

Nine Sources of Frustration in the Practice Room

Description

Have you ever finished a practice session and left the room wondering if you just wasted an hour of your life? Feeling that you put in the time, but are not sure what (if anything) you have to show for it?

One of the primary factors that can dictate how efficient and effective our practice sessions are is concentration (or the lack thereof).

Remember from [this article](#) that that the key to mastery is deliberate practice. And the key ingredient in deliberate practice is one's ability to think clearly and purposefully. Mindless repetition is easy – deliberate practice and true learning on the other hand require great concentration and focus.

Unfortunately, most of us can't just turn concentration on or off on demand. We've all had moments where we really want or need to concentrate, but just can't seem to make ourselves do so, right?

While this is frustrating and aggravating, very few of us actually stop to think more carefully about *why* we were unable to concentrate. After all, if you can't concentrate, there's usually a good reason.

Why Why I Can't Concentrate Matters

If you can identify the problem, you can identify and implement a solution which will help you focus, concentrate, and facilitate a much more productive practice session. The degree to which you can practice productively also has an impact on your level of motivation to continue practicing (why practice if you're not getting anything out of it?) and eventual performance quality as well (if you just go through the motions when practicing, you are likely introducing and reinforcing a number of undesirable habits which will either jump out and sabotage you in a performance or require extra practice time in the future to eliminate).

Is One of These Factors Preventing You From Concentrating?

Here, in no particular order, are 9 reasons why you may be having difficulty concentrating and having more productive practice sessions.

1. External distractions

Practicing is not always the most exciting thing to do. Are your surroundings conducive to concentration or distraction and diversion? Turn off your cell phone, clear clutter, turn off your cell phone, and make your practice area a place where your brain is not tempted by irrelevant stimuli. And turn off your cell phone.

2. Skill deficit

Have you ever learned how to concentrate? Concentration is a skill, just like learning to play your instrument.

For that matter, have you ever learned how to practice? Unlike athletes who often train and practice under the watchful eye of a coach, very few musicians have ever had specific instruction on how to practice.

3. Low frustration tolerance

As Robert Byrne said, “There are two kinds of people; those who finish what they start, and those who...”

Understand that progress and learning is not linear. The achievement of mastery and performance excellence looks more like a staircase, where most of your time is spent on plateaus. As long as you are practicing the right way, you will be rewarded by progress — but know that mastery requires patience. The book [Mastery](#), by George Leonard helped me tremendously in this regard and is a must-read text for musicians (and non-musicians as well, frankly).

4. No clear order or plan

How clear is your plan for your next practice session? What do you intend to leave the room having successfully accomplished?

Is your plan too vague? (“I need to play better in tune”)

Is it impossible? (“I am not leaving this room until this piece is absolutely perfect”)

5. Lack of energy

Concentration requires energy. If you're tired, you won't be able to concentrate fully.

If you begin paying attention, you'll find that there are certain periods during the day when you are naturally more alert, attentive, and able to concentrate. Don't waste these periods of time on tasks that don't require your full attention. Treat these portions of the day as being more valuable, and use these for tasks that are higher priorities. For instance, if you know that you tend to be the most alert at 10am-12pm, and tend to get sleepy or lethargic around 1:30pm, do what you can to practice at 10am, and go run errands or something that doesn't require 100% concentration at 1:30pm.

In fact, if you are too tired to concentrate and practice effectively, don't. Yep, you heard me, stop practicing if you are not being productive. Why? Sloppy, careless, mindless, mediocre practice will lead to sloppy, careless, mediocre results and only creates more work for yourself in the future when you try to erase the bad habits you have created.

This rule in and of itself can alter your level of productivity and concentration in practice sessions. Imagine, for instance, that you were only allowed to practice 60 minutes per day, instead of your regular 4 hours a day. How intensely focused would you be during that one hour — how preciously would you treat each and every minute of that hour, knowing that this is all you get?

6. Mind racing

Do you have trouble focusing on one thing at a time? Do you find yourself jumping around from one thing to another, without really truly fixing or solving a problem before moving onto the next?

7. Spacing out

Do you have a habit of spacing out, and becoming a mindless practice room zombie? Going through the motions without really listening to yourself and analyzing what is happening so that you can either replicate your successes, or eliminate your mistakes in the future?

8. No interest

You'll struggle to concentrate if you're not really interested in what you're doing. Ask yourself why you are practicing. And no, the correct answer is not "I'm practicing because I want to get better" or "because my teacher will know if I don't". Why are you practicing this piece? What do you want it to sound like? Why do you want it to sound this way?

Many successful people talk about the need for a clear goal, and a goal for which, to quote Napoleon Hill, we have a "burning desire." If we have mediocre goals, we will put out mediocre effort. If, on the other hand, we have inspiring goals, we will be more likely to put our best foot forward.

Think of the last time you went on a date that you were not particularly excited about. How much effort did you put into getting ready? Now think of the last time you went on a date that you were *reeeally* excited about. You probably spent way more time and effort getting ready for this one, right?

It never hurts to remind yourself why you are practicing; this goes hand-in-hand with #4 above (clear goals and plan).

9. Commitment

How committed are you to your craft? Are you willing to do what it takes to be the best you can be? Is it worth it to you?

Read [The Dip](#) by Seth Godin. He talks about how important it is to be the best, and how important it is to know when we should keep working our tails off, and when we should quit. He says that most of us don't quit often and fast enough.

I once took a class on the business of music, where the teacher asked us why he should take time out of his schedule and pay money to see any one of us perform. What did we bring to the table that someone else did not? Why were we so special? As I recall, the question stumped us — most of us had never really considered a meaningful answer to this *vital* question, even though some already had burgeoning performing careers.

Essentially, he asked us for our own personal Unique Selling Proposition. This is a business marketing concept, but one that is helpful for musicians to consider earlier in their training as well — read some examples of USP's [here](#).

Is That All There Is?

Are there more factors that prevent us from concentrating? More than likely, yes. However, these are 9 to begin considering. Bottom line is, if you are leaving the practice room feeling like you haven't gained much from your investment of time and energy, there is an underlying reason why. And the reason has nothing to do with how talented or capable you are, it is probably more closely related to your level of concentration, focus, and clarity of goals — all of which are within your control.

Figure out what is holding you back, implement a solution that targets the specific factor, and see if practicing doesn't become more efficient and rewarding.

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