Watch What You’re Doing!

Pianists and string players have the great luxury, or so it often seems to wind players, of watching their hands fingers as they practice. Focusing eyes on the efficiency and accuracy of hand and finger movements can be an extremely beneficial element of practicing, but only if you can actually see your fingers while you play.

Wind players obviously don’t have to worry about big hand shifts up and down the keyboard, or quick position shifts on the neck of a string instrument. But we do have to pay attention to bobbles and glitches between notes, usually caused by one finger moving out of sync with its colleagues. Although such tiny inconsistencies can be difficult for students to pinpoint by feel, positioning students to run fingerings silently while watching their fingers can make the inconsistencies perfectly clear and very fixable.

Flutists can rest the headjoint on their left shoulder, holding the flute in nearly the same position as when playing. A reed player should remove the mouthpiece, reed, or bocal before trying this practice technique. Clarinetists and oboists can rest the instrument’s bell on their right leg, while resting the upper part of the instrument on their left shoulder. Saxophonists and bassoonists can let their neck or shoulder strap support the instrument’s weight, while angling the instrument and moving their head to see their fingers.

Help the student identify a fingering glitch, focusing on no more than three notes at a time. Ask the student to finger the musical fragment at tempo a couple of times, before moving to slow, steady quarter notes. It’s best if the student spots the finger that’s holding up the works, but the teacher can point it out in the first few trials of this practice technique.

Repeating the fingering slowly, while keeping eyes on the finger in question, not only irons out that specific fingering, it also broadens the student’s awareness of finger precision in general. In addition, it teaches the student that a fingering problem is usually a tiny issue—just a matter of one finger lagging or anticipating a shift.

In the bigger picture, this critical listening and focused problem solving opens the door to a student hearing all sorts of other details, and working methodically on them.

— Elaine Schmidt