

Prep Your Practice

Planning a Well-Balanced Practice Session

Jessica Butler

Lately I have noticed that I have been using a lot of food analogies in lessons with my students. This is probably due to the fact that my lunch most days is pushed into the later part of the afternoon, so my stomach gets grumbly during lessons.

Have you ever heard of “meal prepping?” This is a technique that a lot of individuals and families use as a way of making cooking dinner at home easier. The idea is that you do a lot of cooking, baking, and basic prep on a Sunday, so that you have the basics already covered throughout the week when it is time to cook dinner. Most often, the result is that you can spend less time and energy cooking dinner. When you make things easier, then you are more likely to actually cook at home rather than eating at a restaurant.

But how can you “prep” for practice? It may take a little extra effort at first, but I believe that this technique could be a real game changer for those who want to level up their practice.

Planning

What's on the menu for the week? There are a lot of factors that may affect your menu. For example, do you have any dietary restrictions? Are you on a budget? Do you have a family of four to feed? Do you have an event with friends where you are planning on eating out? Everyone is different, so consult your calendar and consider your needs. Before you start prepping, it may be a good time to visit your fridge and pantry and see what you have in stock.

A practice prepper must consider similar questions. What do I have going on this week? This month? Do I have any tests, major projects, a lesson, rehearsals, performances, etc.? You might want to check in with any long term and short term goals that you have set for yourself and see how this week's practice can help you achieve said goals. Now that you know what your overall week is going to be like, it's time to start prepping.

Curate a Menu

Someone meal prepping will choose a handful of meals and recipes that they will cook in a given week. They will consider breakfast, lunch, and dinner as well as snacks. They will make sure that what they decide to cook is not only healthy but delicious as well. They may also choose meals that have similar ingredients. For example, you may want to steam some broccoli to have with salmon one night and to throw in a stir fry another night. Then, it's time to go shopping. (Don't forget the broccoli!)

So, what's on the practice menu? It should align with your goals and weekly schedule of events. Your practice version of breakfast, lunch,

and dinner might equate to 3 practice sessions. It's up to decide if you want to "eat" a big breakfast and have something small for "lunch." Again, these practice sessions must be in line with your goals as well as your schedule. The most important thing is to plan it and write it down. Now of course the real decision is what you are going to "eat." What recipes will you draw from? Lately, I've been using a couple of brass cookbooks so to speak. I have been basing my warm up / routine on David Vining's *Flow Studies*, Arban's studies, and some of my go-to exercises from Brad Edwards' *Lip Slur* book. I have marked these favorite exercises with sticky notes so that I can quickly recall them. I also have a handful of gigs and performances coming up, so I want to make sure that I practice that music as well. Of course, I have some personal goals and solo works that I am working on, so those must be accounted for too.

Use a recipe...or don't!

When I first learned to cook, I learned a lot from my parents and grand parents. They are all fantastic chefs. When I went out on my own, I asked my family for favorite those recipes so that I could make my dad's / Memeré's famous crêpes (I still can't do it as well as he can!). At first, I would follow these recipes religiously and measure everything out. Now, I cook mostly from intuition and experience. Of course, I still consult a cookbook or the internet for specific measurements or inspiration, but I have a good sense for what tastes good and what I like to eat.

The same goes for practicing. Perhaps at first you need to follow an exact routine or method for your initial warm up. Maybe you need your teacher to walk you through the method a few times before you feel comfortable doing it on your own. The key is to keep practicing the art

of practicing. You will begin to learn about yourself and your playing. I do think that a balanced approach is key. Think about the food pyramid...what would your practice pyramid look like? My practice pyramid always has a firm foundation of fundamentals.

Remember Your *Why*

Why are you doing all of this? It is a lot of work to plan your weekly practice menu. It certainly takes more effort than just throwing your Bordogni etude book on the stand and randomly playing a handful of etudes for thirty minutes or mindlessly playing some lip slurs while you scroll through Instagram (How you do this while playing your trombone is still a mystery to me!). Just as you can't expect to nourish your body on Doritos and pizza rolls alone, you can't expect to nourish your musicianship on thoughtless, unorganized, mindless, and inefficient practice. What may seem like extra effort at first will actually save you time in the long run. After all, the planning / organizing can be done relatively quickly once a week. What may seem like extra money at the grocery store will save you from eating out or visiting the vending machine. What at first seems like a lot of work might turn into a true love of quality cuisine...aka quality time with your instrument that enables you to become better every time you put your fork, I mean mouthpiece, to your lips.

I have lots of free downloadable resources for planning your practice in the Resource section of my website— please help yourself!