# ‘No-practice’ instrumental lessons

VMT

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### Introduction

In an ideal world, our students would bound up to the practice room door exactly two minutes before their allotted lesson time, instruments and books in hand, keen as mustard to demonstrate the fruits of their hours of practice. In reality, however, this is not often the case.

Even at secondary level, just getting students to the right room at the right time with the right equipment can seem an uphill struggle. And after stuttering through the first bar of a piece that they’ve been studying for weeks, I’m sure we’re all familiar with the long list of detailed and sometimes highly creative excuses that can ensue after a casual enquiry as to how practice went this week.

As instrumental teachers, we tread a difficult line: learning an instrument is supposed to be fun and even a hobby, but it also requires a lot of discipline and commitment. If we’re too formidable in our insistence on practice, we risk putting students off. If we go too much the other way, however, progress is so painful that students lose interest.

Perhaps, like me, you’ve aimed for somewhere in the middle, and have found yourself half-heartedly and ineffectually nagging students about practice (having devised reward systems that are difficult to police, or trialling practice diaries that never get filled in, or attempting a myriad of other strategies that are time-consuming and produce variable results at best).

There are many reasons why students don’t practice. Some young people lack a suitable environment at home – indeed, there’s such disparity in students’ home environments at some schools that ‘optional’ or ‘no-homework’ policies are being introduced. Some students may not yet have developed the organisation and self-discipline to practice – unless they have a family member who’s a musician or a gym fiend, the concept of daily training may be new to them and take a while to take root. Perhaps our pupils are not connecting to repertoire, or find a particular musical skill like sightreading daunting. Equally, students may go through a period of increased academic workload while preparing for public exams.

Several years ago, I took over teaching some very demotivated violinists. Students often didn’t turn up for lessons, and when they did, they’d rarely done any work. Feeling that attendance was the top priority, I decided to release my expectation that they practise and focus all my energy on making our lesson time a fabulously positive experience that I hoped they would look forward to. No nagging. No being ‘put on the spot’. Positive vibes only.

Instead of working with what I’d *hoped* the student would bring, and feeling pressure that they should be making progress in a prescribed way, I found I was able to respond much more directly to the person in front of me. The dynamic shifted from master-apprentice to being much more collaborative. Keen to engage my violinists, I would quiz them about what music they enjoyed (violin or otherwise), and we would sometimes spend a significant proportion of the lesson listening to or watching performances together, taking it in turns to suggest tracks.

An interesting thing happened. After a few weeks, not only did students’ attendance improve dramatically, but they were also regularly coming through the door having practised, or researched music or other resources.

Here’s a table summarising the main differences between formal and informal learning in music:

| Classical, formal musical training | Informal musical learning |
|---|---|
| ▶ Master/apprentice model of learning | ▶ Peer-to-peer or collaborative learning |
| ▶ Study a set canon of music | ▶ Repertoire choice guided by personal interests |
| ▶ Formal ‘schools’ of technique | ▶ Greater emphasis on self-expression, e.g. improvisation and songwriting |
| ▶ Technique is drilled through scales and studies | ▶ More flexible approach to technique |
| ▶ Music assimilated through staff notation | ▶ Music is likely to be assimilated by ear/TAB/online tutorial |
| ▶ Understanding of music theory is expected | ▶ Knowledge of music theory is not assumed |
| ▶ Numerous conventions and etiquettes | ▶ Fewer conventions and etiquettes |

Jazz and traditional musics fall somewhere between these two extremes

There’s no question that regular practice is essential for progress. It can, however, sometimes take a while for students’ commitment to music to deepen, and for them to fully understand what being a musician entails. Being berated by a teacher on a weekly basis rarely has the desired effect, and at worst can turn students off their lessons. As counter-intuitive as it may seem, taking the pressure off practice and incorporating some strategies that support informal learning can be a powerful way to increase student motivation.

There are also clear benefits for teachers in terms of this approach’s positive outcomes and learning opportunities:

- ▶ It offers an alternative strategy to try with students who are demotivated or don’t practise.
- ▶ It will probably expand and develop your repertoire knowledge.
- ▶ It promotes a collaborative lesson environment.
- ▶ It’s a less pressurised approach to learning an instrument.
- ▶ You’ll probably broaden the skills you use in lessons, e.g. transcribing, arranging and improvising.
- ▶ It’ll test your ability to think on your feet by introducing an element of unpredictability.
- ▶ It encourages you to model resilience and tenacity.

In this resource, I’ll share some tips and activities that I’ve found to be useful for ‘no expectation of practice’ lessons, and that support a more informal style of learning.

## Lesson structure

Having a clear structure is important in any lesson, even more so in ‘no-practice’ lessons. Typically, my lessons comprise two halves: the first is more teacher led, and in the second I encourage students to decide what they’d like to play or investigate. Routine makes our lessons more efficient, since everyone knows what to expect. It also ensures that we’ve done some concrete work on developing key musical skills, as we don’t always know where the second half of the lesson will take us...

Keep activities short and simple: this helps maintain a purposeful, energetic pace and a frequent sense of achievement. If a student is really struggling with something, you can quickly move on if necessary and return to the task later.

### Teacher-led section

#### Secure success in the first task

The first experience our students have in their lesson should be positive. Ask them to do something you know they can do well, and praise them. This could be playing a scale or a piece they already know, or with a beginner, simply holding the instrument correctly. Make your praise specific: ‘Well done! Your posture was excellent and your bow was perfectly straight, which helped you make a pure, confident sound.’

Specific praise not only comes across more sincerely, but also provides a chance to detail the things that are working well and that you would like to see more of.

Think of a creative way to extend this first task together. You could play the scale as a round, play a rhythm on each note, or start on the second note of the scale and see what that sounds like. Be curious and creative. If they’re playing a piece, you could try the first four bars at a much faster tempo, give them one minute on the clock to memorise it, try playing it backwards (why not?), or play it along to a drum backing track with a different feel, e.g. swung. The more you can encourage students to have ideas and experiment, the better. We learn just as much, if not more, from the experiments that don’t work.

### Skills drills: focus on a few key skills and do them well

There are so many things we can teach our students: we could go into great depth about posture, relaxation and breathing; encourage them to commit large numbers of Italian musical terms to memory; experiment with improvisation; or get really good at identifying pitches on the stave.

When students are doing less work in the week, concentrating on a few key skills and mastering them builds confidence and motivation better than a more scattergun approach. *What* you decide to focus on is very personal, however, and it’s important to bear in mind what will have the most tangible impact on pupils’ ability to get playing music. Few things are more frustrating for students than going to an instrumental lesson and spending so much time on theory that you hardly touch your instrument.

My top priority is good posture and basic technique, as it’s so vital to making a decent sound on the violin and staying healthy. My other main focus is developing a strong sense of pulse and reading rhythm confidently, as these are fundamental skills that will serve students well in all their future musical endeavours.

I do not, however, introduce the letter names of pitches for a while, instead using a colour-coded TAB-style notation that’s very effective at getting students playing tunes quickly. My violinists also only play *forte* for the first few months, which helps avoid that wispy, whiny beginner string player sound. Once students know their way around the instrument and are secure with reading rhythm, building in note-naming and quiet playing is relatively simple.

Approach these key skills from different angles, and have lots of short, easily adaptable activities up your sleeve. If a student is finding something particularly difficult and getting demotivated, a quick shift of focus can keep the lesson from stagnating.

Some sample activities for teaching rhythm:

- Say rhythms (I use tea/coffee/mi-ilk for crotchets/quavers/minims with my beginners or students who find rhythm challenging. This might be a little babyish for secondary students, but it’s extremely effective and they usually think it’s quite funny, especially when you say it along to a backing track).
- Play them on body percussion.
- Say/play them along to a backing track.
- Transcribe simple rhythms.
- Compose rhythms.
- Assign a limited range of pitches to rhythms and play.

### Practise practising

When there’s no expectation of practice during the week, a proportion of your lesson time will be spent practising together. Explicitly draw students’ attention to the results of your hard work, and how they were achieved: ‘When you came in today, you couldn’t play that difficult two bars, but we practised the notes slowly in rhythms and now you can play it fluently and by heart.’

Use a few key practice techniques consistently and help your student build a toolkit that they feel confident using. I keep things really simple at first, and we go through the following process:

1 Identify and isolate the tricky bar(s).
2 Break it down: work it through slowly, checking the notes.
3 Loop it: slowly at first, and then speed it up.

Once a student is secure at deploying these steps, I add ‘Play It backwards’, where we play the last two bars of a piece, then the last four, and so on.

You can also design exercises together to help master a tricky section.

### Revise repertoire regularly

Cycle over and over familiar pieces, activities and/or scales. Regularly revisiting things and doing them better or differently is not only a great confidence boost, but also helps reinforce and deeply ingrain basic skills. It’s far more satisfying to be able to play a few pieces really well than ‘sort of having a go’ at lots of things.

I encourage students to compile their pieces into a display folder to create their own music library. At the back, we always have a selection of short easy pieces that they enjoy playing and know well. These are used for warm-ups or adapted and used as studies – e.g. changing the key or playing it with a different character, tempo or groove.

### Student-led section

While the numbers of young people participating in instrumental lessons is declining, there’s a huge increase in students learning through informal means such as digital platforms. To my mind, this approach offers three major appeals:

- Total freedom of repertoire choice.
- Musical learning is presented in a highly accessible way.
- Students can work at their own pace (no pressure to practise or being put on the spot).

Incorporating these factors into my teaching to various extents has really helped me improve engagement and retention of students. ‘Opening the floor’ like this, however, is not always easy, and can challenge us as teachers – both in terms of our musicianship and also in the shift in dynamic. When we’re used to being the expert in the room, it can feel strange and a bit vulnerable at first to be presented with unfamiliar material, deviate from our own training, and allow students to see our process of working something out, mistakes and all. However, it models some invaluable learning traits. When pupils observe their teacher being resilient, tenacious and unafraid to tackle something new, they’re more likely to adopt these qualities themselves.

### Your opinion matters

Some young people will have very clear ideas about what music they want to learn, or what they enjoy listening to. Others may say they don’t mind. This is absolutely fine, but I always encourage students to at least express a preference – choosing between two pieces is a good place to start. We’re in the business of developing artists, not drones, and artists have opinions! I want my young musicians to find their voice and take ownership of their learning right from the start of their training. When we feel we’ve chosen to do something, we’re much more likely to be invested in the outcomes.

### Research online together

For most people (especially young people), their first instinct is to ask Google. Many students, however, report that other instrumental teachers have discouraged them from using resources found online. Given the enormous range in the quality of material out there, this is perfectly understandable. But I would argue that it robs students of their favourite go-to tool.

I have a laptop in my teaching room which has now become indispensable. My students and I will usually do some initial research together during the lesson, and then they’re encouraged to see what else they can find during the week – this could be an app, an online tutorial or a YouTube video of a version of a piece they really like. Lessons are then an opportunity to collate material and to help them to be discerning about the quality of the content. Being a lot more tech-savvy than I am, my students have directed me to some very useful and innovative resources. They also really enjoy being asked for their advice and expertise.

Let’s say your student is a huge Beyoncé fan and wants to learn to play one of her tracks. The student-led part of the lesson might unfold as follows over several weeks:

- **Step 1:** listen to a few Beyoncé tracks together and decide which one is most approachable. You don’t necessarily need to play a whole track – you could start with just the chorus or a hook. This could lead to a discussion about why some songs work better than others as instrumentals, and it’s also a great chance to talk about melody. If the vocal melody is too difficult, you could pick out a part to play along with the band instead, or perhaps suggest some other similar tracks that will result in a more satisfying experience.
- **Step 2:** transcribe a few bars during the lesson. Students often find it mind-blowing that their teacher can hear something and work out how to play it. If you’re finding it tricky, be open about it. You’re modelling resilience, humility and a love of learning.

- **Step 3:** research together online and see if you can find a score/instrumental version/tutorial/backing track. Your student can continue the search in their own time. Listen or watch together – what did you like and why? What did you not like and why? The ability to evaluate is a high-level learning skill.
- **Step 4:** create resources. For some pieces students suggest, there will be a ready-made suitable version easily available. But this is often not the case. Sometimes you’ll need to change the key or make other alterations to ensure it’s within their grasp. I have a subscription to MuseScore (**musecore.org**) which is full of user-created content. Although the quality is very variable, I can usually find a transcription there that I can manipulate (and correct if necessary) within minutes, sometimes even during the lesson. Karaoke backing tracks are also very useful and great fun for playing along to. There are thousands available online for free for rehearsal purposes, and several sites allow you to create custom versions or download stems for a small fee.

At first, incorporating students’ suggestions can seem a lot more labour-intensive. However, making custom resources is part of the lesson and the learning experience. When I do have to do a little extra work outside lessons, it feels a small price to pay for having happy, enthusiastic students.

Constantly discovering and arranging new repertoire also keeps my teaching fresh. Over the years I’ve played everything from George Michael to Egyptian folk music, Ella Fitzgerald to Studio Ghibli soundtracks, Polish carols to Britney Spears. With large class sizes and strict curricula, students rarely get the opportunity to pursue their own lines of enquiry with the support of an expert, so this is often extremely motivating for them, especially when they can explore their cultural heritage through music.

Sometimes a line of enquiry will result in a dead end – perhaps the piece a student wants to learn won’t work well on their instrument, or is simply too difficult. This can be a great opportunity for the teacher to suggest an alternative or a good intermediate piece to help build the necessary skills. When the final goal is one of the student’s own choosing, they tend to be much more proactive about following your advice: it’s a good opportunity to sneak in a study or two! Usually students and I will take it in turns to suggest repertoire. Getting to know their musical tastes helps me think of pieces I know will appeal to them.

### Accessibility of material

The guitar is one of the most widely played instruments. There are many reasons or this: guitars are ubiquitous in popular music, as well as relatively cheap to buy and fairly easy to teach yourself at a basic level. Another major factor is that guitar TAB and chord diagrams are notation systems that require no prior knowledge of music theory and are immediately accessible to the layman. Guitar TABS and charts are also very widely available online for free.

While we don’t want to do our students a disservice by avoiding music theory altogether, if we’re too uncompromising on this side of things, they can get very demotivated. This can be especially important in ‘no-practice’ lessons. How you tackle music theory will depend heavily on which instrument you’re teaching and which skills you prioritise. But if writing in some note names or fingerings will help move things along faster, consider the merits of some instant gratification.

There are a number of online tutorials and apps that use animated diagrams of instruments instead of or in addition to standard notation. Examples include FlowKey (**www.flowkey.com**) for piano music, or the slightly dubiously named YouTube channel ‘Fiddling with my Whistle’ (**www.youtube.com/channel/UCVgPuZJRehYN3j2fAHRsVKA**) which has hundreds of songs presented in a *Guitar Hero*-like moving TAB for violin and karaoke-style TAB for tin whistle.

Personally, I find these types of resources to be a total game-changer as they enable students to explore and access music that they recognise and love quickly. Being able to assimilate music though non-standard notation does not preclude young people from learning about the stave in the same way that my being able to glean information from a pie chart does not preclude me from reading a bar graph. Any potential negatives on this front are, to my mind, outweighed by the increased engagement and key musical skills that are being developed in playing along. When you work through these types of resources with a student, you can ensure they’re using correct fingerings and technique.

### Peer-to-peer learning

While I don’t insist on personal practice, I’m strict about students attending band. Not only does band automatically increase students’ weekly time spent playing their instrument from 25 minutes to an hour and 25 minutes, but it also builds community and culture. It also offers an excellent opportunity for some peer-to-peer learning.

Rehearsals often include extended periods of time where pupils work in pairs or small groups learning and practising their parts together. More experienced students can exercise and consolidate their expertise by coaching less experienced students – sometimes young people find ways to demonstrate or explain concepts to each other that are much more intuitive or relatable to them than when it comes from a teacher. Again, students are free to suggest and discuss repertoire that they would like to play. Listen to a shortlist of suitable pieces together and take a vote.

Where possible, encourage students to learn the same repertoire as a friend or collaborate with a couple of other instrumentalists. Preferably, students should be able to use practice rooms to rehearse at break times, and teachers should have the option to organise some overlapping or joint lessons. Many young people really enjoy making music, just not on their own!

## Some final thoughts

Consider broadening your criteria for what constitutes practice. My students get strong positive feedback for showing me that they’ve engaged thoughtfully with music in *any* way during the week. What starts as doing some casual online research can sometimes quickly transform into determined practising when a student hits upon a project that fires them up.

As we well know, there is no one-size-fits-all method of teaching, and there are many different ways to be a musician. One of my pupils is rampaging through the grade exams with a spot at conservatoire in her sights, while another has fallen in love with trad jazz and is experimenting with improvisation and part-composed solos. Some students dream of standing in the middle of the stage as the centre of attention, while for others, music making is almost a meditative experience that they enjoy most on their own.

Whether you choose to adopt a less formal approach in general or experiment with certain aspects of informal learning for a limited number of sessions, helping students find what it is in particular that they enjoy about playing music is rewarding for everyone involved. If we can harness students’ love of technology and research instincts, we will create self-sufficient, creative learners who are not afraid to take the initiative. That can only be a good thing!