

Guide to practice

Introduction

The one thing that can make or break you in your progress as a drummer knowing how to practice. This might seem a little ridiculous. Surely its obvious? Well, sadly I have seen many a student fall by the wayside because they didn't understand how to practice effectively and how to manage time. It's incredibly destructive if you drift around without direction.

Targets

Whether you are happy playing to yourself in your garage or spare room, or want to play in a band, you need some goals. Short, medium and long term. In the short term, this is a case of managing your time week to week. What are you working towards right now? Is it a set of skills, possibly an exam? List them and mark where you are with each one. If you don't have some sort of target you will drift around and have no feel for how you are progressing. Make your goals realistic. I once heard someone say he's ok but wants to be 'premier division' in a course of 5 lessons. Of course that is not realistic. Work with your teacher and set out some goals together for the next 6 months to a year.

Budget your time

Don't put things off until tomorrow. Work out how much time you can and are willing to spare each week. Try and make this spread out over the week. Regular practice is by far the most effective. A constant flow is better and helps things stay fresh. If you leave big chunks of time you will fall behind and have to relearn parts. Remember you haven't truly mastered something until it is fully committed to your memory and you can play naturally. Of course, once you know what time you have you need to know how to maximise it.

Don't waste too much time playing your favourite groove. Focus on your weak side. Even on a small scale I see students who can play a basic straight 8 back to front and at virtually any speed but fail when it comes to bass drum variations.

Be creative

Don't just rely on everything that is black and white dots on a piece of paper or screen. Try making small adjustments to what you are working on e.g. what if this note was on floor tom or played with an accent etc etc.

Play along to music

This is so important and even better, fun. It doesn't matter what it is or whether you are playing the original part. Have fun trying or even deliberately play something obscure over

the top and see when it fits the music. This is such a good exercise in ear training and can be inspiring. Feel like you are sitting in with the band. Picture yourself there at Wembley!

Be your own critic

You should listen to yourself when you play. How am I doing? Even read a score and imagine how you would play it. Try and determine what your weaknesses are and attack them. Is your grip good, are you relaxed, is your left hand dragging, are you staying in time. If you don't know then ask someone else to listen.

Don't get frustrated too much

If it isn't going your way then leave it and come back later or tomorrow or play around with something else. In my experience if you get tense in your mind its like a lactic acid of the brain. You need to settle down and think constructively again.

Overall, stick to your plan

As mentioned earlier its not effective to wander around, and just tap about with things. Try to stay on subject. If you suddenly think of something you'd like to do, see how it can fit in with your plan but don't let the long term goals hold you back. Focus on the now.

One bit of advice I've always thought was brilliant (quote Craig Blundell) – always leave the practise room with a smile on your face. Makes sense to work on the harder material first.

If you have trouble coming up with a practice plan have a look out for our plan as a guide to get you started.

EXAM Practice

Firstly I would get a feel for how much time you have before the exam. Ultimately, if you practise it to the point you can play without your eyes fixated on the book, you are likely to do well. Make sure each week you can honestly say you have taken a step forward. Have you learned another couple of lines or mastered the rudiment or dynamics etc.

If you are struggling, analyse why. Are you struggling to keep up. Learn everything at a slower speed and gradually bring it up or perhaps play with a metronome until its stretched out to where it should be. Keep your technique in check. Poor technique often leads to over playing, or playing too heavily. Feel the music and move with it.

Above all don't leave it to the last minute or you will struggle and possibly fail. You have the skills, you just need to put the time in and you'll be surprised what you can achieve.