# Whiling Away the Hours

"There are two means of refuge from the misery of life: music and cats."

- Albert Schweitzer

More important than the guidance of a teacher in helping a student figure out what to practice is helping a student figure out HOW to practice. The what part is easy, the how part is a very different story. I believe one reason for this is most of us quite naturally bring our experience as a listener to music into our experience as a player of music. We're used to hitting play and enjoying a song from start to finish at its regular tempo. It tells us a story with a recognizable beginning, middle and end. So when we first begin practicing we take the same approach. We play whatever we're working on from beginning to end, over and over with plenty of bumps in the road. We likely back up for a moment to smooth out those bumps and then move onward. After hundreds or thousands of run throughs we might even have it memorized. This is often how we WANT to practice. Again, I think it has a lot to do with our experiences as a listener. It may feel enjoyable in the moment but is not an effective way to practice in the big picture. I call it the brute force method because it often leaves us with a feeling like we've been beating our head against the wall. We can be left discouraged, wondering why all the time we've been putting in hasn't been paying off as we hoped.

The techniques and methods that are most effective in practice are skills we need to learn and develop: playing slowly and at a variety of tempos, breaking things apart into small chunks or phrases, putting extra focus into the middle and ending of the song where we are less likely to spend cumulative time, playing something correctly and with ease at least three times (more is better) before moving on, not practicing the same thing day after day when we are getting diminishing returns but using variety as a way to allow ourselves time to process while staying engaged. None of this comes easy or natural. In fact, refining these techniques and others takes sustained time and effort. However, anyone who does so will see such resulting growth that the struggle will be well worth it and the sustained future application easy. Once you experience the

difference, you won't return to less effective practice habits and the depth of enjoyment you get from your *playing* in a non-practice context will be greatly elevated.

Of course, most of you have heard me harp on these ideas quite often. Sometimes I see them applied to great success and other times dismissed in favor of personal preference for what feels "fun" in the moment. Fun is important but the harsh truth is that sometimes practice isn't fun, it's challenging. However, as I alluded to above, the fun gets way deeper on the other side of the challenge.

These days, there has been a lot written about practice from lifelong musicians but also from neuroscientists. Sometimes from both! This combines the deep wisdom of experience and the benefits of scientific research. I've been interested in the topic for a long time and have read and listened to everything I can to help further educate myself as a musician and teacher. What can be really satisfying is that sometimes I stumble upon an insight through the hard lessons of experiential learning to then find that insight confirmed from the field of neuroscience. Other times, the insight arrives from the maestro or PhD and saves me (and hopefully you) a lot of future grief.

Really this essay has been the longest book blurb of all time. Last spring, my long-term and dedicated student Joe, who is a professor at Amherst College in Massachusetts, attended a guest lecture given for the music department. Molly Gebrian holds degrees in both music and neuroscience and was giving a presentation on her new book *Learn Faster, Perform Better*. Joe was kind enough to mail me a copy. Once I started reading it, I had to force myself not to treat it like a page turner even though it is dense with information. My natural interest in the topic made me want to careen from page to page. However, I realized it was a book much better digested slowly so that each new realization could be applied and tested.

Recently, another newer but equally dedicated student, Michael, who I had recommended the book to mentioned how much it has been helping him develop his practice, find extra motivation to apply some of the practice techniques that I had already suggested during lessons and apply new ones as well. So: listen to me! Listen to Joe. Listen to Michael. And get yourself a copy of *Learn Faster, Perform Better* and listen to Dr. Gebrian. It is geared towards music students studying at conservatory but is easily applicable for all music students.

Lastly, as we enter 2026, I want to encourage you to pause and reflect. As I mentioned last year, I'm not one for resolutions but I am always one for reflection and this is a good time of year for it. Thanks to all of you who took the time to respond to my in-depth prompts last year. I read them numerous times throughout the year to check in with how we were doing and to help inform how we spent our time in lessons. This year, I'd like to keep it much simpler. First, a few questions to mull over. If you want to share your responses with me, I welcome that. If not, take some time just to ponder them.

After your musical journey through 2025, where did you end up? Where did you begin? Go backwards. How were the two different?

What surprised you about your musical journey in 2025?

What was your musical highlight in 2025?

Lastly, a goal for 2026: pick up your instrument EVERY DAY and see where it takes you. Make that a serious goal: every day. I will even allow that picking up your instrument and sitting for a moment in intentional silence counts. Practicing silence is part of practicing music. Be open, be curious, let go of your opinions, expectations and evaluations. Just see where the act of picking up your instrument on a daily basis takes you. Music is an infinitude for each of us as individuals and the more we let our journey with it unfold naturally, the more we will find ourselves excited and surprised by where it takes us. We may find that the musician we are meant to be is not the one we thought we wanted to be when we started out and that is actually a wonderful discovery. Take a journey with me into *The Realm of Possibility*. We'll talk more about that next month.