How to Practice a Musical Instrument



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We all know that if you want to learn to play an instrument, you have to practice. But it's important to know ***how to practice effectively***. Your practice time will be twice as useful if you do it right - and that is the subject of this article.

I am a saxophone and clarinet teacher, so of course the advice here is directed especially at woodwind players. However, most of these ideas apply to all instruments.

The practice advice below is divided into three sections: Beginners (first and second year players); Middle School Age; and High School/Adult Players. Both students and parents should read it.

First, here are some basic principles that apply to all levels:

- ***You are your own best teacher***. Only you can make yourself into a better and better player. You absolutely must understand this!
- Practicing should be fun. It's fun to be good at something, and it's fun to be constantly improving your skills.
- Practice with your brain turned on and you will learn twice as fast.
- Part of good practicing is developing your ability to concentrate. If you always try to focus to the best of your ability, ***you will actually get better at focusing!***
- When you identify a problem spot in a piece, turn that spot into an exercise. Play it as slowly as necessary to eliminate the mistake, then gradually increase the tempo. A metronome can be useful for this.
- Practice being correct. When you are working on a difficult piece or section, don't try for a fast tempo until you are ready. If you try to play it too fast, you will make the same mistakes over and over, and ***you will get better at making those mistakes***. You don't want that!
- Try to practice every day, or nearly every day. Find a time of day that works for you, and stick to it.
- Find a place to practice where you can concentrate - no TV, or anything else bothering or distracting you.
- Be patient with yourself. Learning to play an instrument is a long-term project.

If you are taking lessons, you should make your practicing cover these three things: 1) Review of your last lesson, applying what you learned; 2) Preparation for your next lesson (i.e., your assignment), and 3) Anything else that you feel is important to you - or fun for you.

How to Practice - Beginners

Here are some simple guidelines for a 30-minute practice session:

First, warm up with something easy (5-10 minutes)

Next, get down to business while you are fresh - learn something new - REALLY learn it. Take as much time as necessary.

When you are satisfied that you have achieved your goal for the day, don't stop just yet. Play fun stuff, easy stuff, old stuff, or do some sight reading, for 10 or 15 more minutes.

Here's a game I use with myself: When I'm learning something new, or fixing a problem, I tell myself that I have to get it right *four times in a row* before I can consider it learned.

Invent exercises.

Always think about your tone when you practice. Even when you are just playing scales, try to play with a good tone.

When you are reading music, ***look ahead***. Don't just look at the notes you are playing - try to see one or two measures at a time.

Spend part of your practice time just making up your own music (improvising).

Some Crummy Excuses for Not Practicing

Here are a few excuses that I hear from time to time. It should be obvious why these are not good reasons to avoid practicing, but in case you need it spelled out, I've put a little advice after each crummy excuse:

- "But I play every day in school" (That's not practicing, and it's not enough to help you really improve.)
- "I already play better than anyone else in school" (You should try to be the best player that you can be. It's not about comparing yourself to others. Besides, if you goof off, pretty soon you won't be the best anymore.)
- "I've already learned my assignment" (So...give yourself a new assignment! Remember, ***you are your own best teacher***.)
- "It's boring" (This indicates the need for a better attitude. Learning is fun, music is fun, and being good at something is fun.)
- "I don't have time" (Really? You can't find 20 minutes a few times a week? If you truly are too busy, though, just make sure that you make up for it the following week.)
- "I don't know how it goes" (Ask a parent, or an older sibling, or find a recording. If you somehow can't do that, then practice other things, and ask your teacher to demonstrate it at the next lesson.)
- "I'm taking lessons, so I don't need to practice" (That's not the way it works. Your teacher is not there to babysit one day a week of practicing. He or she is there to give you the tools so that ***you can be your own best teacher***.)

If you are the one who practices when the other kids are being lazy, you will become a better player than they.

Try for 20-30 minutes per day, at least 5 days/week. If you want to become a really great player, more.

You should try some ideas from the "Middle School" section, too (see below).

How to Practice - Middle School Age

All of the above "beginner" advice applies to you too, but you are more mature, and you have a longer attention span. Here are some additional important things to include in your practicing:

- Scales and arpeggios: These are the basic building blocks of music, and will be a huge help to you in the long term. Memorize them!

- Long tones (for wind instruments): Hold a note as long as you can, medium loud, with the best sound that you can. Keep the volume and the pitch absolutely steady. Do this with notes in every register - high/middle/low. Do this for 5 minutes every day.
- Working on pieces as long-term projects: As you become a more advanced player, you will be working on pieces that may take several weeks (or more!) to learn.
- Sight reading: This is an important skill to develop. Open one of your exercise books to a random page, and see if you can read it correctly on the first try.
- Improvising: Using a scale as raw material, make up your own music. You can do this with major scales, minor scales, or blues scales. If you are studying jazz, you might want to use a play-along recording.

Set achievable goals for yourself - both one-day goals and long-term goals. Your teacher will help you with this.

Remember - When you solve a fingering or reading problem, it's not just to make that particular piece sound right. The next time that fingering comes up in a different piece, it won't be a problem. As you become a better and better player, you will solve more and more of these little problems - and you'll gradually play at a higher and higher level.

Always try to play with a good tone, even when practicing scales.

When you are practicing a piece, play with feeling and expression. Of course you should follow the dynamics and expression markings, but you can also add the kind of expression that can't be written down.

Stay relaxed, both mentally and physically. You'll think better and play better.

Try to practice at least 30 minutes per day, at least 5 days/week. Twice as much would be a good idea, when possible. If you are really serious, more!

You'll find some more ideas in the "High School/Adult" section, below.

How to Practice - High School/Adult

All of the above advice applies to you too, of course.

When practicing scales and arpeggios, vary the rhythms, groupings, accents, and/or articulations. For example, play a scale in eighth notes, then in triplets. Play both slurred and tongued. If you know your scales for one octave, then learn them for two octaves. Next, learn your scales all the way to the top of your instrument's range, then back to the bottom of your instrument, then back to the starting note. Play scales in thirds, or in fourths. The idea is to build versatility and expand your abilities - don't just get stuck playing the same routine week after week.

When you are working out a problem spot in a piece, here's how to do it: 1) Identify the exact problem; 2) Create an exercise that addresses the problem - perhaps start a few notes before the problem spot; 3) Start slowly, being aware of each muscle movement, then gradually increase tempo; 4) Put the excerpt back in context - back up a measure or two, and play the entire phrase that includes the problem spot, plus another measure or two. When you can consistently play it correctly this way, then back up 8 or 16 more measures and try it again - just to make sure.

Sometimes it's harder to play slowly; the music just doesn't sound like it should. But it's worth the effort to work through the process. You'll understand the music better, and your "muscle memory" will be more precise. Imagine that you are playing a "slow motion" soundtrack.

Invent melodic patterns, and play them in all 12 keys. Here's a good exercise: Can you play "Happy Birthday to You" in all 12 keys, by ear?

If you are studying jazz, it's essential to practice scales, chords, patterns, and licks in all 12 keys. Move them around the circle of 4ths, or up/down by half step, or up/down by whole step, etc. This is really helpful for classical players also.

Listen to recordings of the great players, particularly for pieces you are working on. Check YouTube, too. But be critical - listen for what the performer missed, and consider how you might play it better.

“Practice makes perfect” - not true. There is no “perfect.” Practice makes *better*. If you ever think that you played “perfectly, ” you are probably fooling yourself. There is always a way to make your music better. Learn to analyze and evaluate your own playing.

When you are working up a piece, shape every note. Every note is there for a reason, and every note should have meaning. This is every bit as true for an improvised jazz solo.

You can practice mentally, without your instrument. Imagine the sound of the music, and imagine moving your fingers. For example, imagine playing scales while you are on the bus or riding in the car (NOT while driving), or when you are going to sleep. If you are a jazz player, improvise some blues in your head while you are out on a walk.

Try for at least 45 minutes/day, at least 5 days/week. Twice as much would be a good idea. The upper limit is determined by your level of seriousness and by your other commitments in life.

Here is a lesson about practicing that I sometimes give to high school and adult players:

> Say that you have an hour to practice. What sorts of things, specifically, could you spend your time working on? Let’s make a list!
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> Then we make a list of practice items. It might look something like this:

- long tones
- scales - all kinds (major, minor, modes, chromatic, etc.)
- arpeggios (triads, seventh chords - by ear or from exercise books)
- patterns and licks in 12 keys (jazz players should do some II V patterns)
- jazz reading - transcribed solos or etudes (project pieces)
- classical reading - etudes, duets, etc. (project pieces)
- sight reading, jazz or classical
- soloing/improv - with playalong recordings, or unaccompanied
- stuff for “tomorrow” - school pieces or urgent projects, for upcoming concerts or gigs
- overtones
- altissimo
- memorizing (classical)
- memorizing tunes & changes (jazz players)
- working on reeds
- listening - classical/jazz
- transcribing (on paper or by ear)
- solo analysis (jazz) or harmonic analysis (classical)

> Here is an obvious fact: You might be able to seriously work on one or two of these things in an hour. There is no way that you could do justice to all of them.
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> Here is the next obvious fact: You will have to choose which items are most important to you, and work on those.
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> Here is the obvious conclusion: Over a long period of time (years), your choices will determine the kind of musician you will become. For example, if you do a lot of sight reading and no improvising, you will probably become a good sight reader, but not as good an improviser. If you work more on tone but less on technique, tone will be one of your strong points, but technique maybe less so. It’s really up to you!

Jazz Practicing vs. Classical Practicing

Jazz players tend to practice somewhat differently from classical players. But it's not so different, really - it's a question of emphasis, doing what is necessary to meet the demands inherent in your chosen style of music.

Both styles require two types of practice: 1) Projects aimed at mastering the basic materials of music (scales, arpeggios, etc.), and 2) Projects that are performance-oriented, aimed at mastering specific compositions.

The first type we might call "long-term," the second type we might call "piece-specific."

Jazz players need to develop the ability to play anything that occurs to them, in any key, so it's only natural that "long-term" practicing tends to take precedence. However, as a player takes on more complex projects, the "basic materials" approach moves beyond scales and arpeggios, and begins to incorporate licks, melodic units that will be used in performance. These will become elements of one's personal style.

This "patterns" approach to practicing is standard in the jazz world, and there are a great many books that detail this approach (a specific exercise program is beyond the scope of this article). Basically, this means playing any given shape in all 12 keys, starting with scale- and arpeggio-oriented shapes.

But "piece-specific" practice is appropriate for jazzers, too. As an object lesson, consider Charlie Parker's showpiece, "Cherokee." If you listen to various recordings made over the course of his career, you can hear it as a composition that was a perpetual work-in-progress. Much of his "improvisation" seems to have been worked out, and practiced, in advance (although he never played it exactly the same way twice). You can dig deeply into a tune, work out some nice paths for improvisation, and refine your interpretation of the melody.

Classical practicing is usually about working up a performance of an already-composed piece; improvisation is almost never an issue (though interpretation is a very big factor). Compared to jazz playing, classical performance demands a higher standard of perfection. It's only natural that more time will be spent on "piece-specific" practicing.

But "long-term" practice is essential for classical players too. It will improve your ear and your grasp of theory, as well as your overall technique. And it is certainly worth your while to work towards having equal facility in all keys.

Jazz players can benefit from some classical study (discipline, high standard of perfection, internalizing great composers' sense of melody and harmony). Classical players can benefit from some jazz study (projecting spontaneity, the benefits of "long-term" practicing). And if you are interested in looking into the musical styles of other world cultures, so much the better! It's always good to broaden your horizons.

I hope that the advice in this article has been helpful! Whatever your age or level is, ***have fun practicing!***