

How to Practice

Most of what you learn when you study an instrument is what to practice and how to practice it. The first part is relatively easy. Practice the fundamentals: scales, arpeggios, technical exercises, repertoire. Once a certain level of competence is achieved, you can start considering specific questions: What can I do with what I've got? How do I express myself using the abilities I've acquired?

How you practice is something else and will determine not only how good you get, but also how quickly you get good. Unorganized, unfocused practice is a waste of time. Instead, follow the guidelines below.

1. Slow Down

Everyone wants it to sound the way they want it to sound and they want it right away. But getting it up to speed and having it sound good requires intelligent practice. If you try to play it faster than you can play it, you'll make mistakes and your body will think that the mistakes are correct. Your brain knows better, but motor memory will make your hands do things that you know are incorrect. Playing everything slow to begin will teach your body the proper movements. Once you have that, getting it up to speed is easy.

Remember: if you teach the body a wrong movement, it takes between five and ten correct repetitions to re-learn the movement. By going slow, you'll get where you're going faster.

2. Master small things

This takes patience and discipline. Practice one small thing until it's mastered and then move on.

The way to master something is to play it slow, and repeat it many times. The standard advice is to play it perfectly once, and then play it that way 20 more times. You'll learn it better, retain it longer, and be able to use it more effectively. And after a few months, you'll have a lot of stuff that you can use well. If you don't, then you'll have a bunch of things that don't sound very good.

3. Resting

Don't, as a rule, practice for more than 45 minutes at a stretch. Your brain won't assimilate the material effectively anymore, and you'll be wasting your time. For the sake of your body, take short breaks at 20-minute intervals. Just put the instrument down and do a couple of simple stretches, go to the bathroom, whatever.

4. New stuff, short session

When working on new material, don't go for more than 15 minutes. You want to avoid going beyond your attention span, losing concentration and making mistakes that will have to be fixed. New stuff requires more attention and concentration than old stuff.

5. Identify the stuff you know, work on the stuff you don't know

Working on stuff that you can already play well is a waste of time. People do this to feel better about themselves since new stuff just shows them what they don't know. This can be hard on a person's ego. A change in attitude is required, one in which we see the stuff we don't know as a gift that allows us to get better. The old stuff doesn't make us better. To be clear, the old stuff is the stuff that you can play easily without trying.

6. Keep it interesting

Don't try to practice everything every day. Some things need to be worked on every day in order to get them into the fingers. At the beginning, fundamentals need to be worked on until they feel natural. Once they feel natural, they can be practiced when they need to be for the sake of maintenance.

Stress variety in your sessions. There is a ton of technical exercises to keep you in shape; you don't have to play scales every day. Technique is important if you want to effectively express yourself, but look at other topics: learning solos by your favourite player, songwriting, anything that interests you.

7. Clearly identify what you want to accomplish

Why are you doing this? Do you want to become a great soloist, play in a band, compose, record, all of the above? What kind of music do you want to play? These are the kinds of questions you need to answer to figure out what to practice. The answers will change the longer you remain a musician, but the questions will stay the same.

Once you answer the questions, figure out how what you're learning applies to what you want to do. If you want to work on songwriting, do you need to be practicing the melodic minor scale every day? What skills apply to each area that you're interested in?

What to do when you don't want to practice

Sometimes a lot of times you just don't want to practice. Here are a couple of suggestions that might help.

1. Clear your mind, walk over to your instrument (stop thinking) and pick it up. Sit down, pick up your instrument, and try not to play. If you feel like playing, go ahead. Play whatever comes to mind. If there's something specific that you feel like playing or practicing, go ahead. We often wind up practicing for half an hour without realizing it. Half of the struggle is getting the instrument in our hands.
2. The night before, write down when and for how long you're going to practice the next day. Write it down in a book that's going to stay in your room and leave it somewhere obvious where you'll see it the next day.

What's important here is not practicing so much as stating your intention to practice. You could just write "Tuesday, ten seconds." It doesn't matter. Two things happen when you do this: it makes it easier to practice, and it gives you an objective look at yourself as someone who thinks that it's important to practice. After a while, practice becomes a habit.

Here are some excuses for not practicing:

- **I don't feel like it.** This relates to #1 above and is the first thing you'll come across *if you think about it*. When we're actually practicing, it doesn't seem like that big a deal, but when we're not there's anxiety about it. Your brain creates that anxiety, so shut it off and go pick up your instrument. Don't worry about practicing. Just pick it up.
- **I'm not inspired.** Don't wait too long. Inspiration, in almost all cases, comes once we're immersed in the work. Here's something else to think about: every successful artist will tell you that. American artist Chuck Close said, "Inspiration is for amateurs. I just get to work." Somerset Maugham famously said that, for him, inspiration struck every morning at 9:00 a.m. sharp. He knew that inspiration required discipline and dedication.
- **People can hear me.** You're a musician. You want people to be listening. Maybe they can hear something you aren't hearing and help you get better. This one isn't really that big a deal for most people, but if it's a problem for you, remember: they've got their own things to think about; they're not that concerned about you practicing. If you think that they're judging your playing, pay attention to what you think they're saying. That's probably what you're thinking about your own playing. Unless you're a mind reader, what goes on in your brain is you talking.
- **Work on hearing the things you're doing that sound good.** The difficult passage you've been working on finally falling into place, a scale played strongly from start to finish, a chord that sounds good. Small successes are really important. There are always as many things that go right in a practice session as go wrong. Recognize them.

What should I practice?

There's a tension between what you want to practice and what you have to practice. Sometimes it's the same, sometimes not. Regardless, you have to figure out what these are on a regular basis.

For university music students, it's relatively easy. They're told every lesson what they need to be working on, and how to work on it. When preparing for an audition or a recording, you

prepare whatever is relevant to those situations. But what if these scenarios don't apply to you? What if you don't have a teacher telling you what to do?

Try this: spend a quarter of your time on other people's music (solos, pieces, studies), a quarter on technique (scales, arpeggios, exercises), a quarter on composing (you can write something as simple as a melodic motif that you turn into an exercise, or you can write pieces), and a quarter on listening (to music, ear training). You don't have to cover everything every day. The important thing is to keep a variety of interesting things in your musical life.

Cultivate diverse musical interests with well-defined projects with which to develop them. Projects can be anything from a particular technique that you want to learn, to a band you're putting together, to a solo piece you're writing, to a new style of music you're learning, to a new instrument you're learning, to recording tunes for social networks. There are a lot of things you can be doing. Make a list and prioritize.