

Practicing

By Tony Guerrero

I've just started reading a new book. I'm only a couple chapters in, but the concept of the book is really what I want to talk about. Written by Glenn Kurtz, it chronicles his self-imposed early retirement from a budding career as a classical guitarist and his eventual return to music. He speaks of music in glowing, loving terms, and while we all might claim to love music, I am struck and somewhat jealous by his almost intimate relationship to his art.

It is the title of the book that really caught my eye and caused me to pick it up. It's called *Practicing*. I saw that title and thought, "Is this a whole book on how to practice? How dull!" I assume most of us would probably feel the same—that practicing is dull enough, much less reading about it. Practicing is a burden that we have to do, not something we love to do. But, just a few chapters into the book, and I am already feeling pangs of shame and guilt. In a nutshell, this guy loves to practice, and I, well... I don't exactly love to.

HOW MUCH MORE?

I love to play music, and as a result, music ministry is fun. Even though it requires tons of administration, headaches, personality conflicts and general frustrations, those moments when we're all making music together in worship really do make it all worth it. But I wonder—if I loved to practice as much as I love to play, how much more would I love to play?

And probably like all of you, I really do want to offer the Lord my best in those situations. But when I look at my practice regiment, I have to wonder...do I ever?

Any definition of "personal best" in performance would have to mean that at that moment all my charts are prepared correctly, my instruments are in good condition, I am well rehearsed with my band, and most of all—and this is where it gets embarrassing—I am playing my instrument to the absolute best of my God-given abilities.

Now, I've been playing a long time. I have developed a trusty bag of skills I can pull out at will. To the average ear, I probably sound okay most of the time. But I know that I am far from having mastered my instrument, which means that there is always more I can learn and improve. But, since I play all the time, I don't often make time to just practice. So, if I am to be completely honest, I haven't added a ton of new skills to that bag in some time. Maybe little things here and there, but there hasn't always been a real intentional progression in my abilities. So, am I offering my best to God every week, or am I just getting by? Are you? All of us church musicians and singers, especially those of us on staff, should be asking, "Am I a better musician now than when I got the job?"



WHO WOULD HAVE THOUGHT?

The other day, haunted and inspired by these thoughts, I set out for an old time practice session—just me, my instrument, a music stand and some technical workbooks. After a short time, I was hard pressed to feel the same excitement that Glenn Kurtz seemed to describe about his practice sessions. Let's face it, practicing your instrument is boring. So, I practiced for a while then went on to other, more enjoyable, things. However, that evening I had a performance to play. Lo and behold, I played better than I had in weeks. Maybe there is something to this whole issue of "practicing."

This issue takes a greater relevance when you apply it to your worship life. Is it ever okay to just skate by on the work we do in our ministries? The following verse seems to apply:

"Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving" Colossians 3:23-24 (NIV).

WHATEVER YOU DO

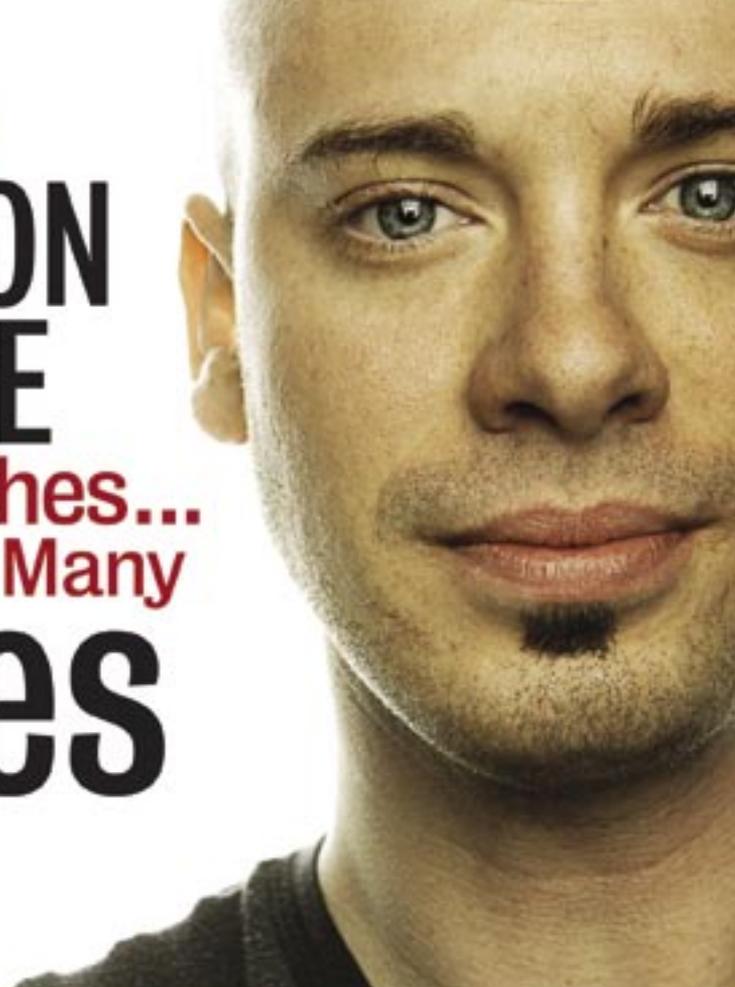
Does this even apply to preparing your skill set for the worship stage? Yes: Whatever you do. So, if we are playing music in the service of the Lord, is it okay to show up just relying on the skills that have gotten us this far? Shouldn't we be striving to be better all the time? We all know the answer is yes, but why then the struggle to maintain our practice habits? Sure, we are all too busy—family, work, ministry. But do these just become the excuses we satisfy ourselves with?

People often confuse the two words "practice" and "rehearsal." They figure that the time they spend with the band rehearsing is enough preparation to do a good job at playing. However, work should be done before that. "Practice" is what takes place with each player before the rehearsal. "Rehearsal" is when you bring several practiced people together to make their performance cohesive. Are you practicing and rehearsing, or just rehearsing?

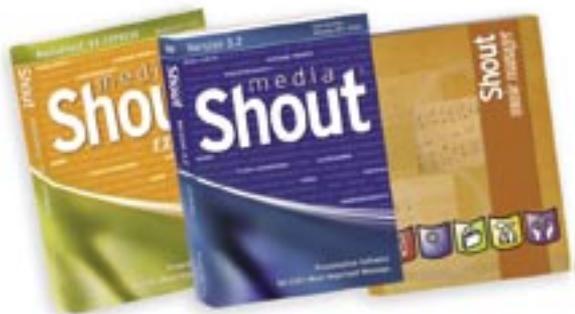
Christians, more than any other musicians, have a reason to improve our skills. We aren't just playing music for art's sake. We are playing to serve the Lord and Creator. We must offer our best, and that includes the preparation. Practically speaking, maybe our practice needs to get more fun—play-along tracks, practice partners—whatever it takes. But, boring or not, we cannot let our skills settle into mediocrity. God deserves better.

Tony Guerrero is the Director of Creative Arts at Saddleback Church. He is also a recognized jazz trumpeter and is finishing up his latest CD featuring several jazz notables. Visit www.tonyguerrero.com for more information.

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