

PRACTICE GUIDELINES FOR VOCALISTS

How, and how often should I practice? That's a question everyone asks at one point or another, and there is no one answer. Your practice routine depends upon many factors, such as: what shape are you in now, vocally, and where do you want to be? Are you performing regularly, or getting ready for a big concert? Are you learning new repertoire and if so, how demanding is it? And finally, what time do you have available to practice?

Since singers are vocal athletes, if you are practicing for a concert, you can compare yourself to someone training for a marathon. Sitting on the couch and eating potato chips for weeks and months before a race and then trying to cram in a lot of training at the last minute is unlikely to give you the results you want. It's the same thing if you are training for a big gig. It takes some time to get your muscles into peak shape and they respond best with consistent exercise. So practicing every day for a short time is much better than a marathon session once or twice a week. Tony Bennett, who has been performing for some 60 years, vocalizes every day for 15-30 minutes. He sings along to a cassette recording made by his vocal coach. As he was quoted by Guy Talese in the *New Yorker Magazine*, "The first day you don't do the scales you know. The second day, the musicians know. The third day, the audience knows."

How long should your practice sessions be? You can make progress with as little as 10-15 minutes per day between weekly lessons. Be realistic about what you can do and set yourself up to win by aiming for an achievable amount of practice time and sticking with it, increasing incrementally as you integrate new habits into your life. On the other hand, if you are singing professionally, actively trying to change vocal habits, or learning new repertoire, you should probably think more on the lines of a 20-30 minute vocal work out every day, with another segment of time - anywhere from 10 minutes to an hour or more - on repertoire.

Research shows that people that want to move past a plateau with any skill need to not just put in time, but put in focused, analytical time.

Amateur musicians, for example, are more likely to spend their practice time playing music, whereas pros are more likely to work through tedious exercises or focus on specific, difficult parts of pieces. The best ice skaters spend more of their practice time trying jumps that they land less often, while lesser skaters work more on jumps they've already mastered. Deliberate practice, by it's nature, must be hard. (Joshua Foer, **Moonlighting with Einstein**. 2011. New York, Penguin Books.)

Depending upon what you are working towards, divide your practice sessions into segments. These should include:

- **Vocal Technique.** Go through your individualized vocal technique workout, with focused time working on any specific exercises your teacher has given you to work on problem areas. This can be done by singing along with a recording, or at the piano.
- **Repertoire.** Don't waste your time endlessly running through the same music in the same way; instead, use your vocal technique and musicianship skills to focus on small problem areas. Gerald Klickstein, in **The Musician's Way, A Guide to Practice, Performance, and Wellness**, recommends dividing material into three categories; new, developing, and

performance-ready. Each of these stages require different approaches to rehearsal that will be covered more thoroughly in a subsequent article.

Finally, where should you practice? Is it ok to practice in the car? The ideal situation is to have a regular time and place to practice, free of distractions, where you can deeply concentrate and focus. However, all of our lives get busy and if that's not always possible, it's ok to vocalize in the car sometimes, if it's not the **only** way you practice. You're unlikely to really be able to get optimal breath support in the car, and you have to be careful about pushing to sing over any ambient noise. That being said, warming up in the car can be a valuable pinch-hitter when you're pressed for time and it's an excellent space to work on memorization or other aspects of music such as listening to other artists or to your own live recordings.

With time, practice can become as integral a part of your life as brushing your teeth, and, as the small successes in your sessions begin to add up, practice can become a rewarding and fulfilling aspect of your musical life.