

Courtesy of

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### **CONTENTS** (click each internal Link):

- I. Blog: “Practicing Without Your Instrument?”**
- II. Blog: “Listening vs. *Hearing*”**
- III. Blog: "Slow Practice”**
- IV. Guidesheet for NY Students: NYSSMA Solo Requirements in Detail**
- V. Scale Template option**

# PRACTICING WITHOUT YOUR INSTRUMENT?

*Joel Smales*

What?! Excuse me? How can you possibly accomplish anything if you don't have your sticks in hand, working diligently to improve your technique and produce beautiful sound on your instrument? Isn't that contradictory to what we do as musicians? I may as well not practice at all if I can't be using my instrument! Where's the remote?

Too often, I feel, we tend to focus too much of our energies on practicing *on* instruments and not enough time practicing *away* from the instrument. Don't get me wrong, it is vital and imperative that we practice on our instrument, learning notes, stickings, rhythms, sound, etc., but I feel there is another element and balance to practice we can apply and gain great results. Imagine the travelling/touring musician/concert soloist who does not have as much time to practice because their schedule does not allow for it or their instrument is just too cumbersome to set up in their hotel room (i.e. marimba or timpani). What is that person to do? I understand that the vast majority of us do not have the problem of being so busy on our "tour schedules" that we are running from concert hall to concert hall and airport to airport. Regardless, we can learn from the masters an understanding of how to practice away from our instrument. What would I do, if all of a sudden I need to learn some music and did not have the "instrument time" on my hands to practice? I would like to share those ideas with you.

**Score study.** Studying the score of the music you are learning, or have learned for that matter (it's funny how we can "learn" a piece of music only to find out later we learned it incorrectly), is essential to gain a greater grasp on the composer's intentions, catch some subtle nuances, and analyze the musical form, structure and theory. We can "practice" the piece of music in our head while reading the score, singing out loud or to yourself the way the music should be played. With score study, you can mark specific parts in your music for stickings, phrasing, dynamics, etc. We gain a broader scope of the piece of music before us when we take the time to study it apart from our instrument. Now we can take that newly gained knowledge and insight and apply it when we get back with our instrument.

**Counting.** Are there some difficult rhythmic passages that trouble you or some that you just fake your way through? Work away from the instrument and analyze the counts, write them in, if need be, in pencil. Is it a drumset passage that has multiple limbs playing at once? If so, try writing out the entire rhythmic figure on one line rather than on multiple lines as in drumset notation. This way, it is easier to see the rhythm as a whole, then apply it to the different components of the drumset. I have a motto: *If you can count it, you can play it.* I truly believe that fully understanding the counts for any rhythmic passage enables you to understand its concept and make it a breeze to perform. Count the rhythm out loud while you play. What a terrific advantage we have over wind players who have to blow into their horns and cannot count out loud. It adds another independence/coordination dimension to your playing, allows you to better understand the rhythms, and for teachers, shows if the student is counting correctly, if at all! Once you can count a rhythmic passage, all you have to do is make your sticks/mallets play what you counted – perform what you studied/verbalized. This is much better than fumbling through a difficult rhythmic passage over and over, only reinforcing the wrong way to play it. Step back from the execution of the music, study it, analyze it, then apply it to performing, slowly at first if need be.

**Singing.** No Way!! I am a percussionist, not an opera singer! I like to hit things, not vocalize! Well, there is an element of singing your parts that will help you when away from your instrument. I'm not suggesting you drop everything and go get some voice lessons. But singing the music out loud and to yourself can prove quite helpful when it comes time to get back to your instrument. Singing, humming, vocalizing, scating "digga-digga-daka-du-doom" is all what I call singing your music. And of course, this can be out loud or to yourself, both of which are useful. Singing the melodic line of a marimba piece can help you better understand the phrasing, dynamic flow and help you add your own personal touches to the piece since your concentration is not on which mallet plays what note, or where do you stand and place your hands for that ridiculous interval. Singing allows you, as does counting, to better understand the rhythmic content. If I can sing the music to myself before sight-reading, I have a much better chance of playing it correctly. Whether it is tonal music you are working on or purely rhythmic, singing through the passage is practicing the music, reinforcing what you will do when you put the mallets in your hand to play.

Just be sure to sing it accurately. So many times I have noticed that my students and myself consistently sing a wrong note(s), wrong rhythm(s) or just stop when a difficult passage comes along. We often sing the same mistake that we make when playing! I attribute this to the mental aspect of practice. There really is no reason why, when we are singing a passage to ourselves, we should make mistakes (if we know how it is supposed to go). Singing is the opportunity for us to reinforce to ourselves that we can perform accurately and correctly. When singing, we should make every effort to correct the mistakes we make when practicing, thus providing a mental correction to the physical problem. Singing is our great opportunity to practice a piece in its entirety and practice it correctly, with correct rhythms, pitches, dynamics, etc. Don't pass up this vital component to practice.

**Mapping.** When planning a trip where you will be driving, it is often best to plan a route ahead of time. One way to plan is to study a map before your journey. When you plan your routes, exits and stay-overs, you are more prepared before you begin. You won't be flying down the highway frantically reading a map hoping you don't miss that important exit. It would be crazy to head off on a trip, (although I have relatives I deem nuts who do this!), without making the necessary travel preparations ahead of time. When you know your route before you travel, you can anticipate what is ahead, and more comfortably travel your route. The same is true in music. We can map out our music. By studying the score, we can learn where a difficult tuning change takes place or where we need to switch from sticks to brushes. This is an important mental practice element that has proved quite useful when a piece of music has many tempo, meter, key, and instrument changes. I have found this to be extremely helpful when I am going over tunings for timpani. Often, the technical aspects of the piece are not difficult, but the tunings can be real tough. If I map out when and where I will tune, pencil in my changes and be aware of the changes by mapping, I am able to better perform the music with correct tuning changes. This concept also works well if you are performing a piece that calls for multiple instrument changes. I recently worked on a piece that called for eleven different percussion instruments, and switching back and forth between them often. The orchestra did not have a lot of rehearsal time for this piece. I had to study and map out when I would switch mallets, instruments, music, etc. Going into the rehearsal, I was better prepared for the changes between instruments because I knew the map I needed to take.

**Air Time.** I find this especially useful for playing any of the mallet instruments, but is useful for any instrument played. I utilize this and have my students do so too. I stand at the instrument in playing position, mallets in hand (or sometimes, no mallets), music in front of me, but instead of playing any notes on the instrument, I "air drum" them over the instrument and near the bar where I normally would play. This helps me with the flow of the piece, sticking consideration, body movement – all without playing any notes, especially incorrect ones! When I use this method of practice, I find that I stop less often when it comes time to practice by playing the notes. I also play it *perfectly* every time! How could I make a mistake if I'm not even hitting any bars? I have found this to be such a positive reinforcement for when I do strike the instrument.

For mallet players, especially beginners, I have found it works well to say note names out loud in rhythm for whatever music they are working on, whether it is from a method book, band music, solo, etc. Often, beginning mallet players have a difficult enough time identifying the note name on the page of music, then finding it on the mallet instrument, then playing it in rhythm/tempo. This can get quite frustrating for the beginner who isn't even comfortable finding the notes. Instead, take away the element of execution and just have them say the note name out loud in tempo/rhythm. This will reinforce their knowledge of note names and give them added confidence for when they play the notes with mallets in hand.

**Reflection.** This is especially helpful if you know a piece of music and do not need the music. Take some time away from the instrument in a comfy chair or lying down. Go through your whole performance. Envision yourself walking onto stage, breathing comfortably, sticks in hand, confident and comfortable. Then go through your entire piece in your head, playing perfectly, catching all the phrasing and dynamics, correct notes, extreme musicality, and playing a beautiful, well-enjoyed piece. If you do this, I believe you will find your performance to be a better one. Part of what we play involves our hands and feet; the rest comes from our heart and our mind. I know I definitely don't want to psyche myself out because I get too nervous or because I didn't have as much time to practice a piece. I want to psyche myself *up* for a great performance.

**Non-musical tasks.** As percussionists, it is important for us to be equally adept with both our right and left hands. It is not a bad idea to be as ambidextrous as possible. To accomplish this, I work on gaining strength, control and independence in my weak hand, resulting in more balanced ability between my hands, all without being at my instrument. I can open doors with my left hand, wash dishes with my left hand, work a screwdriver, brush my teeth, use a fork, etc. I have even tried writing left-handed. It can also be a great form of comic relief! Just be sure you do safe things! I had a student come to me and say, "I loved the idea of using my left hand to gain independence. I used the meat slicer at work with my left hand yesterday!" YIKES! Be creative, yet safe please. Think of what common tasks you are using your strong hand for that you could substitute with your weak hand. No sense in making your strong hand stronger and leaving the weaker in the dust. Take advantage of time away from your instrument to gain control and independence.

**Finally.** As I practice away from my instrument, my focus is not so much on the technical needs as it is on the overall musical scope of the piece. There is virtually no technique needed when practicing without your instrument. You can get away from "I have to spread my 3<sup>rd</sup> mallet extra in order to reach this interval while at the same time rotating my wrists so I don't keep clunking that wrong note and crescendo the first 3 beats, then repeat back to letter C", etc. Later when I am with my instrument, I can apply the technical, creating a stronger overall, improved and better-prepared musical performance. Do indeed practice on your instrument, but also try and use score study, counting, singing, mapping, air time, reflection and non musical tasks as well as ideas of your own to improve your playing. There are so many ways in which we as musicians can practice and gain more insight into our instrument, craft and music as a whole. Look for ideas and concepts to continually grow as musicians, being creative and opportunistic.

# Listening vs. Hearing

*Joel Smales*

Is there a difference between listening and hearing? Is hearing the same as listening? As musicians, we require our ears to be in the best shape possible, our ears must lead us toward the best tonality we can play, and our ears are used as music is played either in the background or with music that we are performing.

I heard a bird singing while walking through the park. I stopped to listen to the sounds the bird was making, the short high-pitched twitter, and the longer whirling tones. I heard my boss talking to me, but didn't listen so I didn't know the instructions he wanted me to follow. Uh-oh.

If I heard what my boss was saying, how come when I left his office, I didn't know what he wanted me to do? I feel this is because I only *heard* what he said and did not *listen* to what he said.

When I hear something, I may not necessarily need to be paying close attention to the sounds I hear. It may be a car passing, a mother talking to her child in the grocery store, music on the elevator. I hear the sounds, but I am not registering them as I would if I were listening. When I listen, I am actively involved with my ears to the sounds around me. I listen to the words my boss is saying so I understand what he wants me to do. I actively listen to the CD on my stereo, taking in all the sounds of the orchestra, noticing the highs and lows, the nuances, who has the melody and what is happening in the harmony. When I am listening, I am paying closer attention to the details of what is going into my ears.

So here I am playing in the first night of rehearsals for that weekend's performance. Am I using my ears to their fullest potential? Am I taking advantage of the opportunity to let my ears lead me to greater musical heights? Or I am just letting the music I am playing and the music around me to just pass me by, not paying careful attention to what is being said musically?

My main thought on this subject is that as a musician, I should be actively listening to the music that others and myself are making. I can then respond to the piano player in my jazz combo who is playing a rhythmic motif during one of her solos, I can determine how a figure should be played when the first trumpet in the orchestra interprets it a few measures before it is my turn to play that same figure. I can memorize a rhythmic pattern played for a few bars on a CD I am listening to because I have paid close attention to what was going into my ears.

I have played with musicians who were obviously not listening. I could have stopped and the music may have well gone on for quite some time before I (the drummer!) was noticed for stopping! It was obvious they weren't listening since I was trying to hold the tempo back, and they were a bull charging forward, uncontrollably. Had they been listening, they would have noticed the volume of the other musicians was significantly lower than their own and they could have adjusted. Had they been listening, they would have noticed that the bass player and I were trying to keep the tempo steady – the tempo that the tune started out. But no, they were only hearing the sounds around them and not reacting, but rather, like a horse with blinders on, focusing on only what they were doing.

I encourage my students to listen to recordings and digest the music on them. I also encourage them to hear the music – play it in the background and just have it there. Listening can be tiring. I don't want to be tired all the time. There is a time for listening and a time for hearing. I encourage my students in ensemble rehearsals to listen to all of the activity and individual parts being played around them –react to the others, beyond what is written on the page of music. Listen to yourself, your section, and the entire ensemble. Many of my students who have developed a keen sense of listening notice when their part does not sound right. They

often find a missed note or wrong rhythm in their part, a chord that doesn't match what the rest of the band is playing, etc. They know when to play their melodic line out a little more or draw back a bit to let the melody project more. They will realize that if seven saxophones are playing the same melodic line as our one French horn, then they should play softer so there is more blend. All of this because they are using their ears to listen and not just hear.

Some people may call listening hearing, and hearing listening. Either way, my point is that we must pay close attention to what sounds are around us and which ones must be given more careful attention – specifically when we are playing or conducting music.

Listen and react to what you are playing, don't just hear it.

# Slow Practice

*Joel Smales*

Have you ever been in a situation where you needed to learn a great deal of music or just one very difficult piece of music in a very short time? Have you found yourself making the same mistake over and over in a solo you are working on? Is there a sticking passage that you just can't get in your hands? Want to fix it? Try practicing slow.

I don't like eating cabbage, being stuck in traffic, cleaning windows or...practicing slow. Well, at least I *used* to not like practicing slow. I never liked practicing slow because I thought I wasn't getting anywhere musically. I thought that if everyone outside my practice room door hears me practicing slowly, they won't think I'm any good! If I am practicing slow, how will I be able to play the music up to tempo in just a few days?!

I no longer think that way. I have discovered that if I practice slowly, I will learn the material more quickly, efficiently, and with more accuracy and attention to detail. Practicing slow allows my hands and mind to learn the material and internalize it, so that later, my hands and mind work more on "auto-pilot," rather than hanging on for dear life.

I have a motto, "***The Slower You Practice, The Faster You Learn.***"

It's true. Practicing slow allows me more time to learn a specific sticking pattern, pay attention to dynamics and phrasing, play the correct notes with more accuracy and hear the music in its correct form. When all of these elements fall into place by practicing slow, I learn the music much faster. Once my hands and mind know the music, I can plug in my fast chops and play the music up to speed.

I never liked practicing slow until I discovered the tangible results slow practice provided. When I started practicing slow and saw how quickly I learned the material, I was convinced. I became determined to teach my students to practice slowly. Many students don't want to. They want to play the music either as fast as possible or as fast as they hear their favorite musician playing it. However, it doesn't take long to convince them. I choose a particularly difficult section of music (music I know they can play with some practice), and ask them to play it. They start and then make a mistake. They start again, same tempo, and usually the same mistake. Start a third time, more mistakes. I ask them to take it slower and they usually either stay at the same tempo, not realizing they haven't slowed down or take it only slightly slower, and continue to make mistakes. At this point, all that is happening is the student is getting frustrated and reinforcing their mistakes. When I point out that they haven't actually slowed down enough and give them a new slow tempo to play, they have much more success, often playing the entire section correctly the first time when practicing slowly. New converts to the school of slow practice.

Use a metronome and write down the different m.m. you use. You will slow down more using a metronome rather than just "trying" to slow down.

Remember, "**the slower you practice, the faster you learn!**" Practice slow and you will learn the music in less time and with greater accuracy. You will have less frustration, more positive music-making and reinforce the good, rather than mistakes.

Now about that cabbage...

# NYSSMA

## Solo Requirements

*EVERYONE who plays a SOLO SIGHTREADS!!!!*

Be sure to bring TWO original copies of your solo to NYSSMA!

### Brass/Woodwind

3 one octave scales from memory

Levels I - II: play any three major scales

Levels III - IV: prepare any seven major scales

Levels V - VI: Prepare fifteen major scales (enharmonic scales are Cb/B, F#/Gb, Db/C#)

### JAZZ SOLOS

Improvise using pre-recorded accompaniment. See Mr. Smales for improv. choices

All State Brass: Play a scale to show your range

### SNARE DRUM

When TWO stickings are listed (in the manual), students MAY prepare with EITHER sticking

#### Level I + II

Long Roll - closed only  
5 st roll  
9 st roll  
single paradiddle  
flam  
drag (ruff) (half drag)  
flam tap

#### Level III + IV

(level I/II and...)  
7 st roll  
single ratamacue  
13 st roll  
17 st roll  
double paradiddle  
single drag tap  
flamacue  
flam paradiddle  
lesson 25  
flam accent  
LONG ROLL - open-closed-open

#### Level V + VI

(level I,II, III,IV)  
6 st. roll  
15. st. roll  
drag paradiddle no. 1  
double drag (tap)  
double ratamacue  
triple ratamacue  
single stroke four (4 stroke ruff)  
10 st. roll  
flam paradiddle diddle  
drag paradiddle no 2  
11 st. roll  
LONG ROLL - open-closed-open



# MULTIPLE PERCUSSION

Sight-reading 3 lines only.

Prepare SD Rudiments (All State only)

All State sight-reads for Snare Drum AND Accessory Percussion

## TIMPANI REQUIREMENTS

### LEVEL I + II

Single Stroke Roll

(p - f - p)

Intervals - P4 or P5 up

from a G or A (on separate drums)

### LEVEL III + IV

Single Stroke Roll

(p - f - p)

Intervals - P4, P5, M3, M6 up

(2 drums)

### LEVEL V + VI

Roll - low drum pitch is given and student tunes low drum. Tune high drum according to interval given. Roll on low drum first (p-f-p), then roll on high drum (p-f-p)  
(20 seconds each drum)

Intervals - ALL major, minor and perfect intervals up to M6. Lower pitch is given, then student will *glissando* the same drum up to the given interval.

## MALLET REQUIREMENTS

3 scales from memory will be played.

**Levels I - II:** play C, F and G major scales and arpeggios 2 octaves

**Levels III - IV:** Prepare the F, G, A, Bb, C, D and Eb major scales and arpeggios

1. Play one scale rolled one octave ascending only as legato harmonic rolls in octaves with a cresc./decre. on each note.
2. Play the other 2 scales two octaves with arpeggios

**Levels V - VI:** Prepare all twelve major scales and arpeggios 2 octaves

1. Play one scale rolled one octave ascending only as legato harmonic rolls in octaves with a cresc./decre. on each note.
2. Play one scale 2 octaves with arpeggio
3. Play one scale in melodic thirds (not double stops) one octave ascending and descending

## NYSSMA DRUMSET REQUIREMENTS

Max 5 drums, minimum 4 drums

Demonstrate basic proficiency playing rock/funk, swing (4/4 and jazz waltz), World (Samba, Nanigo) and Ballad (brushes) Play 9 measures total: 4 measures of time, then a 4 measure break, then stop on downbeat of measure 9 in each style.

See Mr. Smales for tempos for each style. Play 9 meas total (4 bars time/4 bars fill, end on beat 1 of m. 9)

ALL STATE - see Mr. Smales for further details.

(Joel Smales)

# Scale Template

Concert	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>
	<b>F</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>B<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>G</b>
	<b>B<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>F</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>B<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>C</b>
	<b>E<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>F</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>A<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>B<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>F</b>
	<b>A<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>B<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>E<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>F</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>A<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>B<sup>b</sup></b>
	<b>D<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>E<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>F</b>	<b>G<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>A<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>B<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>E<sup>b</sup></b>
	<b>C<sup>#</sup></b>	<b>D<sup>#</sup></b>	<b>E<sup>#</sup></b>	<b>F<sup>#</sup></b>	<b>G<sup>#</sup></b>	<b>A<sup>#</sup></b>	<b>B<sup>#</sup></b>	<b>C<sup>#</sup></b>	<b>D<sup>#</sup></b>
	<b><u>G<sup>b</sup></u></b>	<b><u>A<sup>b</sup></u></b>	<b><u>B<sup>b</sup></u></b>	<b><u>C<sup>b</sup></u></b>	<b><u>D<sup>b</sup></u></b>	<b><u>E<sup>b</sup></u></b>	<b><u>F</u></b>	<b><u>G<sup>b</sup></u></b>	<b><u>A<sup>b</sup></u></b>
	<b><u>F<sup>#</sup></u></b>	<b><u>G<sup>#</sup></u></b>	<b><u>A<sup>#</sup></u></b>	<b><u>B</u></b>	<b><u>C<sup>#</sup></u></b>	<b><u>D<sup>#</sup></u></b>	<b><u>E<sup>#</sup></u></b>	<b><u>F<sup>#</sup></u></b>	<b><u>G<sup>#</sup></u></b>
	<b>B</b>	<b>C<sup>#</sup></b>	<b>D<sup>#</sup></b>	<b>E</b>	<b>F<sup>#</sup></b>	<b>G<sup>#</sup></b>	<b>A<sup>#</sup></b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C<sup>#</sup></b>
	<b>E</b>	<b>F<sup>#</sup></b>	<b>G<sup>#</sup></b>	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C<sup>#</sup></b>	<b>D<sup>#</sup></b>	<b>E</b>	<b>F<sup>#</sup></b>
	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C<sup>#</sup></b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>F<sup>#</sup></b>	<b>G<sup>#</sup></b>	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>
	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>F<sup>#</sup></b>	<b>G</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C<sup>#</sup></b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>
	<b>G</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>F<sup>#</sup></b>	<b>G</b>	<b>A</b>

CHROMATIC SCALE:

**G A<sup>b</sup>/G<sup>#</sup> A B<sup>b</sup> B C C<sup>#</sup>/D<sup>b</sup> D E<sup>b</sup> E F F<sup>#</sup>/G<sup>b</sup> G A<sup>b</sup>/G<sup>#</sup> A B<sup>b</sup>**

SCALE PATTERNS:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

(Joel Smales)