

# Patrick O'Brien Coaches a Student on Practicing

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## Editor's Introduction

This is an email exchange between Patrick O'Brien and luthier Travis Carey, of Vancouver, B.C., who had taken a few lute lessons from the maestro beginning in 2003. The exchange took place in 2009. This brief tutorial presents some ideas not present in Patrick's 1982 lecture on practicing (see above in this *Journal*).

**TRAVIS CAREY:** How to structure my practice time?

**PATRICK O'BRIEN:** Boy, that's a hard one. Everyone learns differently. Some people work best at certain times of day and happily hit upon what time or in what order to do things to use their energy best. Likewise, people remember musical things in different ways: some by pure sound, some by theory, some by visualization of their hands' motions . . .

Several things which seem common: Write out large or a get the best possible copy of what you're working on and use it as a journal entry, writing in your fingering, phrase marks etc. so they are very clear and you waste no time trying to remember what you figured out yesterday. I have noticed over the years how much more trouble people have when working from bad copies of things. Pick a few pieces you really like, stick with them and identify the things which need work so you get to them regularly. Make a list.

One friend makes a bunch of virtual flash cards of knotty bits and practices a few very, very slowly when he has short segments of time. I have known people to do this when they are away from the instrument, just doing the mental practice of hearing the slow phrase and picturing their hands making the motions. (I learn things by a combination of kinesthetics and sound, and this doesn't seem to work for me.)

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**CAREY:** Here's what I've got—most mornings before catching the bus to head over to Grant's [Tomlinson], I've got about 15-20 minutes. Barely enough to get warmed up really; I usually spend the time working (very slowly) on some knotty passage I'm trying to untangle.

**O'BRIEN:** Most people in your situation would like to play a couple of enjoyable pieces with this sort of morning time. A professional doesn't often have the luxury to do that. He has pieces to play through and learn by very slow practice. Often a professional can't even take the time to play whole pieces. He only has time for the hard bits. The only time he gets to play the whole thing is in concert. (This happens to Paul O'Dette all the time.) I would hate that.

I would probably use this sort of fresh, calm, morning time to work on a long term aesthetic project, something which seemed to me lacking in my current playing, working toward some particular current goal: for instance, improving my tone in my right hand by playing long, sustained slow tones in scales, working on some specific goal in my left hand, (adduction of the fingers, relaxation of the left shoulder . . .) or putting things together with both hands to improve the smoothness of my scales during position shifts or the clear articulation of the counterpoint in my cadences etc. When I focus clearly on these things it makes my whole approach to the instrument a more positive thing. I come to anticipate the pleasure of improvement, even if only in one aspect at a time.

**CAREY:** Most evenings—at least an hour, maybe as much as two. Julia [later Carey's wife] and I are hanging out after supper, she's marking, or maybe away at a meeting, and I play away to my heart's content. During this time I'll play through pieces, maybe pulling out passages and working with them in the larger context.

**O'BRIEN:** There are some conventions that might work:

1. We often begin with a ritual of brief warm up, working slowly on some point in either or both hands which is a current technical and/or musical goal. Set a limit of time for this so that it doesn't take up too much time and you are encouraged to concentrate really well for a short burst of very organized abstraction.
2. With that new idea somewhat in place in our memory, we then work on our newest piece, hoping that thus we will learn new things with our best new technical and musical ideas and control.

3. Thereafter we play recently learned repertoire, for which we need to have good concentration and discipline, playing slowly to imprint everything correctly.

4. Then we amuse ourselves somewhat more by playing older repertoire for musical and expressive work and as something of a diversion. In this already learned repertoire, one should be least conscious of one's technique and be simply thinking of the rhetorical expression of phrases.

One of the benefits of this sort of plan is that you get to the essential pedagogic things first and only get to the others once the hard, new, heavy lifting is done. If you don't have much time in a given session, your most essential, progressive work still gets done.

**CAREY:** Saturday and Sunday—usually I have 3, maybe 4 hours both days. I seem to use this time for playing passages in context (as described above) and also for exploring repertoire, finding suitable pieces.

So what do you think? Pretty vague question I know, but if you have any advice, or if there's some vital part of the process I'm leaving out, please let me know. My new circumstances here have really given me a gift of time to work on my playing, and I'm feeling like I could make strides over the next few months, if I use the time wisely.

FYI, the kind of stuff I'm playing these days—Holborn, Pavan and Galliard #2; Dowland, Earl of Essex and Queen E's Galliard (I'm also on the lookout for anything else in the "Varietie" that I can play on 6 courses); Arthur's Dump from the Marsh lute book (a nice, easy pace on that one); and various Francesco (10, 11, 12, 28, etc.)

**O'BRIEN:** Some people set a goal of reading a new piece every day [if] they have enough time after doing their essential work. The internet being what it is, one can pick something from a website like Sarge Gerbode's and read it right off the screen. One gets more familiar with the scope of the literature in this way and it improves the speed with which you pick up new things.

In general, one starts with a plan, even writing it out as a list on the right side of a piece of graph paper and checking things off daily if that works for you, but what happens is that you find yourself remaking the plan quite often. In the process you learn how you learn. It's good to have real goals, like playing in front of people every so often. My favorite university plan was made for one school by a very active secretary to the chairman of the music department. She got the names of local librar-

ies, elementary schools, old-age homes, hospitals etc. For years, when a student was preparing a recital he could go to her with his date and she would set up practice performances for him. It was a great community outreach project. People in the area came to support the department and the school and many would come to the student's final recitals. Often he would play only a few pieces in each venue and sometimes give a little talk about what he was doing but he learned to get ready, perform, and deal with the audience and different performing situations.