

[Sanne's View on: Practicing]

## Why I am studying and not getting better

I am going to talk about a topic that might be a bit frustrating. It could be interesting for yourself or when you are teaching others. I will talk about it from a music point of view, but it's actually applicable in a much broader way.

*The case is: you are studying hard, maybe for hours, days, months, or even years: but you see no improvement. You are of course studying because you want to improve yourself. So, why is this happening? Is it a lack of talent? I don't think so.*

I am going to show you a checklist. If you can answer a question with 'yes', then that's actually good news: you then might have found a way to make your practice more effective!

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First question:

**Do you play the things you're already good at?**

*Is practicing for you the same as repeating songs or exercises that you already play well?*

Well, then you're actually not really practicing. That's because there's not a real challenge. You can keep playing for hours, but you won't necessarily get any better. Which of course doesn't mean it ain't fun to do so! But that's not the point here.

Does this mean that you should never play things you're already good at? No. It's good to have fun, it's actually necessary. But if you want to improve yourself, challenge yourself. You can do this with stuff you're already good at as well. Because being good at it, doesn't mean it can't be even better, right?

**So, how can you do this?**

Find the challenge. Focus on a thing you would like to improve.

For example: note length. Being aware of the length of the notes makes you able to influence it and review how that influences the total sound. Another example could be to play extra notes in between, speeding up or slowing down, playing in another range or key, playing without looking at your sheet or instrument, focusing on the dynamics, focusing on your posture, your presentation: there are lots of ways to challenge yourself.

Second question:

**Do you want to be able to do the impossible?**

*Are you someone who likes to watch the most fingerbreaking solos and want to be able to do that yourself as fast as possible?*

This can be frustrating because the gap between your skill and that of the other player is too big. You get better by practicing something that is just outside your reach, not by practicing something that is far outside your reach. The result could be frustration and sloppy playing.

I don't say that something is impossible. And I don't say that you shouldn't have goals and dreams. If you want to achieve something, then go for it. If you really, really want it, go for it in and make a plan.

**So, how can you do this?**

What you practice has to be just outside of your reach. You can achieve this, to break the thing you want to be able to do into different, manageable pieces that you can focus on while practicing. Try to find out what's making it so difficult for you to play.

Is it the speed, for example? Then slow down. Not so much that it's easy to play: choose the tempo that is almost reachable and try to make it. Is it the technique? Then look at it closely. What are the difficult aspects? Practice those. Is it a combination of different aspects? Then break it up by looking at the aspects one by one and then try to combine it.

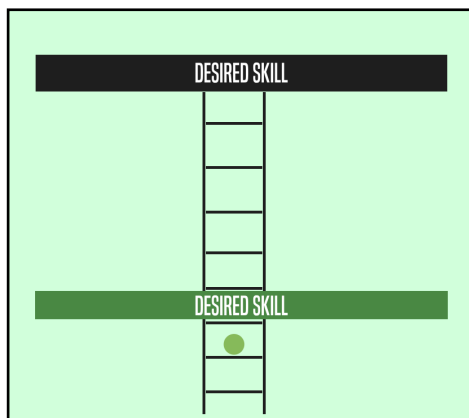


Figure 1. Reduce the gap between your skill and the desired skill.

### What can you expect?

Of course it will take time, but probably less than just start practising head over heels. It will also get you a more steady result, because you will know the aspects that you are playing. When those aspects come along in another song, you've already focussed on them. You will also be able to spot it more easily: you make the seemingly impossible more manageable. And in this way, you will most likely see improvement along the way. That's motivating of course. Actually it could have another advantage: it could turn out that it was less hard than it seemed in the first place!

### Third question:

#### Are you on repeat?

*For instance: are you practicing a particular technique by repeating an exercise over and over?*

Then this exercise will probably go fine, but when you want to apply it in a song it could be that the technique you just 'learned' seems completely gone. That's because you haven't practiced the technique in the context where it's meant to be: playing a song.

It's important that the things you learn - whether it's technique, music theory, sound, timing, and so on - becomes robust. That means that you still master it when the situation, which could be the song, the tempo, the hall's acoustics, an improvisation, your nerves, changes. Because that's where you practice for: to be able to perform it in the real situation.

Does it mean you should never repeat something? To repeat something is important, right? We can't know things just by doing it once.

### So, how can you do this?

Use the concept of: 'repeating without repetition'. When you are playing a certain exercise, make up similar exercises. In this way you do repeat, but also bring variation to it. Variation makes you able to use the concept in different ways. In this way you practice different possibilities that could also happen when you apply it in the real situation.

An even better way to do it is to try to practice everything in an application context. The more the practice looks like the real situation, the better it is.

So, when we look at technique exercises: try to apply it in songs. When you are learning scales: apply them in songs. When you are learning to improvise: you guess it, use songs!

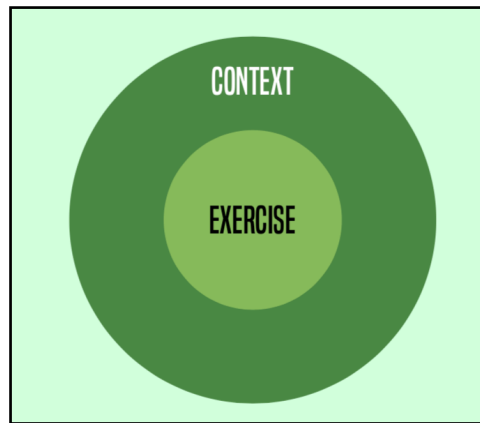


Figure 2. Put the exercise in the context.

You will also remember it more easily. When people forget something, it's because they haven't applied it. And that's very logical: why would you remember something that you don't use? So, practising in context is a win-win.

Fourth question:

**Does time equal practice for you?**

*Are you spending an incredible amount of time on playing your instrument?*

That of course isn't a bad thing. But does it necessary lead to improvement? No.

We've already seen that playing something fun [question **one**] or repeating something a lot [**three**] isn't necessarily effective. What's different in this question?

It's about having a goal. In the first question, having fun is the goal. In the third question, the exercise is the goal. In this question, time is the goal. The thought is that spending a lot of time should equal improvement. And that's where we went wrong.

You can't improve much if you do not know what you want to improve. It's actually that simple. If you just play around, playing a bit of this, taking up some random exercises, it's not very effective. You won't reach the improvement that you want.

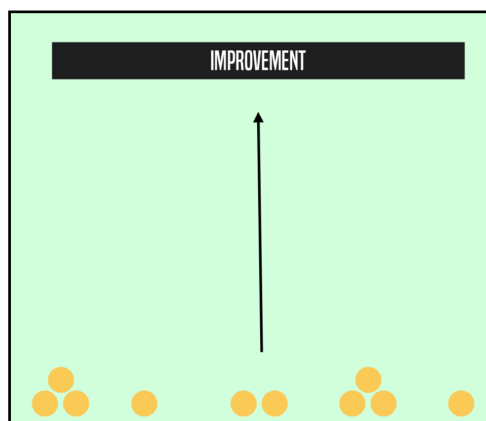


Figure 3. Playing randomly doesn't lead to much improvement.

It might give you a good feeling, a feeling of hard work. But time spent doesn't equal the intensity of work. It's actually even better to spend less time, but really focussed. And you probably can't even spend much time exercising when you're very focussed on a task, because it's exhausting to do.

So, the next time you say: "I have practiced eight hours a day", start thinking: what have I actually practiced in that time? Have I actually practiced, or have I've been playing around?

### So, what can you do?

Practice with a goal in mind. What do you want to learn? What do you want to improve? And then think about how you want to do this. If this leaves you with the impossible, go back to question **two**.

Fifth question:

### Do you give up easily?

Do you recognise yourself in the following situation:

*You are practicing something that's quite difficult. You are not looking forward to do it. You are making a lot of mistakes and it ain't much fun to do. Or you just don't see the point of it. Actually, you are already avoiding to do it for a couple of days. Your motivation drops and you are looking for something more satisfying to do and start doing that instead of your initial practice. You make up excuses to not do it. You might eventually forget about it or your teacher just let's it go after trying to get you to do it for weeks.*

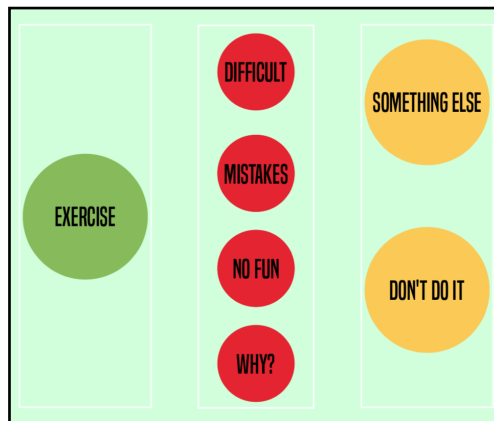


Figure 4. When the exercise is difficult, you make a lot of mistakes (or think you will), is no fun and you don't see the point of it, you want to do something else or just don't do it all.

I don't have to tell you that this isn't a very effective practice routine and it will slow down your progress. And although playing something satisfying was probably fun, you may look back at your practice without feeling good about it.

Take a closer look: it actually leads you to question **one**.

### So, how can you improve this situation?

Since it's clear that the current exercise doesn't motivate you, I don't think you should try to keep up with it in it's current state. You won't have more motivation for it suddenly.

Let's see why it is not motivating to practice.

The first thing that will probably bother you a lot will be the high rate of mistakes that you are making or think you will going to make. It might be a case of what I've mentioned in question **two**. So what you can do is try to lessen the mistakes. Find out what's causing the mistakes and then break it up in manageable pieces.

When you don't see the point in practising something, then the goal is missing or just isn't clear. It leads us to question **four**. Try to see the bigger picture: why could practising this be useful? If it's your teacher who gave you the assignment, just ask him or her. If the goal of the practice seems far out of reach, go to question **two** and see how this exercise fits the goal in breaking this goal into manageable pieces.

You can also make it more fun, by putting your exercise more in the context. That's actually what I've been talking about in question **three**. So: make music with it. Make it something you can instantly use in the music you play. It's not only more fun, it's also more useful this way.

If you've got rid of at these non-motivating signs, I may question if it's non-motivational if something is only difficult. If you have a clear goal where it leads you [four], if you break it down to manageable pieces [two] and make it more fun to practice it by putting it in the context [three], I think it leaves you viewing it as a nice challenge. And then you have the motivation to go for it.

Sixth question:

**Are you not aware of your mistakes?**

If you do not know what you are doing wrong, then you can't learn from it. And if you can't learn from it, well.. you are not learning!

So it's crucial to make mistakes. If you're not making mistakes, it means you are doing something that you're already good at. Which makes us go back to question one again.

**So, how can you do this?**

Watch critically when you are practicing and address the errors. If it's hard to see yourself or if you want to dubbelcheck, ask someone else to take a look or record yourself so you can watch and listen back later.

If you are applying this and you conclude that you make so many mistakes that it leaves you sad and frustrated, then you might want to go back to question two.

Last question:

**You don't want to make mistakes?**

Playing safe is no use when you want to get better. You'll end up at question one.

You learn from your mistakes. When you analyse what's going wrong, you can find out how you can improve. And that's what you can practice.

**So, what can you do?**

Be happy when you make a mistake! That's a wonderful opportunity to learn something.

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Did you answer any of these questions with 'yes'? Then that's something to take a closer look at. It might not be as much fun initially, but you will be smiling when you see the improvement.

In summary, we've talked about:

- (1) challenging yourself with something just outside your reach**
- (2) repeat without repetition: use variation and context**
- (3) setting goals: what do you want to achieve**
- (4) feedback: learn from your mistakes**

When you are going to apply this, keep in mind: do not expect to improve instantly. Improving takes practice time. These ain't magic tricks that make you play better instantly. But a lot of practice doesn't necessarily make you better as well. It's about good practice. And when you practice good, or in other words: **deliberately**, you will improve.

Did you answer none of these questions with 'yes' but you feel like you're not improving in your current practice? There are probably more obstacles in practice. So do not worry and instead have a critical look at your practice routine. Maybe you have a good practice routine but some things just do take a lot of time to improve. Also when you take a closer look: check if there's really no improvement, or if it's just not the amount that you hoped you got by now [two].

The things I've talked about might seem really straightforward. If you think about it, it actually is quite straightforward. But these are also topics that might be overlooked easy. So maybe it's helpful for you or someone else that you see is struggling. Keep it up: you can always improve!