

Practice, Practice! Group vs. Individual Warmup. And What Is Warmup Anyway?

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Within the past ten or fifteen years, players of our instruments have taken a liking to the concept of a group warmup. Often times this takes place early in the morning and uses resources like the Brass Gym, supplemented with exercises common in our field and traded around by many of us, as well as exercises specific to individual schools, groups, or individual teachers. It isn't that group warm-ups never occurred before, but certainly it is a much more common practice now than, say, in the 90s when I went to college. Many, if not most, college and university tuba/euphonium studios convene a group warmup of some kind. In addition, while there is probably a bassoon warmup or a viola warmup going on somewhere, it is safe to say that the tuba/euph crowd is fonder of this practice than other studios.

So, why all this group warmup and practice? Is it somehow better than individual practicing? Perhaps a better way to look at it is: what are the benefits of a group warmup that cannot be had individually? And, are there any downsides?

I've discussed this at some length with many friends, and opinions vary quite widely. Views range from those advocating the group warmup as the primary technical practice block of the day, to others who feel a group warmup actually does more harm than good. What follows is my analysis based on a personal affinity both for practicing alone and in a group.

First, it is worth stating that many of us, myself included, casually and at times incorrectly use the generic term "warmup" to refer to both warming up and practicing. If "morning warmup" lasts an hour, certainly 50 minutes of that hour must be described as practicing. Warming up is something I define as just that brief period of time one needs to physically wake up the wind and chop mechanisms enough to more or less sound like oneself. This distinction is important because if we view an entire hour of playing time as mere warmup, we are apt to treat it as less important and not a real opportunity to improve ("oh, I'm just warming up...").

Almost any type of practice can be either good or bad depending on how one goes about it. So, I'm going to discuss some aspects of group practice that I think are especially beneficial, and how to optimize them, as well as other things to consider as possible unintended ill effects. I'm not going to address in detail what types of exercises are used, or try to determine if one lip slur pattern is more beneficial than another. Rather, I'm exploring larger-scale ideas about group warmup and practice.

Motivation

This one is as simple as it gets and may be the most obvious benefit of practicing with a group. You're more likely to go jogging if you agree to meet a friend at 7:00 a.m. than if you go alone. The same holds true for the group warmup. Having accountability buddies always helps. It would be nice if all motivation came from within (wait ... does it?) but let's face it, the prospect of being warmup-shamed by your studio mates might well help you get out of bed in the morning.

Knowledge is Power

Group warmup, at its best, is not just a dozen or more people playing Clarke Studies for an hour, it is an exchange of information. I like to call our warmup Morning Studio for this reason. As things come up in our playing, I take the opportunity to try and address certain matters to the group and encourage others to do the same. For example, if someone exhibits a certain playing issue, I might point out what that is, describe times that I or others have experienced the same thing, and a few possible solutions. This helps reinforce the notion that we're all pursuing the same goals, and have all experienced many of the same problems. Learning and instrument has been described as climbing a ladder with endless rungs. Some are higher than others, but all are climbing. The knowledge sharing that happens in a group warmup can help reinforce this concept. Plus, you have the opportunity to share tips, techniques, workarounds, different philosophies, industry news and information, recordings, and loads of other potentially useful data and ideas.

Into the Deep End

There is a lot to be said for putting yourself in a situation where you are surrounded by players who are better than you. It gives you the chance to hear and see, up close, how things are done that you can't yet do. How *does* so-and-so play lip slurs that quickly and smoothly? *How* can so-and-so play so effortlessly in the high register? Often, especially in college and university study, players stratify into skill-groups. People in the top band tend to hang out together and people in the second band hang out together. A group warmup with everyone involved helps break some of these barriers down both musically and socially.

A reasonable question to ask at this point might be "but what if I'm the best player in my group? Will I get worse playing with beginners?" I've heard this sort of question asked often. Answer: no. You're fine.

In my view, the three above described areas can be very beneficial aspects of a group warmup. But as I stated, almost any kind of practice can be bad or good. So, now I'll argue the other side and point out some pitfalls of group practice.

Autopilot and the Dangers of the Aggregate Sound

Intonation strikes me as an area that can be especially beneficial to work on in a group. You can play with a tuner or drone all you want, but actually tuning to another human playing a brass instrument cannot be replicated. There are endless possibilities for working on intonation in a group warmup setting. This assumes, however, that you are actively listening and adjusting as you play. Yet, I find that it is pretty easy to go into "zombie mode" in a group warmup and not listen and adjust with a high level of effort and concentration.

In the vast majority of group warmups, everyone is playing in unison, or sometimes key-of-horn (i.e. F-tubas play in F, C-tubas play in C, euphoniums play in B-flat) but rarely in purposeful harmonies. If we're

going to practice in a group setting, let's take full advantage of it. Let's play exercises at the 5th, octave, 3rd, 6th and whatever we can find to work on tuning. I also do not hear much singing going on in group warmups. Why not?

You can find yourself in autopilot mode any time you are practicing, but it is especially easy to stop paying attention in a group, and you can easily lose track of what you are trying to accomplish. There tends to be a routine that can stifle creativity and imagination. There have been many mornings where a dozen of us are playing an exercise like "beautiful sounds" but it's really out-of-tune and not beautiful at all. In this case we often pause, reset our purpose, maybe sing one line, and try again. It's always better. A group warmup at 7:00 a.m. can be an easy place to check out mentally. What we want is the opposite, and it's up to each of us to make sure we're not going into zombie mode.

Another pitfall of the group setting relates to "Into the Deep End". While it is a great thing to challenge yourself by playing with more experienced musicians, there are things that less developed players simply cannot do. In a group setting I have witnessed this many times. It is a valid question to ask whether attempting to play an exercise that is way beyond your skill level is a good idea or not. Many great musicians describe the route to consistency as playing well all the time in technical practice. Play each note, each exercise beautifully and increase speed and difficulty slowly so you are not practicing bad sound and technical errors. Pushing yourself, while not ingraining bad habits, can be a hard balance to strike. I've definitely been in group warmup situations where I heard someone attempt something very unsuccessfully and thought "that person is not, at this moment, benefitting at all."

Many may disagree with this idea. Push yourself, don't worry if something is way too hard, just do it, they say. This idea certainly has merit and it is up to the individual to decide. The problem for me is that if you cannot really hear yourself and you are not very experienced, you may have no idea what you are doing wrong or even that anything is wrong at all.

One solution to this is something I learned in Yoga, but it is used in many exercise related pursuits: modification. As the yoga instructor demonstrates poses, they start with something pretty simple that we can all do (I'm in a beginning class) and they add elements for the more advanced students. In a group warmup I think it is a good idea, when teaching a new exercise, to show something that players can do if the full exercise is too challenging at first. Perhaps they can drone or buzz. It's hard to think of an exercise that can't have at least two levels of difficulty.

Another solution is the idea of "model and emulate". As exercises progress through different keys, it can be a great idea to have one person play the exercise (model) and then everyone play it together (emulate). This gives everyone a chance to really hear themselves and have a moment of really concentrated effort at sounding amazing.

Another way to combat autopilot is to get away from the horns entirely and try some creative games to wake up the mind and imagination. Games like one-word-story and categories can be a fun way to do something different mid-warmup. These are easy to look up so I won't describe them here. But you could really pick anything. The point is not to limit the warmup session to only playing/breathing etc.

Along that line, consider playing a short recording at the start of warmup, or some time in the middle. Having a different person bring a recording each day can add to the variety and become something everyone looks forward to.

Taking time to implement these ideas can combat the autopilot factor that so easily sneaks up.

Life and Social Factors

Also beneficial, a regular group warmup can help you develop life-management (read: “adulting”) skills. If this sounds like a stretch, consider the following. If your group meetup is at 7:00 or 8:00 on the morning, you will learn pretty quickly how to manage your time the evening before so you aren’t a complete zombie during warmup and for the rest of the day. And, you’ll be able to approach the rest of your day with a (hopefully) healthy warmup and practice session under your belt.

On the other side of the coin, I think we have all seen those students who do in fact sleepwalk through warmup after staying up way too late and never really figure out how to manage their time. At that point, the warmup might be hurting as much or more than it’s helping. It’s a little like coming in to work or school when you’re quite sick – not good for you or anyone else. I can say that, over the years, I’ve seen a number of students arrive at “aha moments” as a result of committing to a morning warmup. It took a while, but eventually they figured out some life management skills that carried over into other areas.

There is also an important social connection that often develops in a group warmup setting. It’s always nice to hang around people with similar interests. I have also observed that there is a pride of ownership that comes along with the warmup. It feels good to know you got up early and got some solid work done. Often, the tuba/euphonium studio becomes known around school for being a hardworking bunch that shows up early every day to practice.

Individual Practice

I want to underscore that I think it is essential to practice on your own regardless of how much group time you spend. Obviously, you’ll be working on repertoire alone, but I think a good amount of technical practice and fundamentals should be done alone as well. One notion I’ve heard floated by group warmup advocates is that, after a good morning warmup, at the next practice session you’ve gotten in all the fundamentals you need and you can go straight into repertoire. That might be true some days, but others you should make sure and do some fundamentals on your own.

Tandem Practice

Another idea that I have tried and liked a lot is practicing with a buddy from time to time. You can play some things together, but also play for each other and get ideas. There are benefits to this that are similar to group practice, but with just two people it is a different dynamic. Some books that work well for this include the Guggenberger Basics Plus and the Vining Daily Routines, both of which have duet materials.

To wrap up this article, I'll reaffirm that practicing well is what is most important, regardless of setting. Stay dialed-in to avoid becoming a zombie practicer, and add ideas add creativity to whatever group you practice with as well as in your individual practice. Remember above all that practicing is not an end in itself but has the end goal of *making you a better musician*.