



Practicing for Artistic Success: The Musicians Guide to Self-Empowerment, by Burton Kaplan (2004) - A review and highlights of learnings in eight parts - Part 2 of 8

By BJ Nicoletti

For more information on this series of highlights, see the last page of this article.

Chapter 3 - The Six Myths of Instrumental Music Practice, and Chapter 4 - The Third Hand: The Source of Control

Reminder: It is best to borrow/purchase *Practicing for Artistic Success* by Burton Kaplan to get the greatest understanding and practical benefit from his pedagogy. It is loaded with gems and these “highlights” are not intended to capture every point he makes.

Chapter 3 - The Six Myths of Instrumental Music Practice

To my knowledge, no books address the issue of self-coaching in a systematic way. I have found that musicians at the top of the profession have all worked out managerial systems for themselves, but none have made their management styles into a systematic pedagogy. This book attempts to do just that. (Burton Kaplan)

Kaplan describes six, very familiar statements about practice which he labels as the “myths” of instrumental practice. He then points out the truths and less-than-truths in these myths and offers up tangible alternative strategies and ways to adjust our mindset.

I venture to say, as he suggests, most musicians struggle with aspects of each of these. I would also say that many of us likely know that these tenets have a time and a place in our practice, and, yet, as he suggests, they are not universal truths to be approached thoughtlessly. In fact, if these are employed unconsciously, the strategy can work against us – at worse wreaking new havoc or, at best, slowing us down from inefficiency. Yet, despite our greater sense, many of us at all levels tend to hold onto these religiously or randomly.

Myth 1: Practice every day, even when you don't feel like it.

Ideally not. Practice very regularly matters, but plan “rest to refresh.” That might mean changing your practice strategy, focus or pace for a day or maybe taking one day off. This is very much an individual decision, but one that should be made plan-fully, and not base it on having arrived at “some degree of despair or frustration.” Waiting until we're discouraged or exhausted in some way is a degree or two too late.

Myth 2: Continue to practice even when you are frustrated; eventually it will pay off.

“Frustration is caused by unfilled expectations.... Frustration is a signal to which you should respond long before you reach your boiling point. In fact, as frustration increases, concentration diminishes.” In later chapters, he addresses tuning in to correctly set expectations and improving concentration. More to come!

Myth 3: Practice slowly.

Well, yes, of course, **YET**, be sure to do so musically as much as possible while being sure to pay attention to when you can play without stopping or hesitating. It is at the latter point that we can move the tempo up a carefully determined amount. “The coordinative timing of your body to express notes time perfectly to the metronome beat is not the same as the timing that occurs when you play to inflect musically meaningful gestures.” He does, of course, acknowledge we have times when we are simply trying to coordinate a gesture and during these moments “it is best to play with 25% or 50% of your available emotional intensity.”

Myth 4: Repeat a lot.

Repetition can and should be useful and meaningful. Never employ repetition mindlessly. Utilize the following “five distinctions” as guidelines for using repetition. **Repeat to:** (1) observe what is incorrect; (2) get progressively closer to your final goal; (3) lock in your recent success; (4) determine an entire work's readiness for performance; (5) maintain control of a piece that is performance ready.

Myth 5: Use the metronome to improve your rhythm.

Of course, **BUT**, “use the metronome to guide your practice until you can play the part in time without it.” He repeats his earlier advice to play at the metronome setting that allows you to practice with musical gestures and emotion, not just mechanically. He does adamantly state that the best way to move up in setting is **NOT** to increase one tempo notch at a time. More to come on his “basic metronome strategy.”

It is of great importance to protect yourself from the trap of unreasonable expectations when you practice. A strategy that will help you is to set your goals to improve rather than to perfect. Aim to decrease the range of error rather than to create perfection.... This strategy will lead you to feel pride in your work. It will protect you from becoming unduly frustrated. (Burton Kaplan)

Myth 6: Isolate parts to improve them.

The “strategy of isolation” can be a tricky one. Often, we make arbitrary choices about isolating a part for attention. In best practice, we should isolate an element/passage in a way that “doesn’t take more than five minutes to improve. If it does, make the goal less demanding.” He also advises we “isolate notes that form musical gestures rather than individual notes or arbitrary groups of notes.”

Chapter 4 - Moving Beyond the Myths - The Third Hand: The Source of Control

“Music is an intuitive art. Practicing is a conscious managerial skill.”

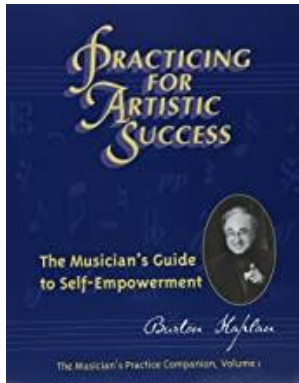
In short, *our minds* are the “third hand” he describes. He points out, repeatedly, that “the thought process must be timed as precisely as the left and right hands to create music using an instrument.”

He helps us tune into this “third hand” by pointing out how the very process plays out for all of us in most physical movement and in our speech/language coordination. So, we’re all quite good at it already. In short, our mind imagines what the body must do, for example, to get across a room with certain physical gestures. It has a “reflexive control.” It is the same with speech, see below. Developing our capacity to be the same musically means developing our sense of the main gestures of these physical and speech process realities – (1) *imagining* a musical idea before playing, (2) *observing* upon playing whether the sound matches the idea, and (3) *evaluating* what is going on to position yourself to try again.

The timing of thought, speech and feeling when you speak fluently is exquisitely coordinated. It is a genetic gift. There is a continual overlap between the expressive thought you are about to give birth to as sound and gesture, the validation of the expressed thought as representing what you mean, and the awareness of the impact of that thought on the person you’re addressing.... If you have a lot to say, you will notice that the next thought comes into your head before you finish expressing the preceding thought. (Burton Kaplan)

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

A review and highlights of learnings in eight parts – slow but sure!



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 book has two sections:** (1) How to Get More Out of Your Effort; and, (2) Practice Strategies for All Instrumentalists.

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.*

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.

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