



On Practicing Music

[The Art of Practicing: A Guide to Making Music from the Heart](#)

by Madeline Bruser

Harmony/Bell Tower

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272 pages, \$14.00

[Sam Hasegawa](#)

Since music is one of the most communal forms of art, it's strange to think how solitary much of the process of music-making turns out to be, how many hours musicians spend playing or singing alone, practicing. As I'm sure is true of many musicians, I've always had ambivalent feelings about practice. On days when you sound good and are clearly making progress, practicing is intensely pleasurable and exciting because you're playing as you would want to in a real performance. On days when the sound isn't there and you struggle, practice becomes drudgery or, worse, a kind of torture that leads you to question your ear, your talent, your creativity, and all those other qualities that inform your desire to express yourself musically.

I recently discovered a book that provides a fresh look at what practicing is really all about and a new way of approaching it. [The Art of Practicing](#) takes as its basic premise a simple idea: that when we practice, we should exercise the same sort of spontaneity characteristic of a good performance. We should allow our preparation to be permeated by the same feelings of openness, uncertainty, vulnerability, aliveness, freedom, and awareness of the moment that we feel when we perform live.

To accomplish this, Ms. Bruser proposes a program consisting of ten steps. Each of these steps involves doing something that directly relates to what we go through when we perform. The first step, for example, is to do a series of basic, gentle stretches before playing. The idea is that performers on the day of a concert instinctively take good care of themselves, try to relax, avoid stressful situations, and eat well to be ready to perform. To practice well, you also need to take care of yourself, and stretching is a simple way of both relaxing and energizing the body to prepare to play.

Similarly, the second step, settling down in your environment, is something basic that happens in a performance. Think of what it's like to see a great pianist take the stage, the ease and assurance of the walk, the extraordinary presence, the elegance of the gestures, the calm, precise way of sitting down at the piano, the deliberate pause and stillness before striking the first notes. In practicing, we also need to take the time to be present in the moment, to situate ourselves where we actually are before we start to play.

The other steps consist of techniques involving aspects of practice, with such topics as tuning into your heart, using your body in a natural way, following your curiosity in deciding what to practice, recognizing when you're struggling, really listening to what you're playing, and being attentive to the sensations of touch and movement.

The jazz pianist Bill Evans, in the liner notes to his solo piano album, "Alone," noted that perhaps the hours of greatest pleasure in his life came while playing the piano all by himself, without an audience. "In retrospect," he wrote, "... these countless hours of aloneness with music unified the directive energy of my life." I believe that all musicians are hoping to make that kind of discovery while working things out alone in practice. In [The Art of Practicing](#), Madeline Bruser has provided a wonderful guide that can help us transform our routine and uninspired practicing into the surprising, creative journey that we naturally want it to become.



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* "Bill Evans Alone." Solo piano. Verve Records: digitally remastered and released on CD in 1988. Originally released in 1969. Liner notes on the original LP by Bill Evans.

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