

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

Regular, focused practice is the key to improving your instrumental skills. What you do in your practice sessions will depend on what targets you have set yourself in your action plan.

Here are some pointers to consider when taking time to practice:



SET TARGETS

Know what you want to achieve from each practice session.

WARM UP

It is advisable to wash your hands in warm water before you even start. Try some finger exercises to loosen up the joints before you start. At the start of each session, do some slow scale based work to warm the fingers / voice up.

USE A METRONOME *

When practicing scales / arpeggios and to help you stay in time generally.

TIME YOUR PRACTICE SESSION AND TAKE BREAKS

Lots of short bursts of practice are much more useful than one long session. Taking plenty of "micro breaks" (30 seconds or so) can also help avoid Repetitive Strain Injury. After 30 minutes or so, stop for five minutes – walk around the room or put the kettle on.

PRACTICE REGULARLY

Daily if possible



FIND YOUR TIME

Some musicians like to practice first thing in the day when they are awake and alert, others naturally prefer to practice later, in the evening or into the wee small hours.

SPLIT YOUR PRACTICE SESSION UP INTO DIFFERENT SECTIONS

This ensure you are practicing a variety of techniques and skills and also helps prevent the boredom from setting in.



ENJOY IT AND STAY FOCUSED

A well disciplined 1/2 hour is much more useful than a full hour without focus. This is where many musicians go wrong – there can be confusion between playing for an hour and practising for an hour. Practising is where we work on focused technique development and we track our progress. A regular and well-disciplined practice routine will result in rapid improvement.



* A metronome is a musical practice tool that can be used to track your tempo and helps to keep you in time. Basically it clicks away at regular intervals and your job is to try and lock your performance in with the clicks so you are playing in time – buy one, their importance cannot be understated.

WHERE TO GET HELP

You can improve your skills in a number of different ways. These include:

GETTING LESSONS / ATTENDING A COURSE



Private lessons can be expensive, but you might be able to share a group lesson with others and reduce the cost. Always get a recommendation or be thorough when choosing a teacher. Ask them what their experience, qualifications and range of styles are, as well as whether they follow any syllabus (such as Rock school, Associated Board etc.) and enter people for exams. You might be able to find a local course – see the links at the end.

PLAYING AND PRACTISING WITH OTHER MUSICIANS



You can share your experience, learn about styles and tips and get lots of encouragement in this way. Don't just jam though! Set similar targets as if you were practising on your own. Never be to proud to ask a superior musician to give you a few tips, or even show you some 'licks' it could improve your playing and it's free!

USE BOOKS, MAGAZINES AND INTERNET SOURCES TO HELP YOU



See the links at the end. 'Tutors' (books in improving your instrumental skills) are widely available – don't forget to look in your local library. Magazine articles can be useful and also keep you up to date with the latest techniques / style developments. The Internet contains many on-line tutorial sites to help you improve your skills, many for free. There are some good videos and DVDs as well, including some on DJ mixing techniques. Some people study towards graded exams on their own, by following the books published by the exam bodies. This can certainly be useful in helping you decide what level your skills are at.

EXAMPLE PRACTICE SCHEDULE

GUITARIST

TIMING	CONTENT
Before session	Wash hands in warm water and loosen up fingers by opening and closing hands, stretching fingers gently and shaking hands gently.
2 mins	Play chromatic scale in F over three octaves, ascending and descending in quavers at 70BPM
30 secs	Break
1 min C	Major scale ascending and descending in quavers at 70BPM. (consistently, without stopping)
20 secs	Break
1 min	C Major Scale – 70BPM
20 secs	Break
1 min	C Major Scale – 75BPM
20 secs	Break
1 min	C Major Scale naming the notes as they are played (no tempo)
30 secs	Break
10 minutes	Work through notation reading exercises in C
1 min	Break
1 min	E Blues Scale – ascending and descending (quavers) @ 75BPM
30 secs	Break
1 min	E Blues Scale – 77BPM
30 secs	Break
1 min	E Blues Scale – 80BPM
30 secs	Break
10 mins	Work on written 12 bar solo using E Blues Scale
5 mins	Break – lie down, walk around the room or put the kettle on
10 mins	Slowly strum through chords of C, G, D, A, E – naming the notes in the chord as each note is sounded
1 min	
10 mins	Break
1 min	Work on “Hey Joe” by Jimi Hendrix using these chords
5 mins	Break
End of session	Improvise a solo using the E Blues scale along with the recording of “Hey Joe” Watch Eastenders

LET’S EXAMINE THE SESSION
This practice session lasts for **one hour and five minutes**. The content is very prescriptive and detailed but the advantage in this is that every single second is accounted for.

Not all practice has to be so disciplined – if you like playing scales while you are watching telly, then great – keep doing it. Research has proven that this also helps you to develop speed techniques because there is more focus on developing your sub-conscious mind and muscle memory if you are not thinking about what you are playing all the time! However, at least one hour of focused practice ensures that you are developing specific techniques consistently and regularly.

NOTICE HOW IT IS STRUCTURED – warm up – scales – chords – note naming – developing repertoire (i.e. learning a song and using the chords that have been practiced in the song – smart move!!), the fun bit (the pay off) – jamming along with Jimi Hendrix to reward yourself and remind yourself why you are doing this!

THE SCALES ARE TO BE PLAYED CONSISTENTLY UP AND DOWN for the time allocated. In doing this we are sending constant signals to the brain and developing a “neural pathway” which will send appropriate signals to our hands to do what we want – e.g. play the C Major Scale. This will only become secure if we do it a lot. Repeating the scale constantly for a minute also helps to build strength in the fingers, quite like an athlete training for the Olympics.

MICRO BREAKS – notice how many short breaks are built in. If practicing is intense, it is important to stop for short periods of time to avoid the dreaded RSI – tension and strain are the musician’s enemy and short breaks will help to avoid this.

NOTE NAMING – this has been built into the session to help the musician develop a fuller understanding of the instrument. This is crucial and must not be overlooked!

RELEVANCE – all the technical stuff that was practiced was relevant e.g. the use of the C Major scale in the reading exercise, the E Blues scale was the basis of a written 12 bar solo, the chords learned were leading to a Hendrix tune – it’s important to reward yourself – learning a load of scales without applying them is unmusical and quite meaningless.

HAVE FUN – try to end your session with the fun bit – e.g. having a jam along with a Hendrix tune. If you want to continue this for an extra hour, that’s ok too!

CASE STUDY
JASON – GUITARIST



Jason plays in a garage rock band and also earns money from freelance performing, teaching guitar and running a course in music performance at a college.

Playing guitar from the age of 10, Jason didn’t learn the “technical stuff” until he was 25 (theory, scales, improvisation, reading the dots etc). Prior to doing this Jason was in a band, writing songs and hoping for the big time. When the band didn’t become as big as U2 (as initially intended!) Jason was left with a choice – get a “proper job” or become a “proper musician”.

Jason’s musical ability at the time was competent enough to play the role of the creative guitarist in the band, writing original material, but making a living from this alone is very difficult. He needed to develop his playing skills to a much higher technical standard and broaden his stylistic awareness and ability. He decided to take a two year National Diploma in Music Performance where he learned to read music, took theory and guitar grades and achieved a qualification.

Practising 4 hours a day for a couple of years also started to open out a range of other musical options. These now include working with house music producers as a session musician (involving playing in different styles and improvising) which has led to performances on a range of albums and singles as well as working as a qualified guitar teacher with the Registry of Guitar Teachers and gigging across Europe with a DJ / live jazz musician outfit



- Jason’s tips**
- 1 Multi tasking is the key to survival – try and dabble in as many styles as possible and keep your options open – don’t put all your eggs in the one basket.
 - 2 Practice regularly and with focus – know what you’re hoping to gain from every practice session.
 - 3 Network – get to know as many musos as you can – the vast majority of work you will get will be by word of mouth and who you know.
 - 4 Don’t give up – if you want to do music for the rest of your life you will – it just might not be as you expected it, but keep an open mind.

CASE STUDY
SARAH - FREELANCE CLASSICAL VIOLINIST



Sarah has been working as a freelance violinist for over 10 years. She followed the traditional graded examination route (achieving grade 8 piano and violin at just 14 years of age). Sarah went on to study on a 4 year degree programme at Music College and a further two years of postgraduate study.

Sarah’s job consists of a lot of large scale orchestral playing and some chamber music (smaller ensembles ranging from quartets to small orchestral groups). She also does studio sessions and features on recordings of pop hits and film scores alike.

Working as a classical violinist requires a high level of technical skill. Constant regular practice is crucial for keeping your playing and sight reading skills to the highest possible standard - she might have three hours to learn a full concert programme which will be performed in the evening.

A typical orchestra day consists of about 6 hours work, split into either (i) two separate three hour rehearsal sessions or (ii) a three hour rehearsal session followed by a concert in the evening. There is usually one 15 minute break in the middle of the rehearsal session. The concert will usually last over two hours, with a 15 minute break.

Sarah says the enjoyment of being a freelance player is the variety of work that she encounters. “I can be in the middle of an 80 piece orchestra one day and working in the studio on a pop track the next. This in itself keeps you interested.”



- Sarah’s tips**
- 1 Be reliable – if you are late more than once, you won’t get asked back.
 - 2 As with a lot of the music world, it’s about who you know so don’t make any enemies.
 - 3 Get to know the programme you are going to be performing – I often listen to recordings of pieces before I perform them – get to know them by ear.
 - 4 Always get a copy of the music before the rehearsal if possible – this helps avoid any unwanted or embarrassing surprises.
 - 5 Be enthusiastic – make sure you always make music and don’t just play the notes – play to the best of your ability and you will get noticed.
 - 6 Learn one thing from everyone you work with, be it “how to do it better” or “how not to do it!”.
 - 7 Keep healthy physically – you work such long and demanding hours an injury is possible so do everything you can to avoid this.