

# Ep #30: Finding Time to Practice

Can't  
wait  
to hear  
you

with  
Michèle Voillequé

**Full Episode Transcript**

## Ep #30: Finding Time to Practice

Your voice is unique to you. It grows as you grow. It changes as you change. If you're curious about the relationship between your voice and your body, your heart and your mind, welcome. My name is Michèle Voillequé and I can't wait to hear you.

Finding time to practice is a conversation that I have with my students a lot, and it's a conversation that I have with myself a lot. A lot of my students come to their lesson with apologies for not having practiced as much as they wanted to, for feeling like they didn't practice really successfully, like they weren't able to replicate something that they learned in the lesson.

I'm not one of those teachers that sends you home if you haven't practiced. And I, maybe more than anyone, understand the drama of learning something in a lesson and then going home and I can't find it again.

That has been a huge frustration in my own learning to the point where, for a long time, I practiced very little outside of my lesson. That is to say, I didn't make very many sounds outside of my lesson for fear that I would do it wrong.

And instead, I practiced mostly in my head. I worked on notes in my head or with a hum. I worked on rhythms without singing full out because I was so worried about developing a bad habit or reinforcing bad habits with how I was using my voice.

Was that bad? Was that overly neurotic? I don't know. I am where I am right now and I'm really pleased with my voice. But just to say that that happened and maybe you are having a similar experience right now. I want you to know that you're not alone.

So finding time to practice, how do we do that?

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First of all, as kind of illustrated by the story I just told you, there are different kinds of practicing.

There's working on the notes and the rhythm, or the words, the script, the blocking before you know it, or the choreography before you know it precisely. There's practicing to get the content right, right? To do the right thing.

And then there's a kind of practicing that's in your imagination, which is focused on not so much the content, but getting the vibe right. How am I being? How am I holding myself? How am I breathing even without making sound, as I'm preparing this piece, whether it's for singing or speaking.

And those different kinds of practice require different levels and different kinds of focus.

So when you're trying to learn notes, rhythms, words, and you need the script, the sheet music in front of you, you really can't multitask and do that successfully.

You can't drive a car, or you ought not to drive a car, and, and try to look at sheet music or your script at the same time, right?

It's focused attention. You maybe want a quieter environment, you're more sensitive to what's going on around you. In order to make progress with that kind of learning, you need more focus.

And there's a lot of practice that doesn't require that level of focus.

For example, repeating something you've already learned. So, going over something in your head, or singing out loud a section of a song that you have a handle on, and you're just repeating it to sort of get it in your bones.

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Same is true for, the lines of a play you're trying to memorize or sections of a presentation. There comes a point when you don't need the paper anymore and you can go for a walk and just run through it in your head.

Similarly with reviewing blocking or choreography, to refresh your memory or test your memory, to see, do you really have it?

Also getting a general idea of how a song goes. So listening to it over and over and over. This is really good in the car, right? And you can sing along to it, but don't kid yourself that you're learning in this with the same level of focus that you would be learning if you were sitting down at home with the sheet music, or, you know, doing this in a quieter environment.

Lots of people learn music without ever looking at sheet music. That's fine. I don't mean to, privilege sheet music over, reading music over learning by ear. That's not what this is about.

I mean, there's a lot of good practicing, there's a lot of good progress you can make with a piece of music or a speech piece while you're doing other things.

One of those, too, is spending time in your imagination, figuring out who the character is, if this is, you know, for a play or a musical theater piece or – I kind of think it's true for any piece of music that there's a character there to investigate, but if that doesn't make sense to you, don't worry about it.

But there's also spending time in your imagination to figure out who you need to be in order to present this piece. What are you going to be wearing? Where is this going to happen? Who's going to be there? And who do you, who do you need to be? What larger self do you need to embody to present this to whomever you're presenting it to?

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And I'm saying a larger self because new songs, new speeches, new plays, new characters, all of those enlarge ourselves, our own self.

Remember, your whole self is the instrument. The things that you work on become part of you. As you're learning a new thing, a new piece, it's becoming part of you.

And when you have it learned, you will be a larger and different person than the person who you were before. And spending time in your imagination, thinking about who does that person need to be? Who do I need to be? Who am I going to be once this is a part of me? is really useful and feels like daydreaming, it kind of is daydreaming, and you can do that anywhere.

And I tell you, it really does help with note and rhythm learning and memorization and all of those other things, because the more you can imagine who you're going to be doing this, the more real that possibility becomes.

If you're looking at a piece of music, for example, and you really like it, but in your heart, you think, "there's no way I could ever sing this ever," that thought is really demotivating for learning notes.

If you've already decided that you really could never sing this ever, you're not going to practice it. There's no point. You've already decided that you're going to fail, if you ever try to do it. So spending time thinking about, well, "Who do I need to be? Who do I need to become? Who will I become as I learn this?" and spending time there in your imagination, you'll find yourself motivated to work on the notes and the rhythms.

Another element of practicing that's in the less focus required part, is walking around in the shoes you're going to be wearing when you perform the piece, or the pair of pants, or the dress, or the cummerbund, or whatever.

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How you're going to be attired, if it's at all different from your everyday self, spending time in those clothes, especially in those shoes, because, again, the effectiveness of your communication has to do with how well connected you are to the earth – your shoes have a lot to do with that – so spending time in those clothes, that counts as practice. That counts.

Now, if you're, if you're sitting here thinking about who you need to be in order to do this thing that you want to do, whether it's singing or speaking, and that's causing you a lot of anxiety, like the first thing that comes up is “Oh No!” It's something you want to do and it really scares the crap out of you.

That's okay. That's good. That's a sign that this is a big growth opportunity. And so there's probably a lot of journaling, a lot of walks, a lot of meditation in your future as you learn this piece, as you incorporate this piece into your being, right?

And it can be very helpful to start what is basically a desensitization process for performing the piece.

So, as an example, I've worked with people who were working on songs that they were going to sing at their own wedding. This is high drama. This is really hard to pull off.

And for all of them, it's been really hard to imagine pulling it off. Because for some of them they would just think about what it would be like to do that and they would start to cry, they were so moved by their love for their partner, the song they wanted to sing, they were just overcome.

They're flooded with emotion about the person, the event, the moment that they were trying to prepare for. And what we did that was helpful was I asked them to sing instead to stuffed animal that I have in my teaching studio.

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And for some of them, that was too much at the beginning. So in my studio, I also have a soccer ball. And so I asked them, okay, sing to the soccer ball, or sing to the pattern in the rug, or sing to the spot on the wall, something that doesn't have eyes and a mouth.

And so, just learning how to send sound out of their body to a specific target, and that, that was doable. And then we gradually moved from the neutral thing, the object, the thing that had nothing animate about it at all, to the stuffed animal, to a photograph of the person, and then to holding them in their mind's eye as they sang the song.

Or, in some cases, the couples came together to a lesson to work on songs they were singing to each other and, or with each other, and then practicing with one another.

So you get used to the nerves, you get used to the emotion, you get used to the tears that stop flooding you. It's not that you no longer care, it's that you're used to the feeling.

You're becoming that larger person, that bigger person who is incorporating this song, this moment, this event into their being, and less scary because you've grown.

And you've helped yourself grow in a really kind and thoughtful way. Not in a way like you're supposed to be better at this immediately, not in a bludgeoning, punishing way, but just very gently taking the smallest steps you need to, to get from A to B.

Now that's true with focused practice as well. It's not just true about the kind of practicing you're doing in the imagination. Sometimes there are sections of music that are really difficult and I've needed to break things down to two notes.

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Like it's a string of 16 or 20 notes – it's a whole section of music that's really difficult for me and I need to spend, you know, a lot of focused time on it. And I start with two notes.

I don't try to do all the 16 right at once, or of course I would try to practice all 16 notes, you know, at one time, and it wouldn't work, and I'd get frustrated, and then I would remember how kind I am to my students.

“Michèle, could you be that kind to yourself right now, and just start with two notes? and then add one? And then add a couple more? And work from there?”

And it feels like it's going to take me forever, but I know that if I slow down to the smallest bits, it doesn't take forever. It actually ends up taking less time, because I'm learning more effectively.

So, with that being said, you can really get a lot done in five or ten minutes. Finding time to practice isn't necessarily about blocking out a half an hour, an hour, three hours on your calendar, you know, pushing things aside.

Finding time to practice really is more about considering what you want to work on and what kind of focus that requires, and then looking for moments in the day when you have that kind of focus available to you.

So you might already have an idea of when you could be practicing. As you think over your day, you may notice there are little gaps here and there. “Oh, I could be practicing...”

You might find yourself doomscrolling on your phone and thinking, “Oh, I could be practicing right now.”



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It's actually, uh, scientifically proven, I'll put a link in the show notes, that it's easier to add a new habit if you attach it to a preexisting thing that you do automatically.

So let's say every afternoon you make yourself a cup of tea and you haven't filled the time that you're waiting for the kettle to boil with anything in particular, you know?

So maybe you try for a couple of weeks when you put the kettle on to boil that you practice a little bit. Maybe you listen to a song that you're trying to learn.

Maybe you sing through the chorus that has been giving you trouble, three or four times.

Maybe you quickly outline the presentation that you're preparing just to see if you can do it from memory, like, this is how it needs to go.

Or maybe you practice your closing lines, how you're going to wrap everything up, while the kettle's boiling.

And you try that for a couple of weeks. And you don't expect that this is going to work. I mean, if you try it the first day and you forget or you don't have anything to work on, whatever, in air quotes, "It doesn't work," that's okay.

Try again. give it a few tries. Give it, you know, a couple of weeks to see, is this a time when I could get some small good work done on this creative project I've committed to?

The important thing is to remember that this is an experiment. You're not only an artist, you're also a scientist, and you're trying to figure out when is the best time for you to do good work?

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So if it doesn't work, that's fine, notice why and you'll probably have another idea of something that would work better.

So right now, if you're able, maybe make a list of all of those times you think you could be practicing, times that maybe you already do practice kind of automatically or you're singing anyway.

Notice where all of those happen in your days, in your weeks. Every day doesn't need to be the same.

When are those times when you think you could practice?

When you look at this list, you probably have way more opportunities in your week to practice than you actually want to practice.

You may be coming into this thinking, "I would love to practice twice a week," or "I would love to spend 20 minutes between my lessons doing something productive on my singing. Of course, maybe I would love to spend more than that, but 20 minutes feels doable."

When you add up all the opportunities you have to maybe do something related to singing, you're probably going to wind up with a lot more than twice a week, or 20 minutes.

And when you consider that practicing who you're being is just as valuable as practicing the notes, you may notice you have way more opportunities than you thought.

Now, I don't want you to get the idea that you never have to sit down and focus on learning notes, rhythms, words. Just that you can get a lot done with notes, rhythms, and words in five to ten minutes, and you can get a lot done with who you're being also in five to ten minutes.

And if you don't have the focused time, you can still get something done.

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I think a lot of my students think of practicing as there's nothing else that's happening – it's only highly focused time.

And while that is important, that is not all of it. And as you grow as a musician, as a speaker, as a creative being, the more you are creative and musical all the time, the easier the learning gets because you're always in that zone and the more amazing your life gets.

Then this creative part of you is not relegated to a singing lesson once a week or a choir rehearsal here or another thing there. You start thinking like an artist.

You start feeling like an artist, and that just makes, I find, everything easier and more fun.

Now, I'm a person who needs carrots.

I am really good at bludgeoning myself. I'm trying to get less good at bludgeoning myself – you know, the carrot and the stick, what motivates you?

And I'm honestly motivated by carrots. So the last few weeks, I decided to revive my practice of meditating every day for at least 30 minutes. And I use an app on my phone that has nice gongs and bings and, you know, dings that will tell me, I can decide when I want them to go off in that 30 minutes, and it tracks my streak.

So when I open the app, it tells me, you know, how long my daily streak is. And that's fun, but that's not enough of a carrot for me. So I got two jars, and I counted out a hundred glass beads – the kind of beads that you use for flower arranging, I found them at a craft store years ago for some project that I no longer remember, like these were in the garage, I don't even know why I bought them but there they were.

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I counted out a hundred of them and I put a hundred in one of the jars. And now every day when I meditate, after I meditate, I move one of the glass beads from the fuller jar to the emptier jar.

So it hasn't been very long yet, but I can see that I'm accumulating days of having meditated, and I'm really proud of those glass beads that have made it into the other jar.

I don't know why I chose a hundred. It seemed like a nice round number. I know there are studies about how long it takes to establish a new habit. I think the numbers are much shorter than a hundred days, I don't know. They just look pretty and they make a nice sound when they fall into the jar, you know?

You might be a person who likes stickers, who likes to check off boxes, who really loves growth charts, things to color in when you accomplish things. Gold stars.

You're not wrong. If those things are motivating to you, use them to motivate you, because practicing can be really hard.

Practicing is paying sustained attention something that we're trying to improve. And the thing about paying attention is that the more you pay attention, the more you hear room for improvement.

And so the consequence of practicing can be a lot of despair, because after a few sessions, you start to hear or notice how far you have to go, and that can be really discouraging.

So you need to find a way to enjoy the journey, to enjoy the process of practicing itself, and rewarding yourself for practicing, even when you feel like you didn't get anywhere.

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Just because you feel like you didn't get anywhere, that doesn't mean you didn't get anywhere. You got somewhere. At the very least, you kept a promise to yourself.

You worked on the habit of showing up for your art, and that is everything. That is absolutely everything – building the habit of showing up for your art, showing up for you.

So I think it's really important for you not to write down in your calendar, "I'm going to practice here and here and here and here," and then ignore the calendar and not do that.

To whatever extent possible, try to keep your promises to yourself. If you write it down in your calendar and you don't practice then, reschedule it for another time.

Honor the commitment, even if it can't happen right now, but don't ignore it. Don't pretend you didn't make that commitment.

When you go to perform something, you need to be crystal clear that you trust yourself. You have to trust that you know what you're doing. You know the piece, you're ready to perform it.

You have to trust your body. That it knows how to be calm. You you really have to trust yourself.

And breaking promises in your calendar is undermining that trust. So, keep your word to yourself.

I think it's fine to not write anything down in a calendar. I don't write down my practice times in a calendar.

What happens for me is usually Sunday night or Sunday sometime, I look at the week ahead and see when I've got time in my days to work on the stuff that I want to work on.

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And I might make a practice plan. I might say, I really need to work on this section this week, or I really need to, you know, nail this down. But I don't all the time.

But I might have a plan. And with that, sitting and looking at my calendar, looking at the pieces I'm working on, developing a plan in my head, I usually get to the end of the week and find that I, that I did something, that I was, true to my intention for the week.

When I have written things down in my calendar or written things down on a piece of paper, like the various things I need to work on, I make much better progress than if I just leave them in my head.

But I do make progress even if I just think about it and then, you know, just kind of find time.

You will find your own way with this. You know yourself and your learning process better than anyone and what works to hold you accountable better than anyone.

I think the most important thing with all of this is to remember that you are learning a new thing hopefully because you love it, hopefully because you're intrigued by who you will become in the process of learning it.

So, it's important to allow yourself to be guided by joy, to be guided by what lights you up, and to trust that you can do this.

This thing that you're drawn toward, this thing that you want to make real in the world, you wouldn't be interested in it if it wasn't at least a little bit possible for you.

Okay, so let's try to sum up.

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Finding time to practice.

There are different kinds of practice.

There are tasks that require a lot of focus, and there are tasks that require less focus.

Decide what you're intending to practice – does it require more focus or can you multitask and make progress on it?

And then think through your week and maybe make a list of all of the times you have that kind of time available to you.

And it's probably way more time than you'd like to be practicing, right? That's great. You've got a ton of opportunities to get a little bit done.

Maybe you've got opportunities to get a lot done. Glory, hallelujah. But I'm speaking to the, the stressed case.

And then, in the way that works for you, make a commitment to yourself to practice during some of those times.

Meet your own goal. Whether it's two more practice sessions a week than you have now, um, a certain more minutes than you have now, and make a list, write it in your calendar, make a commitment to yourself that feels doable.

And if you can't keep that commitment, reschedule, don't just abandon it and ignore it, reschedule it so that you keep your promise to yourself to focus on your art, to spend time with your creative endeavors.

I really hope this has been helpful. Do let me know. Send me an email. Thanks so much for listening.

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