

Practice Journals Are “Notable” & “Key” to Making Musical Progress

It's all about defining focus, setting goals, practicing, and methodically solving problems!



A good way to “warm-up” to the benefits of making a personal practice diary, check out this video of cellist Sarah Joy “A Look Inside My Practice Journal.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=253UMKMfOoc>.

(She has quite a collection of YouTube releases... everything from sight-reading tips to structuring your practice time. They are short and sweet!)

So, let's get started with the “why” and “how” of using practice journals...

I asked the South Hills Junior Orchestra members to give me their insight on how they prioritize/plan their practice time. Thankfully, I received a thoughtful response from one of our violinists, Nicolette:

For practicing, I usually start out with a scale. Then, I'll play a couple etudes I have. However, I won't play all of them, instead I'll leave some to play at the end of my practice. Then, I'll move on to some of my easier pieces to practice. Moving on from that, I'll play my harder pieces, or my orchestra music. I usually try to change it up a bit so I don't get bored. Then I'll finish up with the rest of my etudes. After I'm done practicing, I usually try to write in my practice journal. Whenever I practice, I will keep out my notes from my teacher and my practice journal to look back at while practicing.

For my practice journal, I try to write in it whenever I remember, because I would be lying if I said I wrote in it every day. When I do write in my practice journal, I write down what I need to practice the next day, whatever I was having difficulty with that day, and maybe some notes my teacher gave me.

If I'm starting to feel stressed and frustrated, or if I'm starting to get bored with practicing, I'll start listening to music. The music can vary, but I mostly stick to musicals.

What do the experts say some of the rationales for maintaining a written journal for any serious educational pursuit?

1. It defines targets for a more efficient use of time. <http://www.essential-music-practice.com/efficient-practice.html>
2. Promotes accountability. <http://theaspiringguitarist.net/guitar-practice-journal/>
3. Documents progress. <https://www.musicindustryhowto.com/the-musicians-practice-journal-and-why-you-need-one/>
4. Keeps track of details. <https://music.stackexchange.com/questions/3299/do-music-students-find-practice-journals-useful>
5. Harnesses creativity. <https://lifelhacker.com/why-you-should-keep-a-journal-and-how-to-start-yours-1547057185>
6. Explores what is important to you. <http://blog.connectionsacademy.com/5-reasons-for-students-to-keep-a-journal/>

What does a typical practice log/diary/journal look like?

The “basics” are lists of specific assignments, warm-ups, musical and technical goals, and repertoire. For example, the Fort Couch Band Director Dr. John Seybert distributes the following simple form to his grades 7-8 band students:

| Music Practiced: | Metronome Setting: | Time Spent: | Practice Time: |
|------------------|--------------------|-------------|----------------|
| 1. _____ | 1. _____ | 1. _____ | |
| 2. _____ | 2. _____ | 2. _____ | |
| 3. _____ | 3. _____ | 3. _____ | |

Each entry should be dated and allow space to make comments and goals for your next session of practice. Many musicians divide up the page into segments, such as warmups, scales/exercises, etudes (studies), method book or solo pieces, and ensemble music, each with an area to jot down a narrative of what you did and how well things went.

When I was teaching strings (grades 5-12), my students and I developed an extremely detailed daily string practice routine, which included a year's checklist of lesson targets. (See sample on the next page.) You can make your own “things-to-do” list, including the focal points your music teachers “harp on” for improving form and technique. What does the band or orchestra director say about long tones, tuning, good posture, steady beat, rhythms and note-reading, fingerings, ensemble blend and balance, etc.? Emphasize one or more of these for each practice session!

DAILY STRING PRACTICE ROUTINE DATES _____

| | | |
|------------------|---|---|
| I. Two Scales | <input type="checkbox"/> Major Keys _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> minor keys _____ |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Slurs: 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 16 | <input type="checkbox"/> Rhythm Speed Drill (4, 3, 2, 1) |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Speed: quarter = _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> Word Rhythms _____ |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Cartwheels up to _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> Spiccato _____ |
| II. Arpeggios | <input type="checkbox"/> Keys _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> 1-IV-V7-I progressions _____ |
| III. Intervals | <input type="checkbox"/> Do-Re-Mi _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> Thirds _____ |
| IV. Bow Games | <input type="checkbox"/> Windshield wiper | <input type="checkbox"/> Frog Walk |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Pinky pushups | <input type="checkbox"/> Elevator |
| V. Shifting Prep | <input type="checkbox"/> Meows (down slides) | <input type="checkbox"/> One finger slides (up and down) |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Find the harmonic | <input type="checkbox"/> Find the harmonic + add a finger |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Set interval shift | <input type="checkbox"/> One finger scale |
| VI. Vibrato Prep | <input type="checkbox"/> Uncontrolled sirens | <input type="checkbox"/> Arm <input type="checkbox"/> wrist <input type="checkbox"/> finger polishing |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Rhythmic (even) sirens | <input type="checkbox"/> Speed up sirens |

ETUDES _____ METHOD BOOK pages _____
SOLO PIECES _____ ORCHESTRA MUSIC _____

LESSON TARGETS & TECHNICAL CHECKLISTS – “I can...”

- Analyze the music and select a specific articulation style.
- Demonstrate a controlled on and off-string bowing transitions.
- Develop a rudimentary sautillé (rapid flying) bow spiccato stroke.
- Play an even spiccato (bouncing/brush stroke) bowing.
- Practice a new vibrato warm-up.
- Play a three-octave Major and minor scale.
- Analyze the music to define phrase beginnings and endings (lifts).
- Diagnose and define a practice strategy for a difficult passage.
- Perform varying scales by key, mode, tempo, articulations, and rhythms
- Perform three different scales three different ways.
- Model proper instrument hold w/o hands (violins & violas).
- Play first, second, & third harmonics on all four strings using 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and changing fingerings.
- Install and use a shoulder rest or endpin anchor, and set-up chair to model orchestra sitting posture.
- Define and apply the concepts of stand partner shared responsibilities and sectional rehearsal practice.
- Demonstrate rest, ready, and playing positions.
- Review bow hand position and role of thumb & fingers.
- Play tuning A for 15 seconds with smooth bowing and tune other open strings to perfect fifths.
- Interpret concert music & apply appropriate bowings, fingerings, dynamics, & expressive markings.
- Adjust intonation and match pitches.
- Produce sustained sound, free of tension or distortions, consistent bow speed, & unwavering in pitch.
- Sight-read a new selection without stopping, scanning ahead for changes in meter, rhythms, and key.

In your “customized” journal, I recommend leaving space for metronome markings, special articulations, practicing tips and instructions (like “repeat it three-times-in-a-row perfectly” or “work on measures #1-8 today, #5-12 tomorrow,” etc.) and time spent. Remember, you are a problem solver and must seek ways to integrate your “tool box of tricks” to learn each challenging passage. What works for you? What doesn’t? That’s the true magic of a journal... *in with the good, and out the bad!*

Several previous *Fox’s Firesides* have explored practice methods and the setting of goals: <http://www.shjo.org/foxs-fireside/>. There are many other online resources, samples, and articles about practice journals. A few sites try to sell you printed forms, but others just offer you advice on creating and using documents to set practice goals. Take time to peruse these:

- “Start Small, Win Big” <https://www.thepracticejournal.com/blogs/the-practice-journal-blog/start-small-win-big>
- “How to Bullet Journal Practice” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iTABUNHmczs>
- “Ten Noteworthy Music Apps for Productive Practicing” <https://shenoted.com/2014/09/16/10-noteworthy-music-apps-for-productive-practicing/>

- Blogs at “Musician’s Way” like <https://www.musiciansway.com/blog/2009/11/the-power-of-specific-goals/>
- “Daily Practice Planner” <https://faculty.ithaca.edu/mauk/docs/dailypracticeplanner.pdf>
- “How to Practice – Five Habits to Help Make Your Music Practice More Efficient and Effective” <http://www.essential-music-practice.com/support-files/how-to-practice-five-habits-to-help-you-make-more-progress.pdf>
- “Practice – A How-To Guide and Workbook for Music Students” https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/b6966e_a29f9fc2e51746d6902666074f16d214.pdf
- “Practice Diary” <https://www.musiciansunion.org.uk/Files/Forms/Education/Practice-Diary>

What do you have to lose? Try setting up and maintaining a practice journal! It may improve the value and focus of the time you devote to working on your music... and make a real difference in your musical progress! Like Olympic athletes... *go for the goals and the gold!*

Feel free to share all SHJO enrichment resources and “Fox Firesides” at <http://www.shjo.org/foxs-fireside/>.

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Upcoming Spring 2018 SHJO Concerts:

May 20 at 3 p.m. in the USCHS Theatre
June 24 at 2 p.m. in the Fort Couch MS Gym