

## The Practice Journal

By: Joseph A. Guimaraes

To journal, or not to journal...?

I regret to inform you that this is almost never the question. Most, if not all will agree with the notion that purposeful practicing is, in fact, the best way to increase one's efficiency and product yield.

Whether you fabricate a mental "to-do list", or write one down on paper, you are in essence journaling. I for one am indifferent as to ones' personal approach as long as it works for that person.

With that said, I would encourage the written alternative as it allows for backtracking. The ability to reexamine one's study/practice habits is essential in order to prevent needless repetitions with the same unfavorable outcomes. My own ability to recall things even in the near past is somewhat questionable, and for this reason – among others – I resort to writing most things down.

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I was first introduced to the idea of journaling during my undergraduate studies by one of my professors. A journal was graciously given to me with the verbal instruction to "journal!". Maybe I was naïve at the time, but I must admit, I wasn't too sure what I was expected to write.

The first few days I wrote everything down. The following week I filled a page, followed by a half page, a paragraph, a sentence, to days with no new entries.

"Freedom!" I thought. The journaling "assignment" was over.

Assignment? Yes. That is what I thought. In retrospect, I must have been doing this "journaling" thing all wrong if I thought of it as just an assignment.

The truth is that journaling should give you clear direction within a timeframe – a goal. If you are not getting this direction, it would be wise to reexamine your journaling methodology.

Your goals in the practice room need to be SMART!

**S** – Specific

**M** – Measurable

**A** – Action Oriented

**R** – Realistic

**T** – Time Based

... We'll come back to this in a moment.

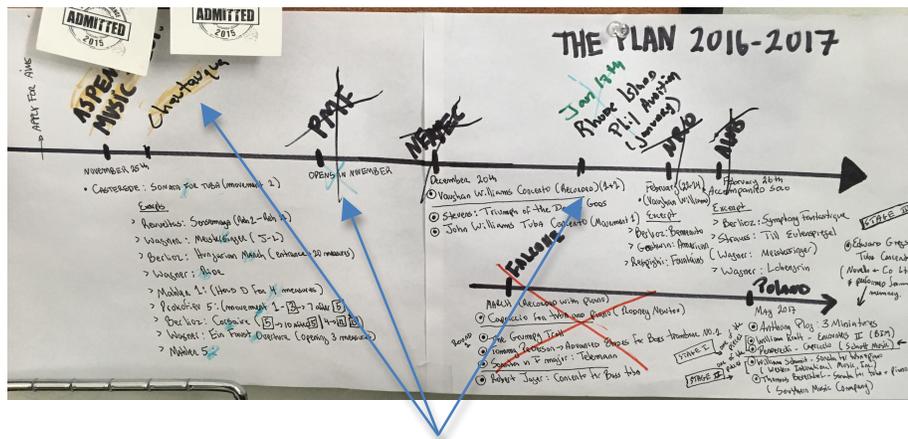
A journal in and of itself is an attempt to organize a singular task or event within a specific timeframe. I find this helpful, yet somewhat shortsighted considering most single events will ultimately influence future events.

If you can figure out the relationship between all of your events within a larger timeframe than you can once again streamline your practice routine to benefit the greater whole.

SMART goals (Journaling) should be **FIRST** coupled with a ***Yearly Engagement Timeline***.

This ***Yearly Engagement Timeline (YET)***, is a visual chronological representation of everything you are hoping to accomplish during the year. This line is constantly varying as new engagements are added and subtracted from it.

I find that this is in essence what dictates how much time you are afforded to spend in each specific SMART goal as well as a means to see overlapping materials.



I made the initial timeline at the beginning of the 2016 – 2017 academic year. At first, the timeline did NOT include the following (Chautauqua, PMF, and Rhode Island Philharmonic audition).

I came up with this idea of the ***YET*** chart after reading and studying Carol Dweck’s research on the “Growth Mindset” and the power of yet. Yet is a powerful three-letter word that implies time without judgment. “I am not there yet” is a positive growth mindset statement suggesting that with hard work we all have the ability to achieve our goals.

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X0mgOOSpLU>)

In researching various festivals online (a comprehensive festival list can be found at <https://josephguimaraes.com/links-2/linkdatabase/>) I began to notice overlapping audition repertoire, which gave me freedom to apply to more things without needing to spend additional time practicing.

The red X over the Leonard Falcone competition indicates a scheduling conflict and thus had to be removed from my *YET*. (Being open to change will surely lessen stress and increase your chances of success).

Other engagements that could, and perhaps *should* be added to this/your *YET* are what we can call **non-negotiable obligations**, such as school engagements and other previously agreed upon performances.

**ONCE YOU HAVE CREATED YOUR YET YOU CAN BEGIN TO ROUGHLY FIGURE OUT HOW MUCH TIME YOU CAN ALLOCATE TOWARDS EACH TASK (GOAL).**

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*The following section will touch upon the importance of self-recording. I will not make mention of any specific brands or models of recording devices as they will likely already be antiquated by the time some readers view this article. Purchase the best device you can afford, as this is an invaluable tool/investment for your development. Aside from the quality of the device, it is equally crucial that it be user-friendly and easy to transport. An operationally inconvenient, or challenging device will NOT be used as frequently as the alternative.*

There are two primary types of journaling,

### **Proactive Journaling (PJ) and Retroactive Combination Journaling (RCJ)**

I will share with you what my preferred method of journaling is, but it does not by any means lessen the effectiveness of the other. Players of all kinds have had great success with both methods.

**Proactive Journaling** is often done in advance of one's practice sessions, as a kind of itinerary. Some players adhere strictly by this "itinerary" while others allow for more flexibility.

This approach is great for those people who like to plan their weeks in advance.

I have never done this method as my schedule typically allows for some scheduling freedom. I would be curious to see how specific one can be in scheduling and planning SMART goals a week or more in advance.

**Retroactive Combination Journaling** (this is my preferred method of journaling)  
This method of journaling is often laid out as subsequent cause to a stimulus, such as hearing a recording of yourself playing, colleague feedback, professor feedback etc.

Ideally, you would like to be reacting to a self-derived or non-competitive stimulus AND not to an audition committee's comment that you play out of tune.

GET IN THE HABIT OF RECORDING EVERYTHING!!!

Recording everything you play (in accordance with the law) is a great habit to have. Another great habit to have is listening to your recordings. I know too many people that are great recorders, but not so great at listening to the recordings.

Critically listening to oneself will not only be a clear indicator of the things you need to work on, but it will also teach you how to listen and self-diagnose.

Aim to record longer practice sessions AS WELL AS individual reps/segments. Recording small segments will give you immediate feedback that allows for immediate alterations while recording longer practice sessions will afford you some insight on how you work that may have otherwise gone unnoticed.

*(Article) For Quick Progress, Record Often by: Toby Oft*

Arnold Jacobs famously said,

“The more a musician consciously attempts to correct their symptoms of failure, the worst their paralysis becomes. In every instance, they have consciously analyzed their tongue, embouchure, air, or hands until they became paralyzed. Tragically, paralyzing self-analyses is prescribed and encouraged by many teachers and music schools worldwide.”

Analyze critically away from your instrument and not while you are performing.

While listening to your recording, take notes. In the early stages, you will notice yourself making macro comments with regards to such things as intonation and evenness of notes. As you continue this play/record/listen/analyze/prescribe/correct approach to journaling you will very quickly start to hear and instinctually correct these things organically as you perform.

To recap: Record your playing sessions and listen to the playback away from your instrument making notes on the things that can be improved. Use these notes as the catalyst to your SMART goal planning. It is during this step that this approach combines aspects of **PJ**, since we are now planning ahead for our upcoming practice session.

The primary difference is the real-time ability to make day-to-day changes to your planning as causation to your self-analysis or collegial/professorial/professional feedback.

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Avoid scheduling too much time for things you are already GREAT at. It is fun to sound good, but being that we have a limited amount of time to practice due to physical constraints we should focus primarily, but not exclusively on lessening our deficiencies and not stroking our egos.

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**A non-SMART goal may be stated as such,**

“I need to be able to play the John Williams tuba concerto by the end of the year”.

*Non-SMART goals are typically short, lacks details and fall over a long period of time.*

You will find elements of a SMART goal even in this example.

**S** – Specific (No. It may specify a goal, but lacks specificity. Be clear and concise).

**M** – Measurable (Yes. Most things are measurable through analyses of recordings and feedback along the way. You are more likely to receive more direct feedback by setting smaller goals instead of a singular large one (entire concerto)).

**A** – Action Oriented (Yes. “Be able to play”. Such vagueness often leads to sloppy, and lackluster practice sessions).

**R** – Realistic (Yes/No)

**T** – Time Based (Yes, “by the end of the year”. Too long of time frames can become difficult to plan for. Work towards many short-term goals instead of one long-term one).

**A SMART goal may be stated as such,**

Each week could be planned in advanced if using the **PJ** method of journaling, or one day at a time if using the **RCJ** method.

Goal setting should be coupled with obtaining feedback in order to best plan upcoming practice sessions.

- I. Be able to perform the first movement of the John Williams tuba concerto in one month, by June 17<sup>th</sup>, 2017 for my recital.

**Week 1 (April 13<sup>th</sup>) (Big Picture)**

Day 1 – Work on measures 3-15, (under tempo 80bpm). Be aware of rhythms in measure 5-7.

Day 2 – Add measures 16-30, (under tempo 80pbm). Play top-30 at 80bpm. Check intonation of high f# and try different fingerings to smooth out the slur (1,2,12 etc.)

Day 3 – Work on measures 31-53 (under tempo 80bpm). Increase the tempo of top-30 to 90bpm.

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**Week 2 (April 20<sup>th</sup>) (Big Picture)**

Day 1 – Spend 20 minutes on the piano singing through the cadenza. (Internalize the pitches)

- Work on double-tonguing in measures 24, 27, 51 and 52. Focus on synchronizing fingers and tongue.
  - Score study. (Make notes of difficult ensemble passages)
- Day 2 – work on rhythmic clarity of slurred section from pickup to 84-101.  
Day 3 – ...

**Week 3 (April 27<sup>th</sup>) (Tempo)** (Week 3 goal – give a studio class run-through of the first movement by day 7 of this week (3))

- Day 1 – Continue to work on giving the phrase from pickup to measure 15 to 30 direction at the faster tempo by leading towards strong beats.  
Day 2 – Work on placing the accent on beat 1 and 2 and not on the long notes in measures 3 and 9.
- Smooth the slurs going from the g to the low Ab in measures 116, 117 and 118.
- Day 3 – Do a run-through of the first movement in my lesson. Listen to the recording and write down feedback.  
Day 4 – Apply feedback into practice session (be specific)  
Day 5 - ...  
Day 7 – Studio run-through... Record, listen to the recording and write down feedback.

**Week 4 (June 4<sup>th</sup>)**

- Day 1 – Apply feedback into practice session (be specific)  
Day 2 – Continue to apply feedback into practice session (be specific)  
Day 3 – Finer details – be specific (day 1), score study  
Day 4 – Finer details – be specific (day 2), score study  
Day 5 – Finer details – be specific (day 3), score study  
Day 6 – Finer details – be specific (day 4), score study

**Week 5 (June 11<sup>th</sup>)**

PIANIST WEEK! ENSEMBLE REHEARSALS!

\*Record and email the rehearsal recordings to your pianist or listen to it together.

Yes, continue to take notes.

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The term asymptote refers to a line that goes ever closer to another line without ever actually touching it. To me, this is the closest thing to a musician. We are forever in search for perfection, and as hard as we try we will never come in contact with it.

