

1. How to practise smart

How many times have you heard music teachers telling their students to “Practise at least 3 hours a day!” or “You have to practise every scale and arpeggio at least 10 times daily”?

The fact is, the number of hours you practise is not that important. What is important is HOW you practise.

For example, when you are practising your instrument, are you listening to yourself? Are you aware of what you are playing? Are you counting accurately? Are you playing the correct notes? How is your intonation, bowing, breathing etc.? Are you following the dynamics, articulations, tempo changes and phrasings marked in the score? Do you FEEL the music? Are you playing musically? Are you using a pencil to mark down notes for yourself?

Or are you daydreaming, thinking of what to eat for dinner, or what movie you are going to watch this weekend.... oblivious to your mistakes while your hands are moving mechanically on their own?

For the former, so long as you are able to focus and be aware of how you are practising, you do not need to practise for hours and hours. Even if you only have an hour a day to practise, you will surely improve much quicker than hours of non-productive practising like the latter.

Another thing to note is that, every time you practise a piece, there is no need to practise from the first note to the last note. You can start by practising what you find is the most difficult or challenging passage of the piece, and just focus and work on the passage until you can get it right. If you still have some time to spare, look for the next difficult passage and repeat the same process. This means that you can start practising, for example, from the middle of the piece, then go on to the end of the piece, then back to the beginning of the piece. Once you have more or less mastered the difficult passages, you can then start practising from the beginning of the piece all the way till the end. This way of practising beats playing the piece from the first note to the last note, over and over and over again. Once a bad habit is established, it will be very difficult to rectify it, so please make sure that you are practising accurately right from the beginning, whenever you learn a new piece.

Try it, and let me know if it works for you.