

It's Not How Much Practice; It's How"

Observation of the practice techniques of three superior performers

Rebecca Grooms Johnson, American Music Teacher Magazine October/November 2009

- A. Playing was hands-together early in practice.**
- B. Practice was with inflection (dynamics) early on.**
- C. Practice was thoughtful—silent pauses while looking at the music, singing/humming, making notes on the pages or expressing verbal “ah-ha”s.**
- D. Errors were preempted by stopping in anticipation of mistakes.**
- E. Errors were addressed immediately when they appeared.**
- F. The precise location and source of each error was identified accurately, rehearsed and corrected.**
- G. Tempo of individual performance trials was varied systematically—slowed down enough; didn't speed up too much.**
- H. Target passages were repeated until the error was corrected and the passage was stabilized, as evidenced by the error's absence in subsequent trial.**

There was no significant difference in total practice time or number of repetitions between the three superior performers and the rest of the participants in the study.

The biggest difference between the two groups was in how they handled errors.

Students hear their teachers play well, but they do not hear them practice well.

Suggestion for students—Use the “Whoa, boy!” practice approach:

When an error occurs, pull up the reins (Whoa, boy!), climb off the horse, and work that section until it can be played slowly with confidence. Then back up into the saddle to begin where stopped and continue on through the piece until the next “Whoa, boy” moment. Practice this bit of horsemanship in the lesson before taking it home to the corral.

Yes, practice does make permanent. However, it only makes perfect when it is filled with “how” instead of “how long”!