

**Opening Address for the Super Saturday  
of the Utah Valley Chapter of the American Guild of Organists  
Brigham Young University Madsen Recital Hall  
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Thank you for the invitation to speak with you today. I feel honored to be among you and am very aware that many of you are more qualified than I to address such an august body as this one. I beg for your indulgence as I share a few thoughts with you that have been turning over in my mind these past months.

Before I began to play the organ, I took piano lessons. Once I reached an intermediate level and because I was not particularly drawn to the sound of the piano, I had difficulty getting excited about Mozart and Clementi sonatas. My mother had to nag me to practice. My lack of enthusiasm was bad enough by the time I was in my second semester of 7<sup>th</sup> grade that I asked my mother if I could quit taking piano lessons. She bribed me to continue by telling me that if I stuck with piano lessons until the end of the school year, she would let me begin organ lessons in the fall.

Well, I stuck with it and once I started playing the organ, instead of having to nag me to practice, mother began having to nag me to come home from the church or local university where I was practicing. For me playing the organ was a pure delight. I loved the sound of the instrument, and I loved the music I was playing. Since then I've spent a significant portion of my life thus far seated at an organ console. There are still many times when I recapture the joy I felt in those early days of organ study, but much of the time practicing is more or less emotionally neutral for me. Much of the time practicing is a necessity for me since I am a professional musician. If I don't practice, I don't eat. I confess that on occasion practicing feels like a chore, and I have to drag myself to the practice room.

What has happened to me? Why don't I want to practice sometimes? How can I find more joy in making music and, particularly, in practicing since it is in that setting where the majority of my music making takes place. How can I make my practicing more effective so that I can get the most out of my time and go about my other tasks without the worry and guilt of unfinished business at the organ.

Practice, by definition, is a lonely affair. We are by ourselves, often in a cold, dark, spooky place. We may see practice as a selfish act. When we're practicing, we're not spending time with children, doing housework, or working in the yard. While practicing may sometimes serve as an escape, we may also feel guilty about taking time away from important duties to develop our musical selves.

As organists it's also often inconvenient to practice. Most of us have to leave our homes to get to our instruments. Some of us may feel, "I practice my behind off for sacrament meeting and still fall completely apart at some point in the service. So why bother?" Or we may think, "I practice my behind off for sacrament meeting, and no one notices except for the one person who comes up to me to tell me I play too loudly. So why bother?"

The music you are playing may be a problem. Perhaps it doesn't inspire you, or you may think it's too difficult for you. Pressure may also be sucking the joy out of practice for you. You may feel you have to perform perfectly or you may have an upcoming performance that you feel is "make or break" for you. Putting off practicing may be a subconscious way of subverting the pressure.

How do we overcome the reasons not to practice and again find joy in our practicing? Seymour Bernstein explores this question in his landmark book entitled, *With Your Own Two Hands*. He encourages us to question why we feel a need to practice in the first place. Is it to perfect our technique so we can make it through a Sunday service without embarrassing ourselves? Is it to ace an audition, to play a good recital, or purely because we love music and express that love by playing the organ? Bernstein acknowledges all of these reasons for practicing, but claims that:

"There is an ultimate goal that transcends all these possible accomplishments: Productive practicing is a process that promotes self-integration. It is a kind of practicing that puts you in touch with an all-pervasive order—an order that creates a total synthesis of your emotions, reason, sensory perceptions, and physical coordination. The result is an integration that builds your self-confidence and affirms the unification of you and your talent."

Bernstein writes:

"Mastering an instrument is a constant challenge. Confronting this challenge means confronting yourself . . . In all my experience as a teacher, I have never had a pupil who did not show marked improvement in his personal life once he understood the far-reaching implications of practicing."

So as we become better practicers, obviously our technique will improve. According to Bernstein, we will become more whole, more integrated. Any guilt we feel about practicing ought to be ameliorated by the knowledge that our success in the practice room or chapel positively affects every aspect of our lives.

How can we practice more productively? I have been doing considerable thinking about this subject for most of my adult life, but particularly since I began working on Temple Square. I hope you will not be insulted if I share some thoughts I've had.

I highly recommend planning your day's practice, at least to some degree. When I was in graduate school, I rarely had much time at all to practice. It was hard to justify more than an hour of practice each day given that my priorities were to complete my course work and write a dissertation, so I tried to keep up my skills by playing recitals or a church service.

When I had a program to prepare, I would divide the repertoire into reasonable-size sections. Each day I would gauge my progress on the pieces to date, figure out how much time I could devote to each—or section of a piece, and set the timer on my watch. When time was up, it was up; and I had to stop and move on to the next piece. I rarely practice more than half a piece on any given day. However, I was able to learn and perform quite a lot of music during that time.

In my current position, I have much more time to practice, but I find that I can allow work on a particular piece to mushroom and take over much of the day. Having a sense before I begin of where my practice priorities are, helps me plan and make sure I get to that which is most important when I am at my best. It also helps me to make sure I get in my skill development and repertoire enlargements projects. Otherwise, they are easily crowded out.

I've also learned that spending time at the piano as well as the organ can pay big dividends. Besides breaking up the monotony of sitting at the same bench hour after hour, playing the piano builds finger strength and helps one play more steadily and accurately.

I recommend using your metronome as a practice tool sparingly. For many years I dutifully practiced to the accompaniment of a metronome. Before beginning a piece, I would set the metronome to a slow tempo. I would play a section of a piece at that tempo, then bump it up and play it again. This process was continued until I was playing the piece at the desired tempo. This technique had the advantage of allowing me to become somewhat lazy. I didn't have to think about how to deal with the difficulties of the piece—I hoped that each tick of the metronome would erode them away. This type of repetitive practice also builds much muscle memory. By the time I was ready to perform a piece up to tempo, I knew it “cold”.

But relying solely upon the solely on metronome practice had its downside, too. It took a lot of time to practice this way, and it was mind numbingly boring. I presumed that practicing with a metronome would help me develop a good sense of inner rhythm. The reverse was what actually happened. I relied so much upon the machine to provide the pulse that when it was no longer there, I felt naked. I actually found it more difficult to play in time.

So now I use the metronome sparingly. I am very concerned about having a good sense of rhythm, so to cultivate it I often count or sing aloud as I play, subdividing the beat and making sure that not only is my playing in time, but also that my *ritardani* and *accelerandi* make proportional sense.

Probably the most important thing we can do when we practice is to practice with our brains present. My years of metronome practice led to bad habits I am still trying to undo. Because I was so bored during my practice sessions, my mind would wander over a multitude of topics. Sometimes I would finish playing a section of music and wonder how it went, because I hadn't noticed. My brain and ears had completely turned off.

If you find you are thinking about lunch instead of the music, where should you direct your thoughts? You may ask yourself: “How is my tempo?” “How is my posture?” “How relaxed am I?” “What notes should I be playing right now?” “How about the next set of notes?” “Are my hands and feet attacking at the same time?” “Am I anticipating the beat or am I unduly behind it?”

I strongly encourage you to take time in your practice to record yourself and then listen carefully to your playing. Both Tabernacle and Conference Center organs are equipped with MIDI interfaces (as are many of our ward electronic instruments). I can set a MIDI sequencer to record myself, and then I am able to go out into the hall and listen to the organ “play itself”. Doing this, incidentally, does tend to freak out visiting tourists to Temple Square. I have been amazed and, quite honestly, sometimes depressed at what I hear—often it is not at all what I think I have played. I’ve found it most difficult to separate my ears from the physical act of playing, especially when I am tense. So record yourselves frequently, whether it is with a simple cassette recorder or more sophisticated equipment. I’ve found the sound quality does not really matter.

Scheduling performances for ourselves is a very effective motivator for practice. However, feeling the pressure of an upcoming performance can really take all the fun out of our instrument. When we listen to a recording, we usually hear a note-perfect performance. But did that performer ever play the piece perfectly during the recording sessions? Perhaps, but more than likely an audio engineer spliced several takes of the piece, editing out any mistakes the performer made. In a way, having so many perfect recordings around has done the rest of us a disservice. We think everyone else plays perfectly all the time. Of course they don’t, and it’s unrealistic to expect that we will either. I’m not suggesting that we lower our performance standards, but we have to be kind to ourselves. My colleague, Richard Elliott, tells me he tries to play as perfectly as possible when he practices; but when he gets into the performance, he does his best to communicate with the audience and to enjoy the experience. He doesn’t worry about making mistakes at the point or dwelling on them when (not if) they occur.

Make sure you are aware of your body and its needs as you practice. When I am really intent on learning a piece of music, I have found that sometimes my mind doesn’t register that my body is hurting. If you have this problem, you may find it helpful to set a timer for, say, 25 minutes. Practice until your timer rings, then take a five-minute break—get up and walk around, get a drink of water, go to the bathroom. When you return to your practice, you will be more effective and your body will thank you for the period of rest. You should do your most crucial practice when you are the freshest.

Be kind to yourself. Make sure you are always working on a piece of music that inspires you. You may need to drop the music you are working on for a season and start some new literature. If all else fails, you may need some time away from the instrument. I have often been surprised at how well I play when I come back from a vacation. Be aware that sometimes we do have to just “slog” it out in the practice room, like it or not. But hopefully, with improved practice techniques and a better awareness of our physical and musical needs, those times will become less frequent.

I doubt I’ll ever recover the bliss I felt in those first few years of organ playing. They were like the exhilaration of “puppy love” when your true love has no flaws. However, as with any romantic relationship, once the thrill of the honeymoon period is over, working at your relationship with the organ will only deepen your appreciation for this great instrument. We cultivate our relationship with the organ by practicing, and good practice—like any quality time—will keep that relationship healthy and strong.