

# Eric Berlin's Workshop

**A**ll of the articles I have written so far lead you to this. If you **REALLY** want to improve, there is no better tool than this simple practice routine. Saying it is simple is misleading as the discipline required to break old habits of mindless repetition is very difficult.

What I have written below expands on the basic practice routine that I got from Vince Penzerella. I give my endless thanks to Vince for giving me this tool for efficient and effective practice.

## STOP!

What do you want to accomplish?

Before we even begin to practice, it is important for us to have goals. Do not be afraid of dreaming big! In the words of 19th century American psychologist William James "people by and large become what they think of themselves." This quote came to me from golf psychologist Dr. Bob Rotella who also said "people with big dreams achieve great things."

You should have a series of goals beginning with grand long term goals and becoming ever more detailed as we approach shorter term and daily goals. Especially as we approach the most short term goals, they must be realistic and allow for small successes along the way to achieving more lofty long term goals. For example, I may have at one point had the following list of goals.

### Long Term Goals

- Have a long career in a major symphony orchestra
- Win and retain a major symphony orchestra position.

### Medium Term Goals

- Conquer my fear of Brandenburg 2
- Gain better control of my softest dynamics
- Play more effortlessly
- Arrive at audition comfortable that I have prepared well

### Short Term Goals

- Become more comfortable with my Eb trumpet (upcoming Haydn performance)
- Get a good audition tape ready for summer festivals

### Daily Goals

- Clarify my articulation on Fetes and Pines Mvt 1
- Better intonation and sound on Promenade from Pictures at an Exhibition
- Practice well: Thoughtfully and Efficiently

In order to achieve any goals, Vince's approach is as follows. I may discuss orchestral excerpts, but it works for anything.

#### 1. Mental Practice - Create: Creating your ideal trumpeter (The real creative process)

This is the most powerful part of the process and what most people skip. Take a moment and close your eyes. Imagine yourself in your favourite performance space. Feel yourself on the stage and really immerse yourself in that environment. Look out into the space and see it in as much detail as you can. (In my mind, I visualize Boston's Symphony Hall.) Understand the size of the space, see the colours etc. (One wonderful upside to this is that because I imagined while practicing that I was in Symphony Hall, it was also easier to imagine I was in my practice room while auditioning at Symphony Hall!)

Hear yourself begin to play whatever you are working on with your ideal trumpet sound. (For trumpeters for example,



Eric Berlin.

let's say the *Promenade of Pictures at an Exhibition*.) Really put yourself in the space and hear your ideal sound in as much detail as you can. I often imagine it with a shape and colour so that I can see it interact with the space. This sound is the most important thing you have to give the world as an artist. Whatever that sound is, the goal of everything we do is to get it out of your head and into someone else's.

Continue to hear more and more detail as you listen to your ideal sound. Draw your attention to the connections between notes, the direction of the phrases, etc. Really perform! Interact with the audience (if you have one) and tell a story. Take chances and allow yourself to imagine all that it could be.

This is a wonderful confidence building part of the process as I have rarely had anyone report that they heard missed notes in their heads! This part of practice can be done anywhere and for me often yields better results than time on the face. Treasure this!

Once you have defined what you want to sound like, pat yourself on the back and know that you are already ahead of 90% of your peers.

#### 2. Press Record - Perform: Bringing your creation to life.

Hit the record button on your recording device and just play along with that wonderful sound you created in your head. Start with short passages. *Promenade* is a great one. Turn up the volume on your mental recording as high as it will go. Your awareness of the actual sound you create out the bell should be merely peripheral. Your goal should be to completely lose yourself in the sound you have created in your mind, embracing it entirely as a real performance.

In this part of the process it is important to remember these important points:

- The mind cannot create and criticize at the same time.
- You cannot hear your own sound as others do from behind the bell.
- Internal vibration and compression narrows what you do hear.
- Once you hear a miss, it is too late to do anything about it, so why bother.

Therefore, just turn the sound up on your great recording in your head and play along!

#### 3. Press Play - Listen: Changing hats from performer to critic.

Changing into listening mode will free that critic which you have drowned out with the excessively loud amplifier you turned up to 11 in the last segment. It is important to separate this from performance and analysis.

Press play on your recording. While listening to what you have done, ask yourself Vince's question:

*"Is what I am hearing on the tape the same as what I heard in my imagination?"*

Listen critically for all the details you created above. You can answer yes, no or I'm not sure.

If your answer is **YES**

- Pat yourself on the back and enjoy your accomplishment!
- Keep trying for more YES answers!
- Start again with more details or new material.



Symphony Hall, Boston.

If your answer is **NO**

- Pat yourself on the back and be glad that you know what you are looking for!
- Make a list of what you wish to improve and go to the wood shed. (See below)
- Stay connected to your ideal goal.

If you answer is **I'M NOT SURE**

- Pat yourself on the back for admitting it!
- Spend more time in your imagination defining what you want.

You may find that you have a combination of answers on any given passage. That is fine! Be sure to congratulate yourself for where you stack up well against your ideal. This is part of building confidence for the future.

#### 4. Back to the wood shed: Refining the vehicle of expression.

This is practice in the traditional sense and normally what we feel most comfortable doing. However, your practice is now informed by a much more detailed idea of what you hope to achieve and where you need improvement. Here is where your short and mid term goals are formed.

**Goals:** From what you want to improve, set a few goals for that day's practice.

- A few which you can definitely achieve
- A few which will be attainable only with real diligent and focused attention.

Setting clear and realistic goals is of vital importance. A goal for me to "play with the ease of Allen Vizzutti" in the course of one session will only set me up to fail and erode my confidence. Aiming for it in a short passage is something which can be built upon.

While working out your issues, keep the following important points in mind

- **Rest as much as you play.** This was first preached to me by Frank Kaderabek in high school. We build muscle when it is at rest. Make sure not to constantly tear down muscle to the point of failure! If you follow this routine and listen to what you have recorded, you already have that taken care of above.
- **Revisit your warm-up.** Stay focused on a good approach. As Tom Hooten says "Start every day at zero". It is important to be vigilant through your session to make sure that tension and inefficiencies have not crept in. Refer to my earlier article about The Warmup
- **Stay connected to the music.** Never lose sight of the fact that you are an artist. The goal is not to "not miss notes" but to express something uniquely yours through your instrument. Spend some more time in your imaginary concert hall if you find yourself losing focus.
- **Find musical solutions to technical problems.** Charlie Schlueter is absolutely brilliant with this. Instead of trying to find a physical way to get a clearer slur, he could help you

change the inflection of the line to get the desired result. Better musical decisions usually cause fewer technical challenges!

• **Separate the components.** This is also majorly influenced by Vince Penzerella. His words were "you learn more away from your instrument than with it". Connect to the ideal sound in your head and:

- Deal with pitch alone with singing and buzzing
- Deal with articulation with simple wind patterns
- Slam your fingers to be more definite
- Realize that everything that has to move needs to move at the same time. If you approach all of the above with great rhythm, coordinating them is simple.
- **Take breaks:** A fresh mind and body work best **Repeat:** Start the process over

Start the process again and remember to keep the music and your ideal in the front of your mind. This can be repeated endlessly allowing you to remain fresh for very long stretches of practicing. Be vigilant as your mind is what tires first. Don't fall into the trap of judgement while performing.

Best wishes for incredibly efficient practice!

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