



Beyond the Basics

The Art and Science of Playing the Lute

How to Practice

Practicing is always an adventure - a meeting of the physical, intellectual and spiritual selves. I find practicing to be one of the most rewarding, joyful experiences in life. Ironically, it has sometimes been one of the most frustrating, maddening and perplexing experiences, too!

Technically, practicing should be about solving problems. Endless repetition of a tricky passage can often be avoided by some penetrating thought. Often, we don't stop to think and really analyze a passage. Try to discover what lies at the bottom of a tricky spot. Think. Why is it tricky? How can the challenging passage be solved? By changing your fingering? By guiding your hands in a different way? By releasing tension?

Don't practice mistakes. Stay in control of your hands. Practice as slowly and carefully as needed to play the music cleanly, without errors. If necessary, use a metronome to keep the tempo slow enough to play cleanly. (It's easy to unconsciously let the tempo creep up!) Then gradually increase your speed as your comfort grows.

Mentally survey each piece you play. Discover its form - its overall structure. Note how the music is divided into sections, how the sections are divided into phrases, and how the phrases are divided into sub-phrases and musical cells. See how the phrases and sections relate to one another. Learn all you can about the music you play. If it is a dance piece, learn about the dance. Learn its character and tempo. If possible, learn how to do the dance yourself. If it is a vocal intabulation, compare your intabulation with the vocal original. See what is added and what is left out. Learn what the text of the piece is about. Is it happy, sad, amorous, devotional, wistful...? I have found it helpful to underlay a translation of the text beneath my lute intabulation. This way, the changing of mood from phrase to phrase, along with any text painting, is made clear.

Open yourself to the mood or spirit of the music you are practicing. Really feel the emotions the music expresses, moment by moment. Feel the fluctuations, the subtle changes in mood section by section - phrase by phrase. A composition may have a single overall mood but many variations and inflections within that overall mood.

Practice feeling the emotions of the music. Don't practice half-heartedly, or play with the wrong feeling. Practice feeling the way you want to feel when performing the piece. (This parallels the advice "Don't practice mistakes.") Make sure the feeling is really coming out of the lute. Listen. It is easy to have a tremendous feeling in your heart for the music, but not fully transmit the feeling through your fingers and the lute. Hear yourself.

Record yourself. A tape recorder is a valuable tool for objectively hearing yourself and evaluating how you really play. Play and listen. Then, play and listen some more. Hold an ideal clearly in mind of how the lute should sound, phrase by phrase. Perhaps that ideal will change and evolve as you

continue to play and listen. That's part of the process. Don't be discouraged. (It's easy to become discouraged if you're constantly listening to practice-recordings of your own playing!) Just keep playing and listening.



In addition to physical practice, I have found it helpful to "mentally practice" away from the lute. That is, to follow the lute tablature with my eyes and listen in my imagination, to an ideal performance of the piece. (This could also be done from memory, without tablature.) When mentally practicing it is important to imagine the sound in great detail, as vividly as possible. It's also good to "see" the ideal movements of your hand and "feel" the sensations of playing, all in your mind's eye. Finally, be sure to be emotionally engaged in your mental practice. Feel the character and emotional content of the music, just as you would in a physical performance.



I cannot tell you how much to practice. That depends on the scope of your ambition and how the lute fits into your life. Why are you practicing? For pure enjoyment? For self-improvement? To become a professional? Once you decide how much time you can set aside for practicing, you may find it helpful to divide your practice session into a balanced format, such as:

- Technique - playing exercises, trebles, and isolated tricky spots in your repertory

- Sight reading - exploring the repertory

- New pieces

- Old pieces

I think it is best if you create your own practice sequence. You'll find a routine that is best suited to you. It's good to change your routine every month or so, to keep it fresh. Whatever routine you choose, be sure to take breaks regularly. I often try to get a little physical exercise during breaks, just to get the blood moving.

The quality and effectiveness of your session depends on your energy and concentration while practicing. So, anything you can do to improve your energy and mental focus will help your practice session. The greater your will and enthusiasm, the greater your energy.