

Required Tools for Measuring Progress

by David Marriott, Jr.

In our path to absorb more vocabulary, more theory, more ideas, more depth, more dexterity – or whatever it is we might be working on right now – it can be difficult to see the light at the end of the tunnel. Sometimes it may even seem that we haven't moved one step in the right direction. But also it's difficult for us to accurately measure our improvement over time, particularly when we don't have the right tools. Generally, the simplest and most common tools are the ones that can give us the best feedback.

MUSIC JOURNAL: The idea is to get a journal or notebook of music paper – three-ring binder of loose sheets, or a nice bound volume, whatever works for you – and keep track of our entire musical exploration in it over time. Things to include in our music journal might include what we practiced that day and how it went, tunes we are working on, pieces of a transcription we are lifting, or a piece of vocabulary or theory to apply. From these records, we are able to look at practice habits, how long things take to feel comfortable with, develop compositional ideas, and come up with new things to practice.

METRONOME: There is nothing quite like a metronome for both assessing skill level and measuring progress. The stability of its measuring system certainly provides the simplest, most direct evaluation of our ability to execute something at a given tempo,



PHOTO BY DANIEL SHEEHAN

however slow or fast. Just putting the metronome on and using it as a time anchor is not enough to measure progress. We must keep track – day to day – of where we set that metronome. Over the time of working on an idea with the metronome, we'll be able to see where the peak of our abilities changes from 160 to 180, for example. The real geeks out there will put that data into a spreadsheet and calculate how long it has taken to achieve a specific goal from start-to-finish, and I say, "Do it!" Learn to love the metronome – if you don't have one and can practice near a computer, visit metronomeonline.com.

RECORDING DEVICE: Whether it's a \$5 cassette recorder or using a

\$5 mic with your computer and free recording software, we should all be able to get this happening regardless of our technical expertise. Documenting our progress over time via recording can give us the clearest picture of where we've been, where we are, and where we want to go with our playing. If we record ourselves consistently over time, then we are in a position to effectively evaluate how our playing has changed (if at all) and what that means in terms of our approach to practicing. Remember to be objective and honest when you listen!

Seeing – and hearing – the fruits of our labors can be inspiring, and push us further into the woodshed with a new sense of dedication and direction. Take the opportunity to objectively measure and analyze your progress as often as you can, and you'll start to see those fruits growing much more rapidly in your playing.



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