



## Episode 58: 7 Expert Practice Tips from Time to Practice podcast guests

Christine Goodner:

Welcome to episode 58. This week I'm here to share some fantastic practice ideas with you from seven different musicians who were guests with us here on the Time to Practice podcast back in the first few months of 2024 before we were on our summer hiatus.

While most of the interviews on the podcast are between 25 to 40 minutes, these are short two to three-minute segments where our guest shares a very specific practice idea that I ask them to be ready to bring to our conversation, which is if you could leave listeners with one idea about practice to take with them into the week, what would that be?

I wanted to share these particular clips with you because you may be new to the podcast and not have heard these interviews before, or you may have missed interviews or guests for various reasons. And by the time these episodes come out, I have heard these conversations a few times while having them, of course, but also while editing the audio, producing the episode, and again, I'll read through what they say while getting the transcripts ready to go out. And still, six to 10 months later, as I was getting these quotes ready to share with you this week, I got so much out of hearing them again.

These ideas are ones we can keep coming back to, and each of our guests has such wisdom and experience that are represented by these ideas. And I hope if you ever need a little pep talk or refresher, you can come back and listen to this episode again. And also, if you enjoy this, you would share it with someone in your life that you think would find it helpful to hear.

We are going to start today with a tip from Crystal Boyack, creator of Wee, violin, cello, and viola. I love the work Crystal's doing, and I love her tips based on her experience as a musician, educator, and parent.

Crystal Boyack:

Our kids learn more from our actions than they do from our words, so we can tell our kids to practice, but I really encourage, and my husband and I do this, and I encourage my families in my studio to do this is find something that you are going to practice. That's your thing every day, and let your kids see you

build your skills every day and you do something hard. This is outside of work. This is outside of parenting, okay? This is something that you do for you.

So it may be going to yoga, it may be learning a new language, but let your child see you work every single day at something that's hard. And then one tradition we have around the kitchen table is we say our favorite thing each day, our least favorite thing each day, and then something we did that's hard. So our kids get to hear me and my husband and all the other siblings say something that was hard that day. And often the hard thing often correlates with also what their favorite thing was. Today, I went to yoga class and I did a pose I'd never done before, and it was so hard, but it was also my favorite. I got that pose down and let them see your example of practicing daily and pushing through even when it's hard.

Christine Goodner:

That's a great tip. I love that - it's good for kids to see they're not the only ones struggling through something that's hard.

Crystal Boyack:

And as parents, we so often push our own desires and wishes on our kids instead of accepting them as our own, right? I want my kid to be amazing, so I'm going to make them practice. I'm going to take them to all the sports, but really we need to take ownership of ourselves and what we have control over. And like you said earlier, our kid may or may not do that, but we have control over what we will do and our kid will learn from our example more than they'll learn from what we're telling them is important.

Christine Goodner:

Our next clip comes from Susanna Klein. Susanna is a professional violinist, practice researcher and assistant professor of violin and coordinator of strings at Virginia Commonwealth University. She gives us some very practical ideas to make practice more fun and to gamify it. Enjoy

Susanna Klein:

Practice is a party of one. It's very difficult. It's so incremental. It's problem focused. It takes time and dedication every day. I mean, you're asking a child to do a very difficult thing, something that most adults can't do, which is to be problem focused day in and day out in this incremental, competitive, often very minutely focused activity. So we need to be cognizant of that. And if gamifying helps gamify, and I'm not just talking about the kids now. I'm also talking about music teachers and what gamify, right? Get out a set of dice, roll the dice, and I don't know, let's say could just be bar numbers. You have two dice. All right, it's set of seven. Let's practice bar seven. It says three. Practice bar three, and if bar three is easy, that's okay, go with it. Don't say, oh three is not very hard.

We're going to skip that one. No. Have the child feel a win, like,

oh, they tricked you. They're getting to repeat a really easy bar. That's okay because a hard number will come up. Or you could do dice for slurs, practice all the hard, I don't know the 16 notes, but we'll slur 'em slowly, exactly what the dice tells us. So if the dice says five, I mean slur five is pretty hard. That's okay, even them failing trying to do it and laughing is success because the brain kind of regroupes the notes when you're slurring. And so that's really good. So I'm a huge fan of gamifying, and most of the gamifying that I do in my studio with my young students is taken from Suzuki. I take a chapter out of that book and I basically say, okay, we need to have some fun.

Christine Goodner:

Here's a practical way that Susanna shares how to make that fun happen.

Susanna Klein:

I have a couple bowls of ping pong balls in my office. I buy them in bulk because they're really cheap, and then I write little messages on them. And so it could be like I have a scale bowl. And so the scales will be like student picks a ping pong ball out because it's supposed to be randomized that already makes them happy, and it'll say, play like a diva, but start PPP and end formo at the top of the scale.

Little things like that or slur two or only start from the top going down, the highest note going down, things like that. So I have one sort of for scales, I'll have another set of ping pong balls for sort of fake performing, do you know what I mean? Okay. Just do all the starts of your pieces, but nothing else but with the bow, that kind of stuff. Or some hard things like record yourself, listen back with headphones. I mean, those are a little bit further up.

Christine Goodner:

This next clip comes from our interview with Alan Duncan, and this episode got a lot of great feedback from parents who felt very seen by it. Alan is a longtime Suzuki parent and collaborative pianist for his violinist daughter. He came on and shared about creativity practice as a stress test for the parent-child relationship and how the practice relationship changes over time.

Alan Duncan:

This is something that I've been thinking about lately because I'm always thinking about it and it's one word which is attention. And I'll just take two seconds to tell you the story of why I think about that. So the American poet, Mary Oliver died I think 2019. And I went to the library and checked out her last book, which is a book called Devotions. It's a series of essays. And I picked the book up and started reading, and there was one of her essays concluded with this line, which is Attention is the Beginning of Devotion. And it really hit me like a thunder clap because I think that really encapsulates everything that we are trying to do in a discipline that we love. So what I tell my daughter, what I try to tell myself is always bring attention to what you're doing and that attention, it enables you to continually improve.

I mean, you can assign a person, do 10,000 repetitions of whatever, that's fine, but if you're not doing that with attention, you're losing the real power in it. And so for me, it's always about bringing attention, whether that's if you're in a quartet, really attend to the tuning. If you're a pianist, really attend to the feel of the key, the feedback you're getting from the key as you're playing, because that gives you important signals into what you're trying to produce in the sound world. And so for me, it's just whatever you do, bring attention to it because that enables everything else. And if you're a parent who's not involved in music, your attention is really on the dynamics of your relationship with your child being observant, like a third party observer, watching things unfold in the practice room and bringing that awareness and attention to it so that you know what directions in which you could be more creative. So "attention is the beginning of devotion."

Christine Goodner:

Next we're going to hear from violinist and pedagogue Amy Beth Horman. Amy Beth Horman is on the faculty of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. She is the creator and host of Beyond the Triangle, a podcast focused on the art of raising young classical musicians and violin breakfast, which she tells all about in the episode if she was on. Definitely want to go back and listen to that if you haven't yet.

Amy Beth Horman:

And the other thing I wanted to talk about with practice, I probably should have answered this before Christine, when you asked me about practice, because there was another stage of practice for me, and that was when I was an adult, and practice as an adult became very different because I ended up having beautiful kids and becoming a mother.

And I was blessed with little ones in the house renting around and also a full studio of students. But at the time when my children were babies and toddlers, I was playing a big concert with orchestra still. And so those times were very special to me because they looked impossible. It looked like, how will I prepare the Brahms or the Nielsen or the Beethoven? And sometimes I would have multiple concerts within a month. How am I going to do this and also teach and be a good mom and a good wife?

That was a puzzle in my head. And one thing that occurred to me in my own practice because I was feeling so scheduled and I needed to get things done, I think I was in my thirties when this happened, I must have been, but I remember very distinctly having a practice session, which felt to me to be very stressed and too regimen and too much like a task list. And I stopped and I thought, this isn't how I want to relate to my instrument. It's almost like the instrument is a person to me. And I felt like it was so disrespectful to this instrument that's given me so much over the years and has lent me such happiness and feelings of satisfaction and empowerment. And I thought, here I am turning it into almost a chore, and it's a privilege to play these concerts. So if I'm going to play the concerts, I need to respect this energy that I have with the instrument.

So I made a little rule for myself, which was that when I touched the violin or when I said to my students when it reaches my shoulder, when that tap happens, I try and shift into a place of gratitude where I remember that it is a blessing for me to make this beautiful music. And if I lose track of that feeling, I put the violin down no matter how much I've been practicing so far. And I started doing that. And I am very good at making these little rules for myself and sticking with them because I'm curious about what will come. And so I did this for a week or two, and I recognized within that timeframe that it would completely change my relationship to practice again. And that shift was I think the only reason I was able to perform as long as I have.

And it kept me just in love with the instrument and with sound and vibration for so much longer. And sometimes I look back on that, and I think if I can impart that to students that it's so much of this is on them to maintain that beauty, that relationship of wonder and curiosity and gratitude with the instrument, that is actually something that they have to participate in and be responsible for and how special it is. That is something that I talk to the students about. And as the music gets harder, that is very difficult to maintain and that I understand that, but that I believe in it because I did it. And that process to me was very dear to my heart. It definitely helped my whole house, it helped everybody in the house. And I like to think that it helped the audiences that heard me inside that year because it was an incredible shift for me.

Christine Goodner:

Many people are also familiar with Amy Beth Horman because they have followed the journey of her daughter Ava and her journey on the violin from a very young age. And I really enjoyed this reflection from Amy Beth on how their journey started

Amy Beth Horman:

When we started working together, when Ava and I started playing violin together, she was quite young and she had a great first summer at it with the instrument finally on her shoulder. She kind of only did open strings or a cardboard violin for quite a while, and then suddenly she's playing open strings, and she was really loving it. And I thought, I remember having this thought, how are we going to fit this into,

not in a negative way, but I was kind of thinking, what will we do once school starts, right? Because she's going to start kindergarten and I wonder how it'll fit in. And then I had this one morning with her. She loved the violin already so much, and it was very, very clear. And she's the only one of my children that made this choice to do the violin. So I could see how fervently she wanted to play it.

We were having breakfast together and it was just, we used to have peanut butter waffles together in our little kitchen space. And she just looked at me very intense, and she said, I feel sorry for the violin. Don't you feel sorry for the violin? And I said, why? And she said, well, it doesn't get any breakfast at all. It just sits in there during the morning and we're having this delicious breakfast. And I said, that's interesting that you feel sorry for it. Okay, well, why don't we just take our breakfast in where the violin is? Maybe we can play some open strings. And she said, yeah. And then we went in and we brought, of course, all of the violin makers in the world are groaning right now. I brought peanut butter waffles in where the violins are, but we did, and then we played some open strings, and she got so excited, her whole face lit up, and she said, it's like a violin breakfast.

It's breakfast for the violin. And I said, then we can start our day like this. And she said, yeah, we should do it every day. And we just played open strings in circles, and we listened to how it moved around the room and how it resonated. And we had such a bond going, and I would play things and she would just play circles on a string that matched so that she felt like we were playing a duet and we were playing a duet, but she felt like she was able to really feel like she was making music with me in the morning. And I will tell you, Christine, I am going to find it. There's a Facebook post where I was so enamored by what I was feeling with her in the morning that I actually dared to go on Facebook and tell people about it and how this was this great thing that we were doing in the morning and that I didn't see this ever stopping.

And I was so excited about it. And one of my good friends wrote me back and said, I give you two weeks at this little project. And I said, challenge accepted.

And do you know what we did right before we had our podcast? Exactly that we did violent breakfast. So maybe to me, part of the mystery that we need to solve is what does the joy and the connection to music look like in your house? And what are you doing to preserve that for you, for your child, for your family, for everybody's happiness? What are you willing to do? What can you do? Little things every day to keep that pilot light on? And this is what we do, that violin breakfast, that warming up together, doing scales and arpeggios and finding fun little rhythms and finding little curiosities about our hands and different textures and colors. We're still doing it.

And it's been almost 10 years now. Eva's going to turn 14 in March, and we're still at it. And now we've even invited people to join us and we do it online. But I think it's more interesting to say that we still do it even when we're not doing the class online. We're still doing this because at the beginning of every day, to have that kind of communion with the instrument and what it's done for us, what it has offered us, joy and love, it carries us in a different direction than if we didn't do that.

Christine Goodner:

Our next guest is Barbie Wong piano teacher, also an expert on raising musical kids and encouraging their motivation on love of music. And I loved what Barbie had to share about the peak end rule.

Barbie Wong:

Well, I think when it comes to practice, I think the first thing to realize about practice is that it is not an easy process. That practice is different from playing practice is the hard work that you put in so that eventually you can get to the playing part, which is really easy. And so because practice is so hard or it can be so hard, then I like to use the peak end rule to really make practice a lot easier. And so the peak end rule, basically it is actually a scientifically based idea, which is that people remember not the

average of the experience that you have of an event, but they remember the peak experience and what happens at the end. And so if you can start and end each practice session with something that's fun or positive, then your child more likely, then they will remember those parts much more easily.

So I usually just say, Hey, when you start your practice session, you can play whatever you want as a warmup. And that's the time when the parent cannot say anything negative about the child's playing. Because even if your child is messing it massively or playing like a speed devil, it's okay because you want that part to be sort of the playing part. The same with the very end of the practice session end on something that your child really wants to play. And regardless of if your child just practiced something and did it in a certain way and then they play something and they've messed up on it, still don't say anything because you want them to end on a high note. So give that a try and I'm curious to hear how it goes for everyone.

Christine Goodner:

Next we're going to hear from Jennifer Roig Francoli. Jennifer is the creator of the Art of Freedom Method, an Alexander teacher, musician's coach and author. I love what she had to share with us in this clip about being present and trusting ourselves and what we've learned.

Jennifer Roig-Francoli:

If you are more present to your experience in the moment right now, that gives you a better chance at being able to do that when you're practicing. And if you're not present and your mind's wandering all over the place and you really would rather be somewhere else, then you're practicing suffers and you're actually practicing that. Sorry, you're getting really good at playing your instrument with your mind elsewhere. Remember what you practice, you get better at, whether it's something good or not. So I think it's really healthy and important too. Somehow. I have a special technique that I teach my students, and I can give you the link for that. And it's called The Cycle. I have a YouTube video that teaches that kids may not have the patience to do a complete cycle, but that's okay. It's the idea. And even just doing a little bit of it goes a long way, and kids don't really need as much as adults do anyway, so close to their natural essence more than parents.

So that's the first one. Basically stop before you start and get in touch with yourself in the present moment. And then another tip that I really wanted to share, because I think it can make a huge difference in a student's progress, is something that most people don't realize. There's a lot of emphasis, I think, on repetition of things. So for example, let's say you want to learn how to play open string one, two, like three notes, or let's say 1, 2, 3. You want to play those notes in tune, right? So you practice getting those notes in tune and you repeat them a few times and then all of a sudden they're in tune. Great. Then I think it can be counterproductive sometimes, and I'm not making a black and white rule here. There's much more to this and we don't have time to talk about it.

To notice that once a student has been able to play 1, 2, 3 in tune, that means that the brain has got it, that the student can do it, and it's better sometimes a lot of the time to move on to something else at that point, because research has shown that the brain keeps on learning even when you're not doing that activity anymore. So it's really good to stop when you're feeling successful. Also, the student is going to be much more motivated to come back to it later or to do something else when they feel like they've accomplished something and they can do it rather than old school would be, okay, let's play this 10 times in a row correctly. And if you mess up once, you have to go back to the beginning. That's not that uncommon, and it can be really counterproductive because it puts a lot of pressure on the student to be able to do it again perfectly, which increases tension, which as we spoke about earlier, gets in the way.

And then if it doesn't work and they have to go back to the beginning, or even if they just have to keep going with the same thing and it's not working, they can get frustrated and start to feel bad about themselves. Like, what's wrong with me? Why can't I do this? Again? All those doubt, monster type of thoughts increase tension, and so it becomes really counterproductive. Whereas if you play it once and it's correct, I think it's much more valuable to trust. And this takes practice too on the student's part and the parents and the teacher's part to trust that it's in there. The capacity to do it again is in there, and we don't need to check to see if that can be reproduced right now. Be better to move on to something else, and then if you want to come back to it five minutes later, come back or leave it for next week or tomorrow or whatever. But the idea is to stop when you're ahead and let the brain and the child feel successful, feel good about themselves, because then everything they do next is going to be easier.

Christine Goodner:

Our final tip today comes from Christopher Maloney of Practice Warriors. He is a multi-instrumentalist who has performed and recorded with an impressive list of rock and pop musicians, and a former instructor and department chair at the World Renowned Musicians Institute in Los Angeles. He's a published author with Hal Leonard Publishing and runs a website called Practice Warriors. I really loved his very specific tip about a way to use a practice log that I hadn't heard talked about in quite this way before.

Christopher Maloney:

Okay, so I knew you were going to ask me this question. And from Mr. Practice Warrior, there are so many things that I could say, goals and consistent practicing, scheduling your time, all kinds of things. But I think the key to lasting musical improvement that literally ties every practice strategy together is having a practice log. To me, if you are writing down every single day what it is that you are working on, then not only will you stay consistent, not only will you know what you're supposed to be doing, but you, you'll also start to see results. When athletes try to measure their improvement, they write down how fast did they run? How high did they jump, how much weight did they lift? And they see incremental changes each and every day. It's how they monitor their progress. And musicians unfortunately, do not do that, but absolutely it should be done.

So whether again, you've got a brand new violent students or teenager coming into this later on, or even an adult, if you have, we actually give our practice warrior members this great downloadable practice log that they could fill out. They could fill out what days they're going to practice their time. We even sell it as an ancillary thing, but that's not why I'm mentioning it. I'm not trying to get a sale. What I used as a practice log was a spiral notebook, and I wrote on the cover, shut up and practice, and I would just open my little thing and I'd write down February 13th, okay, I worked on my reading page 4 8, 2 measures one through four, and then I'd write down what else I worked on. So the next day I didn't have to spend 10 minutes going, what am I open the page, I get right to it, I write down how far I got, and then a month later you look back and go, oh my gosh, look how far I've come. And it goes right back to what we talked about at the beginning of our interview, where now you can see the progress. You ain't going to see daily progress, not even weekly progress, but three, six months later, you look back at your former self and you go, oh my gosh, look how far I've come. How much farther can I go so I cannot stress enough. Having a practice log to write down your daily activities is the key to long lasting musical growth.

Christine Goodner:

A huge thank you to each one of our guests for sharing their wisdom with us, and you can find a link to each of their full length episodes through the article in my website or through the show notes attached to this episode, wherever you're streaming your podcast at that has links to each full episode, so you can find that episode number and follow up with any of these episodes you might've missed in the past. I hope you get a chance to listen to those. You can find that specifically@[suzukitriangle.com](mailto:suzukitriangle.com) slash ttp, episode 58. If you have any suggestions for future guests you'd like to hear from on the podcast, I would love you to reach out and let me know. You can always reach out with feedback or ideas at Suzuki Triangle on Instagram.

I hope you finish listening to this episode, feeling inspired, having some good reminders or new ideas to think about. And I also hope you're as grateful as I am to be a part of this community of musicians that generously share their ideas and support each one of us along the way. Have a great week, time to Practice community. I'll be back next week with another full length interview, and I can't wait to share with you. Happy practicing everyone.

-Here's a practical way that Susanna shares how to make that fun happen.

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