



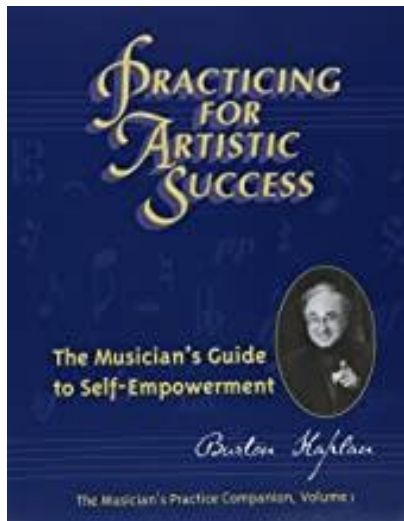
Practicing for Artistic Success: The Musicians Guide to Self-Empowerment, by Burton Kaplan (2004)

A review and highlights of learnings in eight parts - Part 1 of 8
By BJ Nicoletti

Introduction

Over the course of the GPFS 2021 -22 program year, through its publication *The Portland Piper* and the alternating months via the ENews, we will provide membership with a review and “highlights of learning” on the publication *Practicing for Artistic Success: The Musicians Guide to Self-Improvement*.

It is our hope that highlights from this book will be helpful, but we strongly acknowledge these are no replacement for reading the book. It offers much more content, details, examples, and exercises.



In short, the book is very insightful and practical. The language, presentation, tone, examples, and exercises all make it very easy to use. It is dense with potential. It is relevant and suitable reading for young adult (high school, college) reading through adult amateur and professional. It is available from several sources, [including Amazon](#) for \$26. This writer and fellow musician/flutist encourages you to buy the book and study along. Share your thoughts and results - newsletter@gpfs.org.

This is a substantial, practical tomb on the topic. Therefore, it will be covered in 8 parts over the course of this coming new program year for the GPFS. The schedule for specific parts of the book is outlined in the book's description on the next page.

The basic premise of the book is his belief from working with many types and levels of musicians over the years - *Music is an intuitive art. Practicing is a conscious managerial skill. To practice effectively the musician must be in touch with his/her intuitive artist impulses and at the same time stand outside the process as a*

coach.... Most musicians have never been taught the management skills they need to effectively crack their own practice.
(Kaplan)

The book has two sections: How to Get More Out of Your Effort; and Practice Strategies for All Instrumentalists.

A Little Bit About Burton Kaplan



Burton Kaplan is Professor of Violin and Viola at the Manhattan School of Music and The Aaron Copland School of Music, Queens College, CUNY. [Learn more here.](#)

This book is one of five written by Kaplan. The others are: The Musicians Practice Log; A Rhythm Sight-Reader, Volumes 1 and 2; and A Basic Skills Pitch Sight-Reader.

Well-known and respected globally, flutist Keith Underwood has been faculty at Kaplan's retreats.

Part One - How to Get More Out of Your Effort

The chapters in Part One of the book address how we can “get more” from our effort. He provides very practical strategies for dealing with the more emotional side of the effort (e.g., frustration, impatience, boredom, being more mindful, etc.). His presentation, as claimed, aims to leave the learner with ways to replace the counterproductive - habits we all develop over time - to more effective habits that help us reach our greater “technical and musical potential.” He believes that with the advances in neurosciences about how the brain and mind function that the possibilities “to refine the musician’s capacity to empower herself in the practice room seem to be endless.” The topics in this first section and schedule on which we will provide highlights are:

October

What Counts as Practice?

Using the Book to Guide Your Practice

November

The Six Myths of Instrumental Music Practice

The Third Hand: The Source of Control

December

The Basic Work Process

January

Patience and Attention: Two Practice Traps

Mapping Your Daily Practice

Part Two - Practice Strategies for All Instrumentalists

In part two, Kaplan presents several specific strategies (a few time-tested and others more innovative) to help musicians improve their musical and technical capacity and execution. The topics in this second section and the schedule on which we will provide highlights are:

February

The Imaging Strategy

Strategies for Most Occasions (simplification, isolation/integration strategy, modeling strategy, inhibition strategy, comparison strategy, and the basic metronome strategy)

March

The Click Strategy - A New Way to Use a Metronome

The Rhythms Strategy and Super-Learning

April

Strategies for Improving Intonation

Increasing Control at Fast Tempos (the add a note and add a group strategy)

May

Strategies for Memorizing Music

Reflections on Self-Improvement and Practicing

Part 1 - Highlights

What counts as practice? In one way or another, we have all wrestled with this question over the course of our playing lifetime. Our answer has likely changed over time with different aspects of practice taking on more meaning as we take on new pieces, teachers or knowledge/skill building challenges. Perhaps the meaning of practice has taken on new definition and shape as we have aged or become more life-experienced in some other way.

Here, numbered below, are Kaplan's summative thoughts to this question. His outline provides a nice snapshot of a practice framework, a reference guide, a lens through which we can reflect on

elements of our own practice at a given point in time. How have I shaped my own practice lately? How should I shape it today or this week and why?

1. **Warming Up** - He stresses the **THREE ESSENTIALS** of: warming up **the body** (just do something physical to get the blood flowing to the muscle groups); **the spirit** (paying attention to the mood we are in relative to what we are about to play and adjust accordingly to align); and, your **concentration** (choose a small performance goal to work on that demands concentration and work on that a bit before jumping deeply into the rest of a practice session).
2. **Learning New Repertoire** - He suggests using the first two weeks of practice primarily to become aware of and express the musical gestures as implied by the notation. During this phase, he encourages us to pay particular attention to the beginnings and ends of phrases as well as what he calls “peaks and troughs of intensity in each phrase.” The next two weeks is spent more heavily on polishing the piece. He does caution that this means also working on exercises and etudes that require the skills necessary for us to play the piece with more control, not just the piece itself. He notes that working in this way also helps to keep the piece itself fresh.
3. **Learning a New Skill** - This quote says it all: “Learning a new skill is like raising a child. You must nurture it with appropriate respect for each stage of its evolution, but you will hurt its development if you have any expectation of how fast you will acquire control of the skill.” He wants us to “exercise” having an “attitude of disinterested curiosity...while acquiring the new physical and auditory sensations involved.”
4. **Relearning Old Repertoire** - He points out the importance of and satisfaction from picking up an old piece again. We likely have grown since the last time we played through the piece. Doing such shows us some of this improvement. We can feel joy and freedom because “the old glove” suddenly can feel like a better fit and we often can readily gain fresh insights as we study the piece again.
5. **Preparing for Performance** - Here he is referring to how to specifically test “performance readiness.” These strategies are covered in detail in a chapter that will be addressed in part three of this eight part series. More to come in December!
6. **Refining a Previously Learned Skill** -After a couple weeks of intentional and careful practice, if we are not satisfied with the current skill then practice should become about refining a specific skill(s) relevant to the piece. For this he describes a basic work process. These are addressed in a later chapter and emphasize techniques of observation, intimacy strategies, the tenets of “success at any cost” and “first try” techniques - testing performance control. More to come in December when we cover chapter five!
7. **Maintaining Control of a Piece of Music or Skill** - He reminds us that once we really have a skill in our long-term memory then it does not require daily maintenance; it becomes more automatic and seems to occur without trying. He cautions that until that time, skipping regular practice of the skill will likely lead to forgetting recently gained improvements. Therefore, he advises that if we have more to practice than we have time for, it is very

important that we plan our practice to include playing those items at least one or twice as part of our routine practice until we can in fact devote more thorough practice time to them.

8. **Taking Care of Your Body** - Imperative. The last decades have proven playing an instrument is akin to athleticism. New medical subspecialties address performing arts medicine, overuse syndromes, repetitive stress injuries and so on. Young or old, fit or unfit, the musician needs to take care of his/her musical body. Preventative maintenance is essential. In total, he is not prescriptive here, acknowledging that there are many thoughts and theories and that this should be addressed according to one's individual needs. One summative point he makes is to "make time during your practice routine to take care of it." He also reminds us that taking care of our "'system' requires maintenance of our spirit as well as body."
9. **Getting Back into Shape** - He talks about easing ourselves back into playing after we have had down time. In short, he recommends shorter practice sessions than you might typically take on, ease into longer periods based on how you feel. He also advises not playing anything that is out of our immediate skill level. If the down time is related to injury, then the general, cautious advice is play five minutes, rest five minutes.
10. **Listening to Recordings** - As musicians, we all tend to listen to a lot of music. He reminds us of the importance of listening not casually, but with intention. He challenges us to "up" some of our listening to "purposeful" rather than "casual." Listening as part of practice means, in part, making observations about interpretation options and similarities and differences among artists. It means active listening with specific curiosity.
11. **Reading Books about Instrumental Technique and Musical Interpretation** - He acknowledges there are many books meant to improve our technique and interpretive ability as well as books devoted to care of the mind and body in the practice room and on stage. The back of this book has a long list of suggested books on these topics. He wants us to choose the material we read based on needs that arise from our practice, noting that this kind of reading - or listening as mentioned above - can serve as rest after a period of intense playing.
12. **Planning Your Practice for Tomorrow** - He recommends planning for your next practice at the end of today's practice. At this time, we are more likely to have a good memory of how the practice has gone therefore better able to specify strategies for tomorrow. He does remind us that sometimes planning for tomorrow can simply look like repeating today's strategies.

In short, anything you do to enhance your development as a musician or improve your playing counts as practice.

Using the Book to Guide Your Practice

Kaplan has designed the book well to make the content accessible based on individual's needs. He proposes the following five ways of using the book to guide our practice. These are all solid suggestions.

1. **First and foremost, “understanding is doing and doing is understanding.”** He emphasizes that reading and understanding is no replacement for practicing the strategies he is suggesting. Whatever one or more aspect catches our attention, DO and DO again.
2. **Choose from a list of common problems and then go to the chapter with** the relevant solution. This is a very valuable option based on the clever presentation of this book. For example, “‘I often feel I have to start over again each day.’ Solution: Read ‘The Technique of Intimacy’ Chapter 5, page 39.)
3. **Read the entire book and then pick a strategy** or technique you think might help you. Prioritize a handful of these and just do it.
4. **Choose a topic from the table of contents.** Why not?
5. **Jump in at chapter five, “The Basic Work Process.”** He describes this chapter as the heart of the first part of this book. If we take the time to develop four important steps in the work process, we will have more meaningful, satisfying and joyful practice. Note - Kaplan contends most musicians have virtually NO training in these processes, leading to what explains most of any excess pain and frustration they learned to simply to endure over the years.

He has a blog that can be subscribed to here:

https://www.magicmountainmusic.org/practice_magic_blog.shtml

From his blog...

On The Process of Practicing

What isn't automatic needs work; what is automatic needs trust.

Work with your attention, not with your muscles.

Lose time to gain time; follow the path, not the product.

Do not constrain the events of today by an anticipation of tomorrow.

The tension in your body should not climax before the tension in the sound.

Here are some reviews of his books:

https://www.magicmountainmusic.org/book_reviews.shtml

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See these listings on this GPFS webpage – <https://gpfs.org/Commercial-Membership>

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