

Guidelines for Practice

Studying a musical instrument presents a wonderful opportunity to develop skills that can be enjoyed throughout the rest of a person's life. The essential requirements to develop as a musician – an independent and focussed approach coupled with strong organisational skills – are hugely beneficial for the development of a young mind. Yet learning a musical instrument is a long-term undertaking far removed from the widespread culture of instant gratification that permeates much of today's society. The player will be left alone for much of the time – weekly lessons being the norm – so a mature and organised approach is imperative if progress is to be achieved; enjoyment, and, subsequently, motivation will wane otherwise. It is hoped that these guidelines will help parents to support and encourage young musicians to greater heights through a more efficient and focussed practice regime and a greater understanding of the challenges, and rewards, that lie ahead.

Establishing a good practice regime is fundamental to making progress on any musical instrument. Distractions are plentiful, and for all but the most organised students practice is often neglected. Therefore, deciding when to practice, and for how long, is the crucial first step. It is impossible to offer definitive advice about the length of time that should be devoted to practice each week, as so much depends on the standard of the student, the length of the pieces and their relative difficulty, but there are two simple rules: quality is always more important than quantity; and regularity of practice is much more efficient as well as more pleasurable. Practice sessions should be fixed in advance and adhered to, remembering that a little often is infinitely more valuable than one long session, usually the day before the next lesson! The following guidelines suggest the **minimum** time that should be spent practising each week in addition to the lesson:

- Grade 1 Three ten-minute sessions
- Grade 2 Four ten-minute sessions
- Grades 3 – 4 Four twenty-minute sessions
- Grades 5 – 6 Five twenty-five-minute sessions
- Grades 7 – 8 Five thirty-minute sessions

A number of accurate repetitions of a passage, with appropriate attention to the musical detail, will, in time, allow the player to produce a fluent account of that passage. So what can possibly go wrong and what can be done to improve matters?

Impatience is the root cause of so much difficulty and frustration! The limited time available for practice is often squandered playing a piece through only to rediscover the sections that require attention. Students should spend a few moments considering what needs to be accomplished and how this might be achieved, prioritising the more challenging sections. Confidence will increase once these are mastered, and there will be substantially less likelihood of a serious loss of continuity in performance. A secure technique is key: reliability is achieved by developing a strong technique that can withstand the additional pressures experienced on the concert platform or in the examination room. To this end, technical exercises are a necessary part of every musician's diet, yet many students do not recognise their value. Every practice session should begin with technical exercises, but variety is important if a student's interest in this area is to be maintained. For example,

practising scales in a range of rhythmic patterns, and exploring a range of dynamic contrasts and articulation. This will also ensure a musical approach: at all times students need to listen carefully, resisting the temptation to play exercises mechanically.

Most of the problems students are likely to encounter are related to speed: hesitations, wrong notes, poor tuning, inaccurate rhythms, muddled sound, and a host of other musical “crimes”. A suitable tempo – for technical exercises and pieces - must be chosen that permits the brain to process and retain information. In the fullness of time, this approach will allow the student to reproduce the music at a more appropriate tempo and will help to avoid practising mistakes. Accuracy in practice is paramount: the time to take risks is in a performance, never in the practice room. Working in small sections, repeating carefully each section three or more times until each section can be played reliably is equally important.

Teachers should help students to develop a good practice strategy, and their advice should be heeded; to do otherwise will result in going over the same ground, which is a source of frustration for both teacher and student.

It is always gratifying to make progress in any walk of life and progress is a prime source of motivation:

PRACTICE ⇒ PROGRESS ⇒ PLEASURE

Students who claim to ‘learn for enjoyment’ but fail to practise will, however, almost certainly curtail their studies before giving flight to their musical potential. Learning an instrument is a leisure activity for most, naturally, but one of immense value if pursued appropriately.