

My Top Practice & Performance Tips for Musicians with Low Vision

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My name is Melissa Baldwin. I am a 30 year old musician with oculocutaneous albinism currently living in Melbourne. I completed a Bachelor of Music (Clarinet - Classical Performance) at the Queensland Conservatorium of Music in 2009 and a Graduate Diploma of Education at the University of Queensland in 2010. Since that time, I have worked as a clarinettist and saxophonist, music educator (classroom music and instrumental music), ensemble conductor (chamber ensembles, bands and orchestras) and, as of 2018, I work as a woodwind sales specialist at Ozwinds Melbourne.

Life as a visually impaired musician is not always easy. Even a decade into my music career, I still have days where I get so frustrated with my eyesight that I vow to hurl my entire collection of saxophones and clarinets over my balcony when I get home after a bad practice session. (I can be an overdramatic perfectionist diva sometimes!) However, over the years, I have managed to come up with ways to minimise that vision-related frustration, to maximise my confidence as a performer, and to increase my musical enjoyment, productivity and stamina. So here are my Top Tips for Musicians (of any level) who have low vision:

1. Don't be afraid to put your instrument down.

We can be so tempted to pick up our instrument, hunch our shoulders and upper back over the music stand, squint determinedly at the sheet music, and start blasting our way through the music (probably missing every second sharp, flat or repeat sign in the process because we can't see it). The best thing a musician with low vision can do when tackling a new piece of music is to actually put their instrument away, sit down at their favourite OT-approved table (or slope board) and really take the time to study the score first. Get your magnifying glass out, read over the small print, learn the lyrics if necessary, try to gain an understanding of how the music is structured and look up any terms or signs in the music that you don't understand. This counts as legitimate music practice and gives your poor shoulders and upper back a break!



2. Get out from behind your music stand and play without sheet music.

Regardless of whether you are a complete beginner or have been performing for decades, make sure you give yourself permission to put the music away, give your eyes a break and play your instrument freely and comfortably with correct, relaxed posture and (if applicable) correct breathing technique. Perhaps you like to improvise solos or just want to shut your eyes and play through your scales. Or maybe you want to pop on your favourite tune and learn to play along with the recording by ear. Whatever it may be, it is healthy for all musicians to get away from sheet music and just relax, breathe and play!

3. Take regular breaks in your practice.

Studying or working with a visual impairment is physically and mentally draining and music study is no exception. So take breaks! Perhaps you could listen to your favourite recording of the music you are working on for a few minutes, or listen back to a recording you made of your own playing and think about what you will work on in your next practice session. Perhaps you just need to do some light stretches or go for a short walk. There are so many ways to make practice breaks productive and worthwhile. It all counts as practice!



4. Embrace technology!

Avoid spending hours memorising music or enlarging music to cumbersome A3 sizes and, instead, use an iPad. The Apple iPad Pro 12.9 inch (while expensive) is phenomenal, as it the size of an A4 page! In rehearsals, I place the iPad in a König & Meyer iPad holder and microphone stand combo.



The  forScore iPad app has revolutionised the way I prepare for performances. I keep my entire music collection in this app. (I scan my books into the app while watching a movie.) The app allows me to organise my music into folders, zoom in easily to see fine details and to edit and colour-code scores to make small details really 'pop' visually.

Creative Clarinet

1

New notes

Things to remember

- Start each note with your tongue.
- Don't puff your cheeks.
- Always breathe through your mouth.
- A tick (✓) means 'take a breath'.
- Count the beats in time as you play.

Left Hand Right Hand

● = Closed ○ = Open

A complete list of fingering diagrams can be found on pages 68-9.

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str. beat 2 of bar 1

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2 silence before entry

3 cresc.

4 cresc.

5 Mrs. KOOKABURRA: PRELUDE AND DANCE

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I can mark the score up with my Apple Pencil with any notes that teachers, colleagues or conductors give me during rehearsals. And then I connect my iPad up to my AppleTV and have my scores appearing up on my 60 inch Smart TV so I can see what I'm doing (as pictured above). I even turn pages with an Airturn Duo Bluetooth Pedal Page Turner.



5. Use 'High-Vis' instrument stands and accessories.

You want you and your instruments to be safe! So use gear that is easily visible on stage or in your home practice room. Hercules instrument stands are amazing because they have bright yellow centres and have an 'easy-to-assemble-when-you-can't-see' design.

6. Invest in high-quality cases for your instruments.

If you are like me and your eyesight prevents you from driving, store your precious musical instruments in high-quality, light but protective backpack/wheeled cases that can handle being taken on public transport or thrown around by inconsiderate taxi drivers. My cases have bright name tags on them that I can spot from across a room. All of my instruments and cases are also insured with specialist musicians' instrument insurers as I don't have a car and often have to leave my instruments in unlocked rooms between sound checks and performances.

them that I can spot from across a room. All of my instruments and cases are also insured with specialist musicians' instrument insurers as I don't have a car and often have to leave my instruments in unlocked rooms between sound checks and performances.

7. Be open with your music teachers, band conductors and fellow performers about your eyesight.

Being partially sighted and having the ability to see some but not all of what is going on around you means that people with whom we perform often forget that we have an eyesight problem. They may need gentle reminders occasionally, particularly if you are rehearsing in a high-pressure performance situation. So the next time a stressed piano teacher berates you for missing a B-flat or an overbearing choir director bites your



head off for missing an entry, don't be afraid to take a deep breath and cheerfully remind them "I have low vision. I will miss things occasionally. But I won't miss them by the time we reach the performance because... I'm awesome." Ok maybe don't say it quite like that, but you get the idea...

8. Set yourself realistic expectations.

Looking back, particularly at my time in school and university, there were times when I should have spoken up and said "My eyesight makes learning this much orchestral music to a perfect standard in this incredibly short amount of time an almost impossible task for me. Can I please share the load with another musician or substitute player?" Us visually-impaired folk can be stubborn and I definitely burned out in my early 20s due to taking on too much music at once. It resulted in me having to take some time off from playing. Music-making can be challenging in a positive way, but it should never become debilitatingly stressful. So be on the lookout for the signs that things are getting out of hand and confide in your fellow music-makers if you need some help managing any vision-related challenges. (refer to Tip 7!)



In conclusion...

I hope that these practice and performance tips prove useful. If you yourself have any helpful advice to give, please do get in contact with me. The more strategies, short-cuts and experiences we can all share and discuss, the more stress-free, rewarding and enjoyable our musical endeavours will be!
