

KALEIDOSCOPE PRACTICE

*Focus, Finish and Play the Way
You've Always Wanted*

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Table of Contents

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Preface | 3 |
| Part One: The Woodshed | 5 |
| Chapter 1 The World’s Worst Music Student..... | 6 |
| Chapter 2 Inside the Woodshed..... | 10 |
| Chapter 3 Fixing the Focus | 14 |
| Part Two: The Kaleidoscope Practice System | 17 |
| Chapter 4 The Kaleidoscope..... | 18 |
| Chapter 5 Focus Area 1: Detail | 22 |
| Chapter 6 Focus Area 2: Expression | 26 |
| Chapter 7 Focus Area 3: Continuity | 29 |
| Chapter 8 Focus Area 4: Control..... | 34 |
| Chapter 9 Focus Area 5: Connection..... | 38 |
| Chapter 10 Taking Action..... | 41 |
| End Notes | 46 |
| About the Author | 47 |

Preface

This book was written for every music student, young or old, who has ever felt stuck practicing the same piece over and over, wondering if it will ever be finished.

As a music teacher, specifically a harp teacher, I can attest that the most difficult part of teaching is watching a student struggle. When you know that the student is practicing, that they are truly putting in the effort, and that effort is not yielding results, both teacher and student can quickly become mired in a quicksand of frustration. It's a frustration that grabs hold of the soul and eventually leads even talented students to give it up altogether.

The cause of the frustration is plain enough: the piece is going nowhere. But why is that? Why isn't the student's practice moving the music forward? Or why is the progress so slow?

Over the years, I came to discover that most people, not just my students, didn't really understand HOW to practice. Everyone knew the WHAT, or thought they did. But most people describe practice with phrases like these:

- lots of repetition
- correct repetition
- playing it a hundred times correctly
- doing it over and over again until it becomes habit

Those descriptions are accurate as far as they go, but they certainly seem boring and unmusical. What if there were a better way to look at practice, one that focused on these things instead?

- efficient use of time
- practicing musically
- practicing with the "finish" in mind
- focusing on results, not repetition

What follows in this book is the product of my work with my students to help them finish what they start. Whether a student is learning a piece for public performance or just personal pleasure, he needs to take a piece to that final stage of completion. That's where the joy in playing music is found: in actually **PLAYING MUSIC**.

And that is the aim of my Kaleidoscope Practice System. In your practice you will substitute focused work for hours of practice time, intention for repetition, quality for quantity. You will learn the power inherent in having a broader and deeper understanding of the music you play, and you will find freedom from the tyranny of the notes. You will practice, not striving for perfection, but rather focusing on the distinct skills that will make it possible for you to play a piece well from beginning to end.

Tune up, and let's get started...

Part One

The Woodshed



Photo by [Eric Sivesend](#), "[Woodshed](#)"
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Chapter 1

The World's Worst Music Student

“Necessity is the mother of invention.” - English proverb, sometimes ascribed to Plato

For every music teacher, the world's worst student is the one who won't practice.

As a student, I hated having bad lessons, but I hated practicing more. After I started teaching, I realized that I could help my students who were experiencing similar frustration by showing them the simple techniques I had developed to make my own practicing more interesting and more effective.

This is the story...

"Don't sell my piano!"

It's a miracle I actually became a professional harpist.

I started harp lessons when I was eight years old. I had already had four years of piano lessons, so now my parents considered me ready to start the harp lessons I had been begging for. I still don't really understand why they permitted it. Although it was clear that I loved playing and that I really wanted to play the harp, my piano lessons had hardly been smooth sailing.

Almost every week there was a battle over my piano practice. I just hated doing it. I didn't hate the piano; in fact, I still enjoy playing the piano just for fun. But I wouldn't practice.

My piano teacher wrote explicit instructions in my lesson book, which I didn't follow. I wouldn't even go near the piano if it was time to practice. My parents would finally get me to sit on the piano bench, and I would stare at the notes, unwilling

or unable to put any effort into practicing. They would set a timer for me. Not only did that not motivate me; it felt like punishment.

As a last resort, my parents would threaten to sell the piano. That was a tactic that inevitably sent me running to the piano, trying to play my scales with the tears running down my face, onto my hands and the keys. And this happened weekly. I still don't understand why they thought harp lessons (and a harp!) would be a good investment.

My harp practice habits were equally bad. I think now that I never understood exactly what I was supposed to be doing in my practice. I knew I was supposed to be playing pieces and hard parts of pieces over and over again, but I was somehow missing the point of the whole thing.

Summer of Decision

Then came the summer I turned 16, and my harp teacher decided it would be good for me to go to harp camp for six weeks. The "camp" was in Camden, Maine, and it was really just six weeks of nothing to do but practice and take two lessons per week.

I knew this was a make-or-break time for me. My teacher was exasperated; my parents helpless. It was all on me. Did I want to be a harpist, or not?

I did learn to practice that summer. I made myself do four hours of practice each morning, with the promise that then I could do whatever else I wanted. And all of a sudden, practicing made sense to me. I could see that it was a means to an end, not meaningless, or an end in itself, but a habit that enabled me to do what I wanted: to play the harp.

At Curtis

Fast forward ten years. I had become a harpist, graduated from the prestigious Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. I had a busy freelance performing career. I had a small teaching studio. And I had the world's best day gig: I was on the faculty at Curtis, teaching not harp, but music theory and ear training.

It had all come about by accident. The year after I graduated from Curtis, I got a phone call from one of my former music theory teachers there, asking if I would be interested in doing some theory teaching. It wasn't anything big, just teaching the few high school age (and younger) *wunderkind* who were studying at Curtis. Of course, I was interested. I loved teaching, and I could use some extra income.

By the time I decided to leave Curtis in 2001, I had been teaching theory and ear training for nineteen years. I was acting co-chair of the Musical Studies Department. I had taught some of the world's greatest rising classical music stars in my classes. And I had learned a lot about teaching and about how and why students learn.

Less What, More Why

Teaching ear training is not a glamour job. Most students don't like it. Some consider it completely a waste of time. (I maintain that it is the most important skill for any musician to develop, but that's a story for another book.) And almost every music student would rather be practicing.

Ear training classes can be dull and painful, filled with drills and dictation and assignments that must be learned at home and performed in class. While I couldn't change the curriculum, I found I could make the classes better, and make the material seem more relevant, when I emphasized how what we were doing would yield results that would benefit the students in their playing. The more we focused on WHY we were doing this, and HOW our methods would achieve results, the easier it was for the students to commit to the work.

I began applying the same principles in my private harp teaching.

When practicing was not about the WHAT, but about the HOW and the WHY, my students made faster progress. Perhaps their progress was due in part to the fact that they told me it was easier to practice. They were more cheerful about sitting down to practice and keeping at it, when they knew why they were doing it.

And the more specific our WHYs became, the better their results. Each lesson was less a review on what they should have accomplished during the week, and more a check and charting the next step they were to take. It was exciting for me to see my students move forward quickly, in some cases, very quickly, and to see them enjoy their harp playing in new ways.

My mission became this:

- to understand what actually motivates us to make progress,
- to learn how to speed up the practicing process, and
- to redirect our practice methods so that they are focused on the end result of performance.

But first, I had to find out what we were doing wrong.