

## PRACTICE

All musicians have to practice. This sounds very daunting, with visions of a strict music teacher using a ruler to rap the knuckles of pupils who haven't practiced. But this isn't the case today. The emphasis is **not** on how well you progress for the sake of your music teacher or your parents who all think that their children will become rich and famous musicians if they apply themselves. In fact, if you want to become rich, no amount of practicing will help, except for a tiny few. There's a joke that goes: How does a jazz musician make a million pounds? He starts with two million. The same goes for being famous. If you want to be a celebrity, don't practice. Don't try and improve yourself in any way. Self publicity and the media will do it for you.

The emphasis is rather on **self-discipline**. Wanting to improve for the sake of yourself, your own enjoyment and fulfilment. Others may enjoy your playing as you get better and better, but it is ultimately the driving force within yourself which is important. By the same token, you must be your own worst critic. Don't wait for someone else to tell you (or tell others) about your weaknesses. Be honest with yourself and work at those areas which you have difficulty with. If they still criticise you and you think wrongly so, believe in yourself and put it down to sour grapes on their behalf.

**The question of how often, how long and when to practice is crucial.** Some people get by on only a little practice intermittently, whereas others need to do a lot more to improve their technical ability. Our bodies and our life-styles are all different. The only thing I can suggest is do as much as you want to do to fit in with your own ambitions. A classical pianist once said that if he missed a day, he noticed it. If he missed two days, his family noticed it. And if he missed three days, the audience noticed it. Practicing every day then does make sense. You really need to make it into a habit - something to look forward to, rather than a chore, although there will still be things to practice which can be tedious. Thereagain cleaning your teeth and shaving isn't always a bundle of fun.

Some people like to set aside a certain time of day to practice. You can either do that or do it whenever you find time. I tend to do either way. If I can't practice at certain times, it lies on my conscience until I have done so. The only thing to be wary about is practicing when you're feeling tired. If you can't concentrate, you are losing a lot of the benefits that practice gives you. You can actually develop bad habits this way. Better to leave it altogether or still better to do a little bit, do something else, do another little bit, and so on.

**How long** to practice for is again up to you. Again, some days you will be able to do a lot less than on other days. Or to put it another way, some days you will be able to do a lot more than on other days. Don't become a machine and churn out technical exercises in a marathon session - it's a waste of time. Quality rather than quantity.

As already mentioned, concentration is important, so is relaxation and creativity. Before you start, try and **relax**. Breathing slowly is probably the best way. If you feel yourself tense up, you need to stop or you might end up straining yourself and not be able to play for a while. If you are worried about other people hearing you practice, don't despair - there are often ways around it. Use headphones (for guitars and keyboards), mutes - especially the silent mute for brass instruments which is also connected to headphones, practice pads for drums. Find other places where you can practice or try a different time of day. Or you can install sound-proofing materials to deaden the sound.

Regarding **concentration**, be aware of what you are doing. Your mind will drift off, you can't prevent it. But when you find yourself thinking for rather a long time about a good pint of beer while you are playing, try and focus again on what you are doing. (Or go and have a pint of beer and come back.) It's important to grasp that you may be using your fingers, but it is your brain which is guiding your fingers, so practicing your instrument is training the brain.

**Don't be too perfectionist** about getting things right. It is very worthwhile to go over something which is causing you problems, but don't get hung up about it or you could make matters worse. Your subconscious mind will work on it for you and suddenly one day you will be able to play the passage which has been giving you problems. You needn't go over everything you mess up straightaway. Wait until the next day to do so. It's a gradual process and you don't want to bore yourself, otherwise you might just give up playing altogether.

**Creativity** should be exercised whenever you practice. Creativity is really thinking about different areas and making decisions on which to choose. Have a think about what you are going to practice each day and vary it day to day. When you need to be creative then, it will become a lot easier because you're used to thinking in a creative way.

Working out a **good routine** is helpful. For instance, start off with something you want to play. Or mess around working something out, such as playing a tune you've heard. Working out a nice pleasing chord or chord progression. Composing something. Improvising for a while. Anything that you can get engrossed in and which you enjoy.

Having done this you may discover areas of your own playing which need sharpening up or other ways you can put what you've come up with into practice. For pianists, a nice voicing, for instance, can then be put into other keys. A snippet of a tune which doesn't easily fall under the fingers can be transposed into other keys.

Then turn your attention to **scales, arpeggios and other exercises**. You must realise that all music is made up of these elements. They are not divorced from it. Many good players can play their scales, but can't apply them to actual music. This is tragic and prevents them from going forward. Remember that each chord has one or more corresponding scales. From each scale, arpeggios (broken chords) can be built. If you can get these basics under your fingers you can control them and then introduce variations so that they become musical phrases.

**Patterns** are also useful devices. These are very short phrases which can be repeated within a scale, starting on different notes. They are a mixture of scalar passages, arpeggios and other notes, such as passing notes, or leaps.

Practising **intervals within a scale** is very important. This helps enormously in playing meaningful phrases.

Right. You've done your messing about to begin with. Do some intervals then. You have the option of 3rds, 4ths, 5ths, 6ths, 7ths and octaves. There are 4 main ways to do this. Going up, coming down, going up and coming down and coming down and going up. You can also do them as triplets: up and down (C E C). These can also be done in the same 4 ways. So, one day do 3rds going up. The next day do 3rds coming down, and so on until you've finished the ways to do 3rds. Then go on to 4ths when that day comes around.

Scales: Practice in all keys. Change tempos and rhythms and dynamics and which note of the scale to start with. Don't overdo them.

Arpeggios - treat in the same 4 ways as intervals. There are other variations you can find.

Chords - this works by accumulation. You'll come across the same chords a lot, so aim to gradually increase your repertoire. The style of a pianist lies mainly in the voicings of chords.

Sight-reading - the more you do the better you get. But don't get hang-ups. A little done thoroughly will help to get things stamped on to your mind. Recognise rhythmic patterns.

If you can manage all these things, fine. If not, do as much as you can or want to. If you get bored, have a break or stop your practice session.

The above routine can be tailor-made to your requirements and current circumstances. Find out what is most beneficial to you and work on that area, but be sure not to neglect other aspects (see Mark Nightingale's tips in this website).

Finally, you don't have to be at your instrument to practice. Find exercises you can do anywhere, whether they be breathing exercises, finger exercises or what have-you. You can also imagine you are practicing your instrument in your mind's eye. (This tip was given to me by my friend Jim Lawless, former vibes player with the BBC big band.) It works for him, it could work for you.