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What's Your Plan?

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You practice several hours a day (or at least you know you're supposed to...). You buy the books and music your teacher tells you to (although there's that stack of materials in the corner you've yet to even look at...). You subscribe to 5 music magazines (yet you can't remember the last time you

actually read one of them....). You listen to a lot of music (but can't seem to find the time to decipher what the drummer is doing...). Well, the good news is that you're not alone!

All musicians, at least once in their life, go through periods of time in which they can't seem to find a direction or feel overwhelmed and experience "burnout." While such times may be confusing to you, they can actually be very positive points in your life. It's a terrific opportunity to discover (or re-discover) what your motivation is and what makes you happy about making music.

What's Your Goal?

It's important to evaluate what your goal is (or goals are). Do you want to be a great jazz drummer? Do you want to be the next timpanist of the New York Philharmonic? Do you want to be a sought-after percussion teacher? Do you want to be known as the World's foremost 8-mallet marimbist? Do you want to be a first-call freelance percussionist in a major city? Because your goal is likely different from the goals of others, the items you choose to study and practice may necessarily be different from what others do.

Whatever career goal you're considering, it's important for you to develop excellent musicianship. In addition to honing their craft on their primary instrument, all musicians need to work on music theory, ear training, singing, listening skills, rhythmic understanding, piano skills, and analysis. But how you choose to specifically work on each of those will be determined by both your prior experiences in those areas as well as your goals. By honestly evaluating your level of competence in these areas and gaining a clear picture of where you want to be in, say, five years, you can begin to develop your plan of what to study and practice, and how long you need to spend on each of those on a daily/weekly basis.

What's Your Motivation?

For many, simply telling yourself and others "I just want to play music" may not be enough for you to dedicate yourself to enough study and practice to attain your goal. Yes, *wanting* to play music is important, but true motivation comes from some form of passion and/or emotion.

Very few musicians have exactly the same motivation for wanting to play music and wanting to be better at it. Many musicians experience a "natural high" while performing, and that's what leads them to want to do it more often. Many have such a strong natural talent that pursuing music just seemed the automatic thing for them to do. Others have made music their career because they want to provide for themselves and their family and they want to have fun while "working." Still others have such a strong feeling for a particular style of music that they cannot imagine their life without it.

So, what is your personal motivation? Once you know what that is (and for some you'll know immediately, for others you may have to think about it for several days), find a way to keep that at the forefront. Just as dieters often place a picture on their refrigerator of a thin-sized clothing outfit they would like to buy and fit into to (hopefully!) keep them from overeating, many of you will need to have a daily reminder of what gets you going.

What's Your Favorite Music?

I have met many musicians who get completely caught up in what their teachers (or tradition) are telling them to practice, study and listen to, that they barely have time to listen to their favorite music. How many of you dreaded reading another book for high school English class? Yet, if you'd been given the opportunity, after 30 minutes at a book store you would likely have found a dozen books you had interest in. This same phenomenon occurs in music training. Your teachers are telling you what to do because they know it helps develop certain parts of your musicianship and technique. But that doesn't mean you need to do that work to the exclusion of what you really love!

It's important to keep copies of your favorite recordings handy. Listen to them frequently. Analyze what the different instrumentalists are doing (if you're a marimbist, transcribe the guitar parts, the bass parts, the trumpet parts, etc., and then play along with them!). If you like, for instance, the Dave Matthews Band, go to a music store, buy an artist portfolio of their music and then learn it. If music learning becomes like the required English reading assignment, it won't matter what your motivation and goals are. You must have some musical joy in your life on a regular basis, and listening to and performing your favorite music is a great way to have that joy.

Okay, So Now What?

Hopefully, you're now more motivated, have a clear picture of your goal(s) and know how important it is to

continue to have your favorite music in your life. So how do you pull it all together in order to progress as a musician?

First and foremost, you need organization in your life. Make a weekly schedule of your obligations, and determine how much time you can devote to music study and practice each day. Keep in mind that a little bit each day is better than several hours one day and nothing for several days after that. No matter how busy your schedule may be on a particular day, do your best to find even 15 minutes to review some of your music or do some chop exercises.

Now that you know *when* you can work on your music, you need to know *how*. The phrase I like to use is "Practice Smart." Like all musicians, most likely you have several things to work on each week (including your favorites). Find a way to balance all of those. It may well be that you do not have enough time every day to work on every thing you need to. Don't worry! Make a 2 or 3-day rotation of items to work on. Just make sure you have a daily warm-up routine that (a) really does warm you up and (b) includes a little of everything that you're working on. For a 2-day rotation, you'll warm-up both days, but the remainder of your work is shared between the 2 days. For a three-day rotation, after warming up each day you'll be working on every item 2 times over the three days. Here are two examples:

Two-Day Rotation

Day One	Day Two
Warm-up (a little of everything)	Warm-up (a little of everything)
Snare Drum Etudes	Timpani Tuning
2-mallet marimba	4-mallet marimba
Music Theory/Ear Training	Listen to/practice Favorites

Three-Day Rotation

Day One	Day Two	Day Three
Warm-up	Warm-up	Warm-up
Snare Drum Etudes	4-mallet marimba	Music Theory/Ear Training
2-mallet marimba	Listen to/practice Favorites	Timpani Tuning
Music Theory/Ear Training	Snare Drum Etudes	4-mallet marimba
Timpani Tuning	2-mallet marimba	Listen to/practice Favorites

It's also important to learn how to pace your practice sessions. One of the methods I've seen used with great success is to use short, attainable goals. Rather than walking into a practice room and saying to yourself, "Okay, I want to learn these 6 pages in the next 3 hours," say to yourself "I want to learn these 2 measures in the next 5 minutes." I also advocate a reward system – and one in which you reward yourself at the end of each 5 minute section, whether you've met your specific goal or not! Hey, you were focused for 5 minutes, weren't you? Well, that deserves a reward! I'm personally not in favor of using food as a reward,

but perhaps leave the room for a drink of water, do a little dance, listen to 30 seconds of your favorite music or whatever is going to keep you refreshed and ready for the next 5-minute practice section.

A complete look at "how to practice" is well beyond the scope of this article, but by incorporating even these few ideas you will become more productive and have more enjoyment while practicing. There are several excellent resources on practice methods, and I encourage you to check into these at a bookstore and online.

And Lastly...

Be Nice To Yourself!

I tell all my students that it's extremely important to "be a human!" By that I mean you need some time every day to just do something that's not music related but something that you get much enjoyment from. It might be going to the gym for a workout. It might be taking a walk around a lake. It might be reading a book. It might be watching Star Trek. It doesn't matter what it is, what matters is that it's a time each and every day for you to refresh yourself doing something that you like to do.

I also think it's very important to remember that perfection doesn't exist, but excellence does. Don't put undue pressure on yourself. I have known students whose practice session goes something like this: play a couple of notes, make a mistake (expletive!), play a few notes, make a mistake (expletive!), etc. If this is you, it's time to re-think your approach! Use mistakes as opportunities; don't think of them as catastrophes. When you make a mistake, take a few moments to talk with yourself about it. Analyze why you think you made the mistake. Slow down. Play fewer notes in a row to train yourself to play the correct notes. In other words, think strategically to find what works for you to have more success and enjoyment in the practice room.

Having a plan will come naturally to some of you. Others might have to work at it. Regardless of your disposition toward organization and planning, any additional amount of planning you do will greatly enhance your practicing, your enjoyment and the ability to succeed at your goals.

Rich Holly is a Professor of Percussion at Northern Illinois University and currently holds the position of Associate Dean of the NIU College of Visual and Performing Arts. Rich was a founding member of the Abraxas Percussion Group and has performed with the Long Island Holiday Festival Orchestra, the Lyric Opera of New York and the North Carolina Symphony. Rich is currently the President-Elect of the Percussive Arts Society.

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