

# Perfect Practice:

## How to make the most of your practice time

There's no getting away from it, mastering the guitar is something that takes a great deal of time and patience, as well as the dreaded "p" word for musicians- practice. And in the modern world, time is at a premium- I'm actually writing this between lessons, watching the clock and waiting for my next student to arrive.

There are, however, some techniques you can use to maximise the time you do have to improve your skills. Most players fall into the trap of simply playing what they know a few times over and then putting the guitar down feeling like they're progressing nowhere. End result- frustration, disenchantment with the instrument, and eventually abandoning it to sit in the loft gathering dust.

### IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE THIS WAY

By organising your practice time, setting regular and realistic goals, you can ensure sustained progress on the instrument. And this isn't some magical cure, it's basically the application of common sense; but like, adding checking the oil, water and tyres regularly on your car, it's not obvious unless you actually understand the mechanics involved.

What we're going to do is look at a couple a basic practice routine, suitable for classical and pop/rock players . We'll take the basic time frame of 30 minutes per day- although 1-2 hours is recommended for those seeking to take their playing to a drastically higher level, good results can be achieved within the time normally taken up watching an Eastenders episode. And it's generally a far more enjoyable experience.

#### Stage 1)

##### **5 minutes: Warm up**

Warm ups do exactly what they say on the tin, they get the essential muscles ready to perform their tasks, much as an athlete will stretch before a workout or race. They also serve to get the neural pathways that carry information from the brain to the fingers opened up: if you can imagine the neural pathways between brain and first two fingers (the most used in the normal course of things) as being like wide open motorways, the ones that carry info to the third and fourth fingers are more akin to dank, dark overgrown pathways studded with brambles. A good warm up will help to cut a path through those obstacles.

Warm up exercises range from simply shaking the wrist and elbow to running three octave scales and arpeggios, but as with all things it's best to start simple- strum through a few open chords first (running through the anti-RSI exercises in my No Pain More Gain article is also recommended if you're settling in for a lengthy session), or a few open-string exercises for you classical players, then a couple of chromatic exercises, moving onto scales and arpeggios as dictated by your current level of technique.

## **Stage 2)**

### **10 minutes: New material**

By this stage, your motor skills are revved up and ready, and your brain's concentration span is at its peak. Now's the time, then, to bring in some new material to work on. New pieces are an essential part of development, and you should always be working on widening your repertoire. Aside from the direct benefits (i.e. more stuff to play), learning new material keeps things fresh and allows you to see the benefits of technical development in a genuine musical context.

The approach changes between classical and rock/pop players- for a classical player it's best to work through a new piece bar by bar, practicing it in isolation to begin with, before adding to the preceding bars. For rock/pop players who generally deal with songs written in a modular fashion (i.e. intro verse-chorus-verse etc.), it's best to work through a song in levels of complexity, starting off with a basic chord structure (I always write out a rough guide to each song I learn by ear, helping me to remember it as well as meaning I don't have to worry about working it out again), before settling down to work through some of the signature riffs and wrinkles.

## **Stage 3:**

### **5 minutes: Current problem areas**

Your brain will be starting to lose its concentration by this point, especially after a hard day at work/ school/ college/ the pub, so we'll make use of what's left by focusing on some current material that's been causing problems. Be sure to target your practice time as precisely as possible- break the problem areas down to a 2-3 note sequence or a single chord change and time yourself. It's surprising what you can achieve if you spend 90 seconds hammering a small group of notes over and over. Think about it- at 120 bpm, that's two beats a second. Two beats equals four eighth notes. So a four note eighth note/quaver sequence can be played 90 times at full speed- or more productively, 30 times at half speed, and 30 times at full speed. At the end of that 90 seconds, that particular sequence will be well and truly nailed. Put it into context- a bar either side, then into the section (chorus, verse, whatever), then the full song. In this way you will make tangible, concrete improvements each session

## **Stage 4:**

### **5 minutes: Familiar material**

You've earned it- time to let rip on your favourite song or piece. Technique level doesn't matter, this is the carrot at the end of the stick. No specific guidelines here, just play and enjoy.

## **Stage 5:**

### **5 minutes: Warm down**

Athletes do it, so why shouldn't we? For the last 25 minutes you've been putting both mind and body under some not inconsiderable strain, so some slow, gentle movements are the

order of the day. I actually recommend nothing more technical than some improvisation- play along with a favoured backing track, or just play something that relaxes you. Clear your mind of scales, arpeggios, any technical considerations and for a moment just relax, close your eyes and play music. Let your ear guide you, and try and create a melody that gives you a sense of well being and relaxation, and get back in touch with exactly why you picked up the instrument in the first place.

So, in the space of thirty minutes, we've warmed up, learnt some new material, hammered a couple of problem areas in the stuff we already know, blitzed a couple of favourite tunes and finished off with some gentle relaxing improvisation. Pretty impressive stuff. Now, try this program for a month and see if it doesn't refresh your interest and enthusiasm for the instrument.

It's very rarely a genuine lack of talent or ability that holds players back- don't forget, we all start off pretty rubbish, but there are very, very few people who genuinely are "tone deaf" and cannot find some level of fulfilment from their instrument.

Now, to leave you with the most important advice of all- Enjoy!