

Note: This article appeared in the *Jazz Education Journal*

Summit in Savannah: Insights about organizing effective and efficient practice sessions

By James Ketch

During the weekend of March 29-30, 2006 Rob Gibson, Executive Director of the Savannah Music Festival hosted a weekend workshop for high school jazz bands from Georgia and South Carolina. The line-up of clinicians included the Marcus Roberts Trio (Marcus Roberts, piano; Roland Guerin, bass; Jason Marsalis, drums), trombonist Wycliffe Gordon, tenor saxophonist Don Braden, and trumpeter Jim Ketch. The schedule for the two days was busy and productive. During the “down time” between band sessions I asked each artist to respond to the following question:

What is the one thing you have learned about practicing most effectively and efficiently?

Fortunately for all of us, the musicians were generous with their time and answers. Here are paraphrased reports of the responses rendered by the artists listed above.

Marcus Roberts

The comments offered by Marcus reveal a keen intellect at work. The relaxed freedom Marcus exhibits on stage and on recordings emerges after the practicing is done.

- *You must always create a very clear vision of why you are practicing what you are practicing. Ask yourself: What are the technical skills I am trying to improve in this practice session? What musical problems am I trying to solve in this practice session? What principles in the composition am I trying to unlock and understand in this practice session?*
- *Know that we practice something so that the concepts involved in the assigned task become things that we completely understand and know in our mind.*

Every artist seeks to create pathways for visualizing success in performance. Here’s a glimpse of the attitudes Marcus carries into both practice sessions and performances.

- *I seek to teach myself to see the music in my head.*
- *I imagine the music is circling round me and through me.*
- *As a performer, I view myself as just being there, manipulating the moments in the music as the form of the composition goes by.*
- *I have a vision of what came before, knowledge of what is happening in the chord progression at the present, and a sense of where I might like to take the music in the future.*

In his final comments, Marcus begins to outline concrete elements that must be developed through training.

- *I practice very tangible things; I must understand what is going on rhythmically, melodically, and harmonically in the music. So I create exercises to specifically understand these elements. I must develop the muscular control over the piano in each of the categories mentioned above. To enable this mastery, I practice with a very clear tempo while using jazz syntax at all times. I make sure that I use clear tempo and jazz syntax to unravel all practice challenges.*

The final step for Marcus is to commit everything he has practiced and studied to memory.

- *Finally, I try to memorize everything so that at some point I no longer have to consider notes and rhythms. I want it in my head so that I don't have to think about it in terms of notes and rhythms.*

Wycliffe Gordon

Wycliffe is a commanding presence in a clinic. He is an amazing trombonist and a very accomplished pianist. His comments connect strongly to his roots in gospel music and to connecting the singing voice to the physical instrument. His unmistakable voice on trombone lends immediate authority to his comments.

- *The most important element is to develop a consistent practice schedule. This schedule should include work for at least six days per week.*
- *If you can sing something, you can play it. Regardless of level, the more you develop your singing, the more devices you will develop when you are playing. Through the singing of melody you will begin to develop a better way of hearing how to phrase something you wish to play. For wind players, singing helps us focus more on our breathing. I find that singing phrases helps me connect phrase to phrase on my instrument more efficiently. If you work to articulate something through singing (high to low, low to high; soft to loud, loud to soft; single tongue legato/staccato; double/triple tongue, etc.) you will increasingly discover that these skills will transfer to your instrument.*
- *In summary: Create a consistent daily practice schedule and stick to it. Sing to play.*

Two months after our Savannah Music Festival Workshop, I was fortunate to have Wycliffe visit the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for several days. He offered several clinic sessions and I took notes at both. Here are some additional thoughts he shared about the music.

- *Work on specific items intently for periods of say, five minutes. As an example, work on being able to accurately sing the melody to a tune. Concentrate on time and intonation. Learn to sing very accurately.*
- *In ensemble work, bands must learn to breathe together. Bands that breathe together, articulate together, and release notes together, always sound better.*

- *The best tools we have for practice sessions are the metronome, tape recorder, and piano. Use them each and every day. Wind players should practice in front of a mirror a bit each day. We need to observe what we are doing.*
- *On piano, start with voicing the chords to a tune in root position.*
- *For singing, sustain the roots of each chord as you sing the melody of a tune.*
- *Our singing goals should include: The melody of the tune, the roots of the chords, and the quality (arpeggios) of each chord.*
- *Words we need to eliminate from our music and practice vocabulary: Can't and hard.*
- *Work on your weaknesses. Don't be complacent and practice only to your strengths.*

Don Braden

I have known Don through our work on the faculty of the Jamey Aebersold Summer Jazz Workshop. Don has a magnificent sound on tenor saxophone. He is a most articulate speaker. It is easy to view the parallels between Don's command of the English language and the jazz language.

- *I view practicing as involving three Ps: Prioritize, Plan, and Prepare.*
- *To prioritize, one must determine the most important elements to practice, and which element (or elements) will serve as the focus for any individual practice session. For example, elements for a saxophonist may be: sound (the practicing of long tones); rhythmic practice (metronome use); articulation practice (gaining command of various tonguing and slurring patterns); or chord/scale language.*
- *Planning involves the organization of those priority items into the time frames available. The dedicated musician should think in terms of daily, weekly, and monthly time segments. Planning should also include the establishing of goals and perhaps even the rewards for the attainment of those goals.*
- *Preparation links the above two elements to the professional world. Preparation may include the woodshedding of charts that will be called on an upcoming gig. This will involve working on solo parts as well as on demanding ensemble sections. By doing this, a player also prepares for public performances of unrehearsed music.*

As Don finished his comments, and as we were preparing to work with the next band at the Savannah Music Festival, he added, in conclusion, a fourth "P": Passionate playing.

- *Every practice session needs to involve moments of real passionate playing. We must practice creating the emotional plateaus to which we wish to climb in our performances.*

Roland Guerin

Roland is a wonderfully talented bassist working with the Marcus Roberts Trio. He was forthcoming in his comments and supportive of the notion of sharing important

information with students and educators. These are the natural attributes of a great bassist: Supporting the ensemble and the music at all times with great time, a strong groove, and wonderful lines.

Roland strongly embraces the notion of multi-tasking. He increases the value of any single practice unit by identifying all the elements of musicianship that he can seek to further refine in that practice session.

- *I begin by selecting a composition that I want to study and practice. Within that composition, I will: a) learn the melody, b) play the melody with the bow to improve my Arco technique, c) focus on intonation as I learn the melody with the bow, d) play the melody pizzicato, 5) play the melody in all three registers (low, medium, high/thumb position) of the bass, 6) play this melody at a variety of tempi to work hard on my time, 7) play the melody at different volume levels, and 8) play the melody with a variety of rhythmic feels including: straight, swing feel, strong 2 and 4 backbeat feel etc.*
- *Tone and intonation is the focus of all the above.*

Roland then begins to explore the harmonic elements of the composition.

- *I sit down at the piano and play through the chord root motions.*
- *I then play the roots in the left hand, while I play the melody in the right hand.*
- *On the bass, I begin to learn the chord progression and chord qualities by building triads on each chord. Initially, I move through the tune using root position triads (arpeggios on 1-3-5). Then I use 1st inversion triads (3-5-1), followed by 2nd inversion triads (5-1-3). Once again, I take the time to do these three sets of triadic exercises in each of the three registers on the bass (multitasking principles again emerge).*

After practicing triads, Roland intimated that he is really eager to start walking bass lines. This methodical work through all the triadic structures in all registers, and at a variety of tempi, has served to feed his ears imaginative bass line possibilities.

- *I use a number of digital ideas for creating and connecting bass lines. Ideas flow from the root or the 3rd of the chord. I can connect these chords with whole step or half-step motion (either ascending or descending).*
- *I practice bass lines in all three registers so that I open my ears to hearing these sounds as options at any given moment in time.*

Roland also spoke on soloing.

- *I enjoy practicing phrase motions in which I identify a) where I wish to start (the 3rd of the chord, for example), b) where I wish to have the line go (up to the 11th for example), and c) where I might wish that phrase idea to land (resolving to the 9th of the next chord, for example).*

Although Roland did not state this, I felt that he was describing how he could work with solo materials in the manner of a composer, creating shapes that had some logical architectural structure and design.

In concluding, Roland stated that practicing should have a beginning and an end.

- *I want to outline my practice session, get to the work, and then move on to the next event in my life, whether it be mowing the lawn, or cooking, or taking care of my two sons. I set my goals and complete the work.*

Jason Marsalis

Sharing time in conversation with Jason is an absolute delight. He is one of the most intellectually curious musicians I have ever known. He listened very intently to each musician in clinic sessions and often commented after the session about some specific element of a clinic teaching moment. I was impressed with how eager he was to develop a very comprehensive pedagogy of teaching and learning devices. It is an attribute to be admired.

- *Practicing is about identifying and solving problems. The goal of a practice session is to create and execute effective solutions to identified problems.*

Jason next spoke of what I have labeled “practice groups and multi-tasking.”

- *I like to create time blocks where I focus intently on detailed practice elements. Some examples: a) I could focus for a 10-minute period just on my snare drum, practicing my rudiments, b) I could isolate on foot skill for 10 minutes by working on bass drum and hi-hat cymbal techniques, and c) I could create a third time block and work on the clarity of my swing on my ride cymbal. In a concise 30-minute practice block I have fashioned three 10-minute units on very specific drumming elements/skills. If I have more time available, I have the option of increasing the amount of time in some or all of the groups.*

This first response led Jason to speak about organizing the practice session.

- *The performer must develop the skill to assess, based on the available time for an individual practice session, just how much material can be examined in that practice period. You must start the session knowing what can be adequately covered in the allotted time.*
- *By using time effectively and by identifying and creating needed practice groups of materials, a performer can efficiently maximize the outcomes of daily practice sessions.*

Jim Ketch

It is clear from reading the ideas on efficient and effective practicing placed forth by Marcus, Wycliffe, Don, Roland, and Jason, that each artist embraces practicing as an essential, regular, and ongoing responsibility. The animation with which each artist spoke left me with the notion that to these musicians, practicing is an opportunity, not a chore. Practice sessions for artists of this level serve to solve problems, expand musical horizons, and unlock creative potential. It is a way of life!

The collective wisdom of our artists might be summarized as follows:

- *Develop the ability to organize a practice session where specific problem areas or musical elements are addressed. Take time to think about your skill levels and use that time to ascertain areas that need addressing. Craft specific studies and exercises that deal with the identified issue areas.*
- *Practice in the manner you wish to perform. Muscular habits form quickly. Use a metronome to reinforce good time and use jazz syntax to develop an authentic voice on your instrument.*
- *The singing voice and piano are amazing tools to accelerate your progress. Use them daily in your practicing. Allow your singing voice to elevate the conception of what you seek to create on your instrument.*
- *Concentrate during practice sessions. Your preparation before a session and your execution during a practice session will ultimately reveal how well prepared you are to perform publicly.*
- *Multitask whenever possible in your practice sessions. Identify the elements of great musicianship you admire in artists (sound, intonation, subdivision of time, swing, flexibility, etc.) and incorporate these into exercises and studies you practice.*
- *Divide your practice time into useful and logical practice groups. The intensity of these sessions will increase resulting from the specific focus you have created as a learning outcome for that session.*

In closing, I would like to acknowledge jazz piano master Harry Pickens for coaching me to ask very specific questions of artists during interviews. I would also like to thank my colleagues Marcus Roberts, Roland Guerin, Jason Marsalis, Don Braden, and Wycliffe Gordon for their time, expertise, and above all, their great music.

Biography

James Ketch is Director of Jazz Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is a faculty member for the Jamey Aebersold Summer Jazz Workshop, a faculty member and consultant for the Savannah Music Festival, a clinician for Bach trumpets and Conn-Selmer, and Music Director of the North Carolina Jazz Repertory Orchestra. Mr. Ketch and the artists discussed in this article will appear March 29-30 in Savannah, Georgia, during the 2007 Savannah Music Festival.