

## **Practice Nurtures Excellence**

**by Luci A. Magalit**

“Practice makes perfect”, goes the old saying. This is a dangerous idea, however, for it is only sometimes true. A truly committed student of music may spend hours and hours practicing his instrument, but not really get the desired results. Many Asian musicians, particularly Japanese, Korean, and Chinese, display impressive technique in playing instruments, and it is quite often said that Filipinos are not as successful because we lack the discipline to practice. Whereas the Japanese, Korean, and Chinese are so used to the discipline of incessant repetition that they cannot help but become good at playing their instruments, the average Filipino student is used to a different sort of idiom: *pwede na yan* (“that will do”). But what if the student actually *does* have discipline? The true desire to become really good at playing his instrument? Would simply repeating and repeating do the trick?

There are at least two dangers in simple repetition. One is that repetition becomes boring, and in the long run, the student's interest (not to mention his attention) will dissipate. Another danger is the very real possibility of repeating the *wrong* thing. It happens more often than many teachers realize, that the reason a student is unable to play a certain part of the music well, is not so much the lack of practice but the development of bad habits by doing the *wrong* kind of practice. Playing a musical instrument is both mental and physical; correct practice is ensured when the student is always aware of how he is physically executing the actions that are producing the sounds on his instrument. But what is *correct* practice?

### **FOCUSED**

Many students do not like the idea of practicing because they think they have to do it for hours and hours. This kind of practicing may be necessary for students looking to make a career out of their playing, but what about everyone else? Certainly one's whole day is filled with other important activities, so it is simply not possible to spend so much time practicing. But is this a reason for giving up practicing altogether?

Happily, the answer is no. Progress and improvement are more dependent on the *quality* of time spent practicing than on *quantity*. Quality time is time *set apart solely* for practicing; the student must focus on what he is doing, and not allow his mind to entertain thoughts about other things. To focus is to listen to the sound one is making on his instrument, making judgments on whether this is the desired sound or not, and being aware of the action or actions executed by the body that are producing this sound. It is deliberately shutting out the rest of the world, so to speak, and treating practice time as “sacred”. The student who is able to do this needs no more than half an hour a day to practice.

### **PURPOSIVE**

Another necessary component of correct practice is having a specific goal for the practice time. Of course, the teacher, more often than not, defines the long-term goal towards which the student is expected to work, but there must also be short-term goals: how fast must the student be able to play this piece or this passage by the end of the month? How much of the piece must have been memorized in a week's time? What specific finger action must have become a habit by the end of a half-hour practice session?

Having very specific goals necessarily involves the

### ***The Teacher As Workshop Leader***

*One of the most basic duties of the instrument teacher is to teach the student how to practice. The first few months (perhaps the first year, even) of lessons must include substantial workshop-type sessions on technical practice and memorizing. The teacher instructs and demonstrates, the student imitates. It is most helpful for the teacher to do a step-by-step demonstration of the specific actions that he or she wants the student to execute. Not only will communication be clearer, but it will also be easier for the teacher to check if the student is accurately doing the same action. Once the teacher is satisfied that the student is able to carry out the action without supervision, then he or she can leave*

principle of *isolation*. This simply means that the practice session should be used to learn a very specific action or to memorize a short section of the music. To spend the whole practice time trying to play an entire piece that has many different technical problems is to *waste* time. The student must choose which problem to solve first, and work on that problem alone. Once this problem has been "solved", i.e., the student has found the most efficient action or actions to use on the given passage, then he can move on to other problems. After having worked out all the technical or memory issues, the student can then put everything together and use the practice session for a new goal: to unify the parts into a whole.

#### CONSISTENT

Focused, purposive practicing will be all for naught if the student does not practice often enough to develop habits. (The act of practicing in itself will not become a habit if it is not done everyday). If one cannot *repeat* the actions found to be most efficient for one's piece, these actions will not be learned. The student will fall, instead, into a habit of "trial and error", which is another waste of time. Here is where "disciplined repetition" comes in. Repetition ensures that the mind as well as the body remember the correct actions, and in due time, playing will become "second nature".

So, let us revise the old saying to "*Correct* practice makes perfect." Only two things remain that are necessary to give the student the best satisfaction from his hard work: (1) patience and (2) faith. Learning to play an instrument requires much first-hand experience with the instrument, much listening to music, and therefore much time. Daily half-hour practice sessions may be completely focused and purposive, but results may take time. Some habits are harder to form than others, some techniques more difficult to execute, and some musical pieces more challenging to memorize. Teachers must be realistic in their expectations of students' abilities to form habits, and students must have faith that the hard work they put in will eventually bear good fruit. After all, it is *practice* that nurtures the seed of excellence.