

HOW TO BEHAVE WHILE PRACTICING

by John Muri

In the elementary stages of musical practice the goals are independence in the use of hands and feet and facility in the production of beautiful tone. If you want to get your hands working for you — not against you — you can't avoid the regimen that every competent player has followed through the excellent exercises of teachers like Hanon, Czerny, and Bach. Primary among the early goals is the development of correct fingering habits. Here many of our players fail. Countless beginners insist on playing scales with wrong fingering, thereby producing a rough, uneven progression of tones. Others insist on using the same fingers to play repeats of a single note, producing a choppy effect and tiring out the forearm muscles. Some players hold the fingers out too straight and stiff, again producing inefficient and tired muscles. Fingers curved into almost half-moons usually create the strongest positions, provided that the wrists are kept low. As for pedaling, you don't have to be able to play with your right foot, but it's a good show if you can cut loose with a two-foot pedal cadenza. The flashier organists usually have one or two of these solos in practice with which to knock audiences out of their seats. Actually, pedal technique for theatre organists is not demanding. Speaking of efficiency, avoid gyrations at the console unless you want to make things look hard or unless you can't help it. The more you throw your body around, the more you tire yourself, the jerkier your playing becomes, and the sillier you look to people who know what organ playing is about. Don't be a console jockey.

Every practice session should have a warm-up period during which scales and arpeggios are played. Some effort should be made to master short passages that have defied your efforts. Do not work at these to the point of

fatigue; just play them over slowly but correctly once or twice each session. In a week or two you will be amazed at the improvement that seems to come almost by itself. Short periods in pedal studies performed daily over a period of months will show similar wonders. These suggestions are merely application of an educational rule that has been around for fifty years, namely, that spaced learning (that is, frequent and regular review of material) gets better and faster results than short-term intensive attempts.

Some time should be given to sight-reading of materials that will extend your skills. This work may be done at the piano. I prefer duets, since one player pulls the other along. There are all kinds of good duets available at music stores. Don't fall into the trap of playing things you like to hear and calling it practice. What some call practice is often self-indulgent playing-around with tunes that have already been learned. Nothing is gained in that kind of session. Instead, make note of those passages in which you falter or play wrong notes; these are the only ones you should play at practice sessions. A regular part of the work should include some memorizing and self-testing of previously memorized material.

Many players want to play fast too soon. All pieces should be played quite slowly at first. Problems in elementary technique will then show up. If you can't play a run slowly, the chances are that you can't do it rapidly either. A piece should never be played at a tempo faster than that in which all the notes can be correctly played. Later you may gradually increase speed until it is the right one.

Make sure that your choices of playing speed or tempo are suitable and correct. A waltz will lose its

beauty if it is played faster than a normal dance tempo. See what happens to Chopin's "Minute Waltz" when it is played too fast: its melody and grace disappear in a rat race. Marches should be played at march tempo. Recently I heard a fellow play one so fast that you'd have to run to keep time with it. There is no sense in that kind of playing.

When you have a piece almost finished, ask yourself: am I playing this work intelligently? I heard a performance of Ferde Grofe's "Day-break" in which the player had inserted many left-hand scale-runs, all descending. Is that the way the sun comes up? I think those scales should have ascended, just as light rays do at daybreak. Descending scales remind me of sunset. I have heard players do "Ebb-Tide" fortissimo. Is that the way water sinks and departs? Only when the bottom of a bucket falls out. I never heard of a tide like that except the one at the Bay of Fundy. No tide ever ebbed first pianissimo, then fortissimo, then pianissimo again. I think it should start relatively loud and sink gradually into peace and silence. As Marshall McLuhan would say, the music should fit the message.

Take the right foot off the swell-shoes once in a while, and play a few notes with it, so as to avoid the strong tendency to pump the shades open and shut. Many theatre organists of the old school (and a number of the current one) have kept the shades flapping in time with the melody. I guess that's what some people call "expression", and it doesn't mean a thing. In an earlier article I called attention to the sudden and meaningless switches from loud to soft and back again as "musical lunacy." Alternation of violent ranting and soft romanticism is representative of nothing less than the schizophrenic or the manic-depressive. I don't think that most organists who play this way are mentally sick, but the music certainly is. A unified musical composition has to move in a definite direction. It is not "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

All this comes down to the idea that you have to go into a practice period knowing what you need to do and what you intend to do. This means planning, sticking to your plan, listening to yourself, judging your work, and practicing in the light of intelligent self-criticism. □