



# Learning to Play ANY Musical Instrument

*"Teachers open the door, but you must enter by yourself."*

– Chinese proverb.

## Contents

- Starting Well
  - Buying an instrument
  - Elements of playing well
  - Choosing what to learn
  - Practice (makes perfect)
  - Composing, arranging, jamming
  - Rules
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## Starting Well

To play an instrument well, it is important to start with correct playing technique. This will involve posture, and according to the instrument such items as finger placement, breathing, bowing, plucking, reed control, etc.

For example, if you wish to play keyboards you should know how to correctly rest your hands on, and press the keys: if you want to play guitar you should know how the fingers are best placed on the neck and the ways of holding a plectrum or otherwise sounding notes.

For this you should refer to a good teacher or a good "teach yourself" book.

If you start off properly there will be no need to unlearn bad habits which may inhibit you when it comes to mastering more complex music, or may make playing more tiring than necessary. That is why it is vital to start off on the right track. (How should you hold a drum stick ?).

Whether you intend to teach yourself or use a tutor, if you have already learned one musical instrument, you will find it easier to learn a second, third and so on. So teaching yourself is easier if you already have musical knowledge. It would be wise if you are starting from scratch not only to refer to books but also to find some help from an accomplished player.

## Playing a keyboard

- Hold your fingers in a curved shape. Imagine holding a ball in each hand, that is the way your fingers should be kept.
  - Wrists should be level with your arms. If they are not, then you should change the height or angle you are sitting at relative to the key surface.
  - Press the keys with the tips of your fingers. If your fingers are flat-ish along the surface rather than curling and pressing down from above, you will need more force to move the keys and will become tired more easily.
  - Do you have long nails? If you do, you will hear them click on the keys.
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## Buying an instrument

It is important to buy the right level and quality of instrument to suit your needs.

As a beginner, you should not spend big money on a top-grade instrument that you cannot play. A very expensive instrument is OK if you are rich, good at playing, or if you are a collector of instruments.

More importantly, you should not choose a cheap and poor quality instrument which could diminish your pleasure in playing. It is simply not worth buying an instrument that you will out-grow within weeks or months.

Many people buy an inexpensive instrument at first. Once they are sure they like it, and can play well enough to benefit from a better instrument, they upgrade.

## Care and adjustments

It's obvious but worth saying that you should understand how to care for and maintain your instrument, and do it.

**Never** store a musical instrument outside. (for example in an out-house, shed, garage or loft). Musical instruments are sensitive to temperature and humidity. A quick way to ruin them is through neglect and by storing them somewhere inappropriate.

Instruments can be tuned and adjusted in various ways. Do not try and perform the set-up if you are not qualified. For example tuning a piano is a highly skilled job. Equally other forms of repair, maintenance and set-up on other instruments require expertise you are unlikely to have. Don't be tempted to think you can do it all yourself.

With regards to tuning, make sure you know how to adjust your instrument properly. There's no harm in practising your tuning skills. If you can tune up quickly and accurately you will save time and appear professional.

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## Elements of playing well

Main elements are...

- being able to play the chosen material easily
- being able to play the chosen material with the right feel or feeling
- being able (when required) to play in such a way as to fit in with other performers or other instruments and sounds in the same piece of music

Playing with the right "feel" is made possible by mastery of the technique necessary to perform the music. Once you are familiar with a piece and can easily play it, you can concentrate on playing it perfectly and expressively.

It is possible to learn pieces of music which can convey a great deal of feeling and which at the same time do not require much technical expertise.

The only way to get good at playing music with others is to play music with others. When doing this, make sure you listen to what other people are playing and to the music as a whole rather than concentrating on your part alone.

Remember that **what you don't play is as important as what you play**. The silences between notes are an integral part of the structure of music. It is good to underplay in order to provide 'space' in the music for other parts and other instruments.

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## Choosing what to learn

To begin with, it is advisable to learn very simple tunes or parts. You can keep adding to these in such a way as to stretch your capability slightly with each new piece.

You should aim to choose music not only for its suitable technical level but also because it is music that you enjoy and relate to. By playing music you like, firstly you will find the experience enjoyable which will spur you on to greater achievements. Secondly you will find that it's easier to play music you like more expressively.

Aim to broaden your horizons over time. Many people are keen on a particular type or types of music. Nonetheless it is worthwhile choosing pieces from a wider and wider variety of styles as you become more and more accomplished.

For example you may play violin and be primarily interested in the classics; try some folk pieces or jazz/rock pieces to broaden your horizons. You may play lead guitar; try pieces which require finger-picking, bottleneck or different tunings.

By mastering pieces of music beyond your normal area of choice you learn a wide base of styles and techniques. Also, you can incorporate elements of these styles and techniques into your own playing and compositions. (In effect you synthesise your own style from others). Choosing to play a variety of music types adds to your overall capability.

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## Practice (makes perfect)

*Practising nearly every day is the single most effective way to progress.*

**Remember:** Whenever you play something *correctly* (even at an unnaturally slow speed) it improves your capability. It is better to do a little every day, or nearly every day, rather than long intensive sessions irregularly.

When one has mastered a skill, one can be said to be unconsciously competent at that skill. Many of us are unconsciously competent at driving a car. We don't have to think about it. Earlier stages can be frustrating, so instead of overdoing it, pace yourself. Do a little every day. Small steps add up to a huge improvement over time. Also, never worry because you seem to be worse one day than you were before. Slow it down, get it right, be patient, and keep going.

## How to practice

- If your instrument is tuneable, tune up first. It is worth taking the time to do this properly and accurately.
- You should learn the perfect way to play slowly at first and repeat each item often in order to get used to it. Avoid playing fast at first.
- Investigate learn and repeat the known techniques and exercises on the instrument you are learning (Eg. how do you play a scale, bend a note, move smoothly from chord to chord, and so forth according to the instrument).
- Repeat the technique, only playing as fast as you can do accurately. Slowly increase the tempo until you are comfortable with the required speed.
- When playing a tuned instrument and doing exercises such as chords, scales, arpeggios and so on, change the key in which you are playing or other factors as appropriate (like the fingering, or which strings are used etc.).
- Occasionally vary things to test and stretch yourself. Eg (if applicable) play standing up as well as sitting down, or (if applicable) play with thin gloves on (and when you take them off WOW! its easy). Stretch yourself so you can cope with unforeseen circumstances, Eg drummer loses a stick and must keep going with one hand until he picks up another, or guitarist drops her plectrum.

## How to practice a piece of music

- Work out the correct technique for playing each phrase or small chunk of music including any fingering, breathing, or other techniques
  - Play each phrase separately and very slowly at first.  
(For a two-handed keyboard part, first play with one hand, then the other, then together.)
  - Join up the phrases, keeping the pace slow and practising the joins between phrases in particular
  - Play along with a metronome or a drum machine some of the time. This is invaluable. It helps to make sure you don't tend to slow down, or (more commonly) speed up as you go along
  - String the piece together and check the fingering/technique works throughout in the easiest way for the desired result
  - Slowly increase your speed (starting from very slow and building up to the tempo of the piece) ensuring you are always playing in time. Do not worry if you can't play at full tempo even after several attempts. By playing correctly at all stages, you will be able to master faster and faster speeds
  - Practice whole pieces top to tail by yourself as required
  - Practice with other musicians as required
  - Practice making sure what you play gives the feeling you want to convey. Your tutor or handbooks will explain phrasing, time signatures, accents and so on which affect your performance and feeling.
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## Composing, arranging, jamming

If you want to compose, arrange, or jam, it is important to have an understanding of the way music is usually structured. Different musical genres require different terms to describe their structure. For example a concerto is usually divided into "movements", whereas in popular and folk music, songs may be broken down into "verse", "bridge", "chorus", "middle-8" etc. Your tutor or musical reference books will help you out with this.

When you are composing or arranging, it will be necessary either to write music or in some other way communicate what is required to the musicians who will work together to perform or record the piece of music.

There are commonly used naming conventions and ways of writing music. Look on the internet about musical terms and notation (inc. re braille etc.) and guitar tablature. There are also many music notation software products which do the writing for you.

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## Rules (are not Rules OK)

The last but not least point to make is that although there are many conventions in music, all of these are arbitrary. There was a time before any existed. In fact there are no real or absolute rules. Many of the best players and composers have at times done things which have broken with either tradition, or the norms of the day, or both.

**The importance of learning the rules is paramount.**

**After all, if you don't know what the rules are, how can you break them!**

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