Roll Tape

"Our ears lie…especially under pressure. For one, we don't hear ourselves as objectively as we think we do. Record yourself, and you'll notice things on the recording that you never noticed under your ear."

- Noa Kageyama

One simple and highly effective way to enhance the quality of your practice as well as track your development over time is to develop a regular habit of recording yourself. Begin with an easily accomplished goal: record a 20 minute stream of consciousness excerpt from your practice once a month. As the title above suggests, just "roll tape." The point is to begin the recording and then forget about it so you can capture as authentic a representation of your normal practice as possible. Ideally, you'll want to be practicing longer than 20 minutes which will allow you to record the heart of your practice session, somewhere between warming up and cooling down.

The next step is to store the recording and not listen to it for at least a week or more. By the time you listen to it, you want to have forgotten any specific associations you might have had with that particular practice session. This will allow you to listen with fresh ears and no bias created by whatever emotional state or inner-dialogue you might have been experiencing that day. Set aside some time to listen deeply. You don't have to listen to all 20 minutes. Perhaps spend 5-10 minutes scanning through various excerpts. You might feel some resistance toward doing this because maybe it feels awkward to listen to yourself. Most of us have had the bizarre experience of hearing our voice on a recording. It sounds so different outside of our own head! However, hear it enough and we begin to acclimate until it doesn't shock us like it does at first.

Immersed in the act of music making, we have a deeply subjective experience. Not only are we trying to concentrate on the mental and physical tasks at hand but we are trying to listen, evaluate and adjust all while managing our inner-dialogue. We may have thoughts as wide ranging as, "Oh, that sounded good… Uh oh, that difficult passage is coming up… Argh, flubbed it again… I'm never going to get better… Chris would say to slow down and repeat that part again… Who cares! I don't have to do what

he tells me! I think I forgot to change the laundry over… I never did find that missing sock… Hey, I'm sounding pretty great now… Oh no, now that I had that thought I messed up again." There is so much happening at once, it just isn't easy to listen, let alone objectively.

When we listen outside of the act of playing, what we hear is the truth. That's how we sound. We will hear all our weaknesses that we might not like to acknowledge or that we glaze past while practicing. However and maybe more importantly, we will also be surprised to hear that we sound good! This is why it's important to not listen right away. I've lost count of how many times I've thought I played horribly at a performance only to then hear a recording or see a video and be shocked by how much better it sounds than it did in my memory. Sometimes, our self-criticism may be turned up to 11 and when that's the case, it may be more the result of a foul mental state than an accurate assessment of what we *think* we're hearing. It might even be as random as our finger landing awkwardly on a note, the note sounding just fine but our brain registering the physical awkwardness as "bad" and thereby the entire experience as "bad." It wasn't actually a mistake, we just thought it was. Until we listen. By then, we've moved on from that foul mood and we've forgotten about that awkward moment we falsely labeled as a mistake. By listening with a clean slate, we will hear everything differently.

Over the course of years, you can develop a small library of recordings. This will allow you to compare this month's recording to the same month of the prior year or even further back. Then you can really hear how you've grown. If you've been practicing every day, you absolutely will notice a difference. I can always tell quite easily how much a student has practiced between lessons. My samples of your playing are weekly at best. On the other hand, you're present for *every moment* which makes it seem like you're not improving or at best, watching the grass grow. Very often, before playing something a student will tell me about how little progress they've made and how my expectations should be very low. Sometimes, these prefaces have me fearing for the worst. However, most of the time, it sounds much better than I had been led to believe it would. The progress is obvious to me but not to the student. So stop wondering if you're actually getting better and begin collecting evidence!

Finally, I've mentioned it before but it's worth mentioning again that another highly effective way to use the recording experience is to help simulate the anxiety we might experience during performance. This is the opposite of "roll tape." In this case, you are creating a high stakes performance by committing to hitting record, performing your chosen song start to finish - no matter what - and then stopping the recording. If you make a mistake right away, you just have to push forward. It will probably be more nerve wracking than you expect which is exactly what you want. If you do this regularly enough, eventually you are going to have some good performances and some pleasing recordings. This can become another valuable library that will allow you to document your musical journey. You can track your growth in the same ways as earlier but also your changing repertoire and tastes. It can be a lot of fun to listen back in 5 years and think, "Oh, I used to love playing that song but I've kind of forgotten about it because I fell in love with a bunch of other songs."

Push past the resistance, make this a regular habit and you won't regret it. Like so many worthwhile musical habits, it just requires small doses of determination in the short term and consistency in the long term. It will bring insight, enhance your practice, accelerate your development and leave you with a growing audio journal of your musical experiences.