intervals during the day to keep your mind sharp.

Once you have a good space with dedicated focused time to practice, you are ready to build the new trumpet player within you. Help set the true stage (your mind) for great practice before you begin.

- 1) Have adequate fuel for the machine - make sure that you have eaten a meal to fuel the brain. A grumbling stomach will distract you from the task at hand.
- 2) Have a notepad with you. Should distractions of "to-dos" arise, you can jot them down and continue, feeling confident that you will remember.
- 3) Turn off notifications on your smart phone, tablet and computer. I am guilty of being tied to my email.
- 4) Get rid of any other possible distractions that you can. Life does intervene, but do your best.

Now you are ready to begin.

Arnold Palmer, the great golfer said: "Practice with INTENTION and ATTENTION." These are wise words from a master, which truly apply to us as trumpet players. Amateur golfers often hit the driving range and just hit balls and watch where they go. For Arnold, there was always a clear target in mind and a purpose for what he was doing.

I do a fun exercise with my students every once in a while. Just as they are about to play, I pull the trumpet away and ask them to sing the first note. It is amazing to them



Eric Berlin

Photo: Andrew T. Foster

when they actually play the note and hear how far off they are. So many players get in the habit of just blowing into the horn and waiting to see what the note sounds like. This approach is backwards and very much the same as the weekend golfers blindly hitting balls on the range, as opposed to Tiger Woods or Rory McElroy who hit to a very specific target.

Imagine for a moment the creative process of other artists. Don't forget, you ARE an artist! A painter doesn't wait to see what the brush does, nor does a poet wait to see what words come out of his pencil. The creative process must begin with the intention in your mind to communicate a sound, an image, a texture etc. Years ago, I asked a young student named Madeleine to define music. Her response has always stuck with me. Even as a 6th grader, she understood: "Music is talking without words." We must always have a clear image of what we are trying to communicate or we are just potters throwing our clay on the wheel and hoping for the best. It is the INTENTION of communicating which must be foremost in our thoughts before we even take our first breath.

How much of your practice time has been really mindless repetition? For a long time, I was concerned with "putting time in". There is no doubt that at some point in all of our lives, we need to spend time developing the muscles which help us produce a sound. However, if we are not careful, the incorrect muscle memory that we develop early on can remain a burden throughout our careers.

How many of us have gone through our lives practicing scales mindlessly in front of the television? Has anyone wondered why young players consistently play sharper as they ascend? I believe that much of this is due in large part to starting beginners on low C and ingraining a sense that "higher is harder" by equating achievement with the presentation of a new higher pitch each time. No wonder we struggle and strain as we ascend! These habits remained with me until I began to practice my scales with more attention to intonation. Playing with an eye on a tuner can be a start, but engaging our ears by tuning that scale to a drone hones the skills we really need in performance. Paying ATTENTION to another pitch and INTENTIONALLY creating a pitch is the process of playing in tune with another.

In many ways, some of the repertoire that I learned first is the most challenging for me now. The haphazard practice of youth ingrained habits that remain difficult to re-programme. As a sort of vaccine against these habits, Norman Bolter, the fantastic educator and former trombonist of the Boston Symphony Orchestra counsels his students to approach each piece like it is their first time, even if it is a solo or etude they have played for decades. This encourages ATTENTION to new details which may have escaped us in our prior readings and allows for new INTENTIONS of expression which those new details may inspire.

That sound in your head is the target that Arnold Palmer was always hitting to on the range and on the course. It is that INTENTION to communicate the sound in your head that begins to make the physical process work. The rest of practice is ATTENTION to the details of what you are trying to communicate as well as to your physical habits. More on both to come!

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