# When and how long to practice

One of my students who I have watched make steady progress and find great enjoyment over many years of learning an instrument had a hilarious but powerful idea that they lived by in their approach to practice. Somewhat early on in their journey, they requested that I teach them how to play *Her Majesty* by The Beatles. The final track on *Abbey Road* this song is only 26 seconds in length. No matter what, this student would never allow a day to end without playing *Her Majesty*. Even if it was the last thing they did before going to bed, they would play it once. This ensured they picked up their instrument *every day, no matter what*. The genius of this idea is twofold:

1. On the worst of days, this 26 second commitment was never too much.
2. Many times, those 26 seconds would become 20 or more unexpected minutes of enjoyment.

Sometimes just picking up our instrument is the hardest part. A few notes in, any resistance or fatigue usually begins to fade. This is why I also suggest to new students that they practice 5-10 minutes a day, every day but not for an hour on Saturday. 10 minutes a day is over 4 hours of practice by the end of the month. Eventually, I think a realistic goal for most students is anywhere from 20-60 minutes (a pretty wide range) depending on the day and the student. The key to it all is consistency. That's the first step. If you haven't found it already, find your *Her Majesty*, your musical haiku. Also, leave your instrument out of its case, somewhere you will see it often.

If consistency is no longer an issue for you, here is something else to consider. Instead of practicing once a day, what about practicing the same amount of total time but splitting it up into two to three different times of day? You don't have to do it evenly. I think 5 minutes in the morning is *very powerful*. You begin the day by touching your instrument and immediately that resistance, that feeling of obligation is no longer with you for the rest of the day. You're free to come back to it in a purer sense. How about 10-20 minutes of deeper practice after school/work? Finally (and perhaps most importantly), how about 5-10 minutes in the last hour of the day? Neuroscience suggests this is one of the best practices for processing, memory and retention. You may even find improvement in the next morning's 5 minutes. The brain does amazing

work while we sleep and there's something important about reminding it what to work on close to bedtime. You may also have the added bonus of musical dreams. This can be beautiful, weird and entertaining but I have also written songs by dreaming them first and figuring out how to play them in the morning.

Lastly, we inevitably encounter struggle, frustration, discouragement, self-doubt/criticism and fatigue in practice. I don't think it serves us to sit too long with these feelings or to try to grit our teeth and push through them. Better to walk away, do the dishes, have some tea, call a friend and come back to it later, refreshed and renewed. We're likely to find improved conditions.

So the answer to the above question is not "as often and much as possible" but instead: *every day* - even for just a little bit - and always remembering the two most important hours of any day are the hour after waking and before sleeping. Don't wake up and go to bed with your phone, wake up and go to bed with your instrument. Try it for 30 days and you'll never go back.

*Her Majesty's a pretty nice girl, but she doesn't have a lot to say*
*Her Majesty's a pretty nice girl, but she changes from day to day*
*I wanna tell her that I love her a lot*
*But I gotta get a belly full of wine*
*Her Majesty's a pretty nice girl*
*Someday, I'm gonna make her mine, oh yeah*
*Someday I'm gonna make her mine*