

BEGINNING HAMMER DULCIMER

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PRACTICE

*If I were to begin life again, I would devote it to music.
It is the only cheap and unpunished rapture upon earth.*

Sydney Smith

1844 letter to the Countess of Carlisle

Playing music demands a mix of seemingly unrelated skills. It's part athletic and part esthetic. Some mathematics is involved and, so too, is a lot of memory. Rhythm is essential, and good judgment developed through a lot of analytical listening is vital.

Practice can become a dull, monotonous burden unless you intentionally build in some fun. If you don't get creative with your practice, boredom will drive you away from the dulcimer. It is critical to begin and to close your practice sessions feeling good about yourself, your music and your instrument. You must intentionally design your sessions to achieve this. It doesn't happen all by itself.

Too often, we get overly intent on achieving a goal to improve this or that about our playing. Practice sessions then become a kind of private flogging. We try and try and try to get a phrase, a passage or a technique perfected. We fail and fail and fail and leave the instrument with our left brain punishing us with "*I told you so. You'll never be a musician.*"

Don't fall into this terrible trap. Start thinking *NOW* about how to organize your practice sessions so that you start and finish feeling up about yourself and your music.

How to Organize a Practice Session

Let's say you have a half hour set aside for practice. Here's how I might approach this important time.

First, tell everyone in your household that you love them and they are the most important people in your life. *BUT*, for the next half hour, you are going to work on something of great importance to you and you need to concentrate and to have this half hour uninterrupted. The trash can wait a half hour. You don't care what the score is in the ball game. The grass will not grow significantly in a half hour. Phone calls will be returned in a half hour. You don't need to hear that the playing is good, bad, indifferent, boring, or fabulous. You just need this half hour to concentrate on your music. The only two exceptions are: 1) life and death situations, and 2) if the prize patrol from Publishers Clearing House shows up.



Organize your practice this way:

Tune the instrument	5 minutes
Do a few warm up drills scales, hammer control, accuracy drills	5 minutes
Play the instrument Play something you love, something you are good at, something you are relaxed about. It doesn't matter if it is simple or complex. The important thing is that the selection brings you joy when you play it.	2.5 Minutes
Practice Work on the technique, the tune, the passage, the arrangement, the drill that is the goal of your session.	15 minutes
Play the instrument Again play something you love. Maybe it is the same piece you opened the session with. Maybe it's different. The only important thing is that the piece brings you joy.	2.5 minutes
Total Practice Time	30 minutes

There are lots of variables here. Maybe you can't tune the instrument in five minutes. Often, I can't either. But sometimes, it doesn't need more than a few spot adjustments. Two minutes and I'm on my way. Yes, I'm splitting hairs by suggesting 2.5 minutes to play something you love. But that's about five times through an AABB fiddle tune or three times through a Carolan piece. Maybe that time is two minutes, maybe it is three minutes.

In the end, this half hour session achieves these goals: 1) you get nearly half an hour of true practice, 2) you get to focus on new material or techniques, 3) you reinforce material already part of your repertoire, 4) you review essential basics of style and technique, and most importantly, 5) you begin and end the session confident in your talent and with your love of the instrument renewed.

Some rules:

1. DON'T PUNISH YOURSELF

Never practice a difficult drill or passage to the point of total frustration. If you feel like throwing your hammers, looking for wire cutters, or kicking the cat, take a deep breath. Play something you love and are good at and end your practice session for now. All of us have days that just don't seem to allow a positive attitude for playing.

2. Don't Overdo It

Hours of scales have ended many a child musician's love of the piano. Don't make this mistake. Keep the drills in perspective. Never let them dominate your practice sessions. Small doses,



applied frequently, are far more effective than bingeing. Two hours of hateful drills on Saturday is not as effective as five minutes a day – thirty-five minutes spread out over a week.

3. Don't be Unfairly Critical of Yourself

Music is part heart, part intellect, part muscle memory. You come equipped with the heart and the intellect. It's the muscle memory that's slow to develop. Give it time. Steady, modest practice will fulfill your potential. Don't torment yourself with setting goals that demand too much too soon.

4. Start happy - End Happy

Always open your session with a selection that makes you happy. Work hard on your drills and music in the middle of the session. Always close your session with a selection that makes you happy. Remember, you are in love with this instrument. Don't pick a fight with it or with the music.

5. Short and Frequent is Better than Long and Occasional

Practicing every day for twenty minutes will improve your playing faster and more successfully than practicing only on Saturday for three hours. You are trying to develop the memory of your small motor muscles. They tend to be really stupid and need lots of reinforcement. If you cram them with information, they forget. Little doses frequently applied are far more effective.

If you want to stop playing the dulcimer, my recommendation is that you turn to the exercises section of this book and just start playing drills. These will certainly put you off the instrument. The drills are powerful drugs. Use them regularly, but sparingly. The drills are not music. They are a means to the music. No drill has ever made me happy and I doubt you will be any different. Use them for their intended purpose - as an aid to learning how to play, not a substitute for playing music.

Another View of Practice Sessions

The following Internet post originated by Jackie Luke (Sydney Conservatorium of Music Library, Sydney, AUSTRALIA jlake@extro.ucc.su.oz.au) describes how to approach a one-hour practice session.

I would divide my practice time into thirds. The first 20 minutes I might run through what I call "teeth cleaning". This amounts to playing dance tunes, slowly at first and then building up speed so that I'm warmed up. I usually play each tune around 3 times and join them as in a session situation. Then I would spend 20 minutes playing concert repertoire, more difficult pieces, and if my voice is warmed up enough, songs with dulcimer. This keeps current repertoire up to scratch. In the last 20 minutes I might spend time arranging, trying out new material, including reading tunes. At any given time the amount of time given to each activity might vary. It would depend on what activities I was doing at the time - e.g. if a concert was imminent I might spend more time working on current repertoire. If I was getting tired of that I might do more exploration. Hope you can make something of this.



Cross Training

Competitive athletes exercise outside of their principle sport. The goals of this cross-training are to balance the specific conditioning developed in playing the sport at a high level with muscle and coordination improvement required by another sport. In the end, the athlete gets better in the principle sport.

This works for hockey players and it will work for dulcimer players too. Here are several recommendations that will help improve your performance as a dulcimer player.

Learn to play a compatible instrument. You don't have to invest years of study to become a great player on another instrument in order to become a better dulcimer player. However, familiarity with, and some playing ability, on other instruments can really improve your dulcimer playing. Here are some good options.

Penny whistle for melody and phrasing

Mass produced penny whistles are inexpensive. The fingering is easy to master. AND, they fit nicely into the pocket of your dulcimer case. So on those occasions when your tuning dies at a jam you can whip out the penny whistle and still be in the game. The penny whistle is also a great tool for exploring all kinds of tunes. They are just plain fun, too!

Guitar, mandolin, or banjo for chords, rhythm and timing

These instruments provide harmonic support for the melodic work of dulcimers. Learning music from their perspective helps the dulcimer player strengthen rhythm and build embellishments. Even if you don't learn one of these instruments, make friends with some players and learn the shapes their left hands take when playing chords. If you can read the shape of the hand, you will know when the chords in a tune change. That is a valuable skill for understanding the melody and for working chords into your embellishments.

Bodhran, bones, djembi, conga for rhythm and phrasing

Percussion instruments allow players to focus entirely on rhythm and phrasing. These percussion instruments can be purchased at reasonable expense. Learning to play them will make your playing more fluid and confident. Bones fit easily into a dulcimer case and are often welcome at jams. If you concentrate on Irish music, the bodhran will be a regular participant at jams. Mastering that drum will ensure that you are always welcome in the inner circle.

Learn to Dance. Most dulcimer music is played to support dancers. So, get on the other side of the bandstand, listen to a caller and move your feet. It is a great way to learn how to *feel* the rhythm of music. Most dancers don't seem to remember much about the melodic lines of the music to which they dance. They do remember the rhythm and, if present, the big, booming bass fiddle. Take up dancing to strengthen your rhythm.

Learn to Juggle. The great dulcimer player, performer and teacher, Steve Schneider, is a strong advocate of juggling as a way to improve performance on the dulcimer. He argues that it builds rhythm, strengthens the weak hand, and builds confidence in peripheral vision. It's



cheap too! Three palm-sized balls and you are in the game. Steve often suggests to his dulcimer students that they come to class with three tennis balls and several pennies. A slit is cut into the tennis balls and the pennies go inside. This keeps the balls from rolling away when you drop them while you are learning. There are many books on juggling – *Juggling for Dummies* is one that comes to mind. Common Ground on the Hill offers a course on juggling. A DVD teaching juggling is available at www.musicdvdonline.com. Another source is: www.jugglingstore.com/. Free juggling instructions are available online at: www.acm.uiuc.edu/webmonkeys/juggling/ or www.yoyoguy.com/info/ball/ and www.home.eznet.net/~stevemd/juggle1.html.

Critical Listening

Great writers come from dedicated readers. Great musicians come from critical listeners. Mastering the instrument means internalizing the sound of the instrument. That comes from hundreds of hours of critical listening. And that should not sound like punishment!