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By Kelly Williamson

# Suzuki Flute Students on Practicing

In April, I was due to be absent from my home studio to teach at the Autumn Festival in Melbourne, Australia. I managed to schedule my travel plans so that the majority of my students would miss only one week of lessons, although that did mean that I would miss two rehearsals with the local orchestra and not have much time to sight-see in Australia. Luckily, my kind hostess, Julia Breen, made the most of my limited free time, and took me to see some lovely sights, including the Healesville Sanctuary, and on a beautiful afternoon walk along the beach on my last day in Melbourne. Despite quite a lot of unusually inclement weather during my nine-day trip, I got some gorgeous pictures of Australia's famous animals and the sunset on the pier. It was, as always, an excellent opportunity to spend time with students and colleagues in other parts of the world, and I had many interesting stories to bring back to my students at home—along with some fabulous Australian animal stamps given to me by the teacher participants. My students and I had a great time making exotic animal tracks all over their lesson notes, and any other spare pieces of paper that we could get our hands on.

I made sure all my students had specific goals to work on during the week I would be away, and as part of their practice projects, I gave them a questionnaire on the subject. My objective was to get them thinking about what they are supposed to do during their time away from the lesson. I also told them that their answers would be used for an article to help other kids to think constructively about practicing.

The answers were, as expected, interesting. They showed that even if students aren't always doing all the things they should be doing, at least they know they should be doing them! Overall, they produced an excellent document about practice activities and offered a few suggestions for lessons. Here are the questions I asked, with some of their answers.

## What is supposed to take place at lessons?

- During lessons, we practice scales, work on recent pieces, sight-read duets and sometimes work on improvisation. We also work on improving sound and posture.
- At lessons, students are supposed to be ready to learn new concepts. Teachers will help with techniques or rhythms that the student is struggling with. In lessons, teachers move on from what they taught last lesson (if the student has practiced) to future goals.
- Review pieces; help improve sound overall and places where the student has trouble in pieces ... Also we talk about musical theory.

- We go over what we practiced. Our teacher helps us with challenging parts of the piece we are learning. We also sight read, which is good for challenging my reading and rhythm abilities. The last thing that is supposed to take place at lessons is learning theory and other useful tools to increase my ability to play well.
- At lessons, you are supposed to learn, practice, play beautiful music, and have fun!

## What is supposed to happen during home practice?

- At home, you are supposed to practice tonalization, use your metronome, practice until you get it right, and practice like you're performing in a concert. And listen to the CD.
- Review scales and arpeggios; listen to the CD; if possible, play with the piano; review all pieces; non-stop practicing for at least thirty minutes. [This last represents a personal goal for that student.]
- We practice what we did during our lesson and try to improve all skills. If we have a piece we are working on, we practice that piece and difficult parts in it. In home practice, one can also review their theory or anything else covered in class.
- At home practices, students are supposed to practice what the teacher has told them to focus on and try out new technique. It is also a time to mess around with music you may have found on the internet or in a non-Suzuki book (*Harry Potter*, etc.).
- You are supposed to practice every day and listen to your CD and tune and try hard.

## What specific activities might be considered “practice?”

- Listening to the CD, tuning, practicing songs from the beginning of flute.
- Some specific activities that are considered ‘practice’ could be to listen to your CD, play scales and the piece you are working on, and maybe even some songs from Book One.
- Anything that has to do with improving sound, breath, pieces, or scales would be practice, because they all benefit our playing.
- Scales, arpeggios, repetitions of difficult parts of pieces you are learning. Practice is really just reviewing your skills in any way you feel will benefit you the most. For a piece, I work on the tricky parts, but I also practice my tone by playing scales.

## Do you think a teacher has responsibilities to their students? What might some of those responsibilities be? Do you think a student has responsibilities, too?

- Yes, I think that a teacher has responsibilities, and they are to teach you and help you. I also think students have responsibilities, and they are to practice daily and to do your best.



Kelly's photos from Melbourne, Australia.

- I think teachers should not put too much pressure on students, but let them learn at their own pace. Students also, though, need to practice—it isn't fair for the teacher to have to re-teach the same thing each lesson. Students should also be respectful; the teacher doesn't have to teach them!
- Kelly has lots of responsibilities. She has to correct what students do wrong with the flute and give notes for us to practice every day. Well, certain students will if they don't practice.
- I believe a teacher does have responsibilities to their students, including making sure that they are teaching their students what they should be learning and to instruct them on how to improve. However, a student has responsibilities to practice and listen to their teacher's advice.
- The teacher must help the student and be able to answer any questions the student has. They have to help the student to play to the best of their ability and challenge them to do this. The student must practice and remember what their teacher has taught them. They must always try to play their best and improve a little each week. The student also has the responsibility of challenging themselves when they think they are ready. (This helps them improve their skill.)

**Do you have any other ideas about flute lessons and practicing that you'd like to share with other students?**

- Continue to practice and you will get better.
- Always end with some piece you love to play to end on a "good note."
- If you don't feel like practicing try cleaning your instrument and this might put you in the mood to play.
- A lesson is the time to show your teacher how much you have improved, so make sure to make every practice count!
- Flute is very fun to play. It gets hard but if you practice then you'll get a lot better.
- I find it easier to play easier songs/songs you like while improving posture/sound. Then you can play the songs you've been working

- on when you're done warming up. Also, if you get frustrated, take a break and try again later.
- Playing on just your mouthpiece or using the whole flute are [both] good ways to practice tone. If you are having trouble with a fingering like F-sharp to D you can just use the keys and not blow into the flute.

Then, there were a few personal comments or requests, and notes from the rogue gallery... (I did ask.)

- I think that we should try doing some Beatles songs in group lessons and in individual, too!
- I like it when teachers make lessons fun, using things like competitions, solo time, and games to learn new pieces or show off your own talent.
- We should get to sit on chairs!!! And if possible we can maybe Skype with Kenichi!!! Possibly when it gets warmer we could go outside and practice or play volleyball!!!

The students who participated take lessons at the Suzuki Academy at Nancy Campbell Collegiate in London, Ontario, Canada. They are all between ten and sixteen years of age, and have been playing the flute from seven months to eight years. I would like to thank them for their frank and thoughtful answers, and for their many words of wisdom on the important and ever-present subject of practicing.

I would also like to congratulate the flute students in Melbourne for their excellent attention to review! It was a great pleasure to work with thirty-four students from Books One through Ten, about a dozen of whom were working in Book Seven and above, and to be able to ask for any piece in any book in repertoire class—and get it. They were a very good example for the teachers who were there for teacher development. Good job, everyone! ☺

Kelly Williamson holds a BM (performance) with distinction from McGill University and an MM from l'Université de Montréal. Influential teachers include Tim Hutchins, Denis Bluteau, Toshio Takahashi, Geoffrey Gilbert and Peter Lloyd. She was a freelance musician in Montreal for many years, maintaining a studio of twenty-five private students, and was also Suzuki Flute Coordinator at the McGill Conservatory, before relocating to London, Ontario. Kelly has been a frequent clinician and festival adjudicator, and is invited to teach at workshops in Canada, the US, South America and Tanzania. She was appointed as a Teacher Trainer in May 2006, and contributes regularly to the ASJ.

