

Introduction

This book is written for non-professional, adult musicians who play traditional music.

The term *traditional music* can refer to regional musical styles from any part of the world. A defining characteristic of these styles is that they have historically been learned and transmitted person-to-person, by ear, rather than through written music. The focus was often on playing for dancers, or on playing together as social event in itself, rather than playing for paid audiences. Traditional musicians of many styles have started to refer to their music as “trad,” and that’s the term I use most often in this book.

In the 21st century, technology and the ease of travel combine to make it possible to learn this music, even if we didn’t grow up in the area where it originated. Yet even though the music itself is more accessible than it once was, adult trad players face some obstacles in becoming better musicians.

We Need a Teaching Style that Suits Adults

When we studied an instrument as children or teens, the teaching was normally oriented toward goals like performing, band competitions, or even a career in music. The instruments themselves were standard orchestral instruments.

Not having the goal of competing or performing may be a relief, but it can leave the adult musician feeling aimless, wondering why they’re going to all this trouble. Why spend hours practicing when you could relax and watch a movie after work instead? After all, it’s not as if you depend on it to make a living.

We're Often Self-Taught

The vast majority of trad musicians are learning without formal instruction. We may attend workshops and use online resources to learn, but without the structure, guidance and feedback provided by a teacher, we struggle to maintain our commitment and enthusiasm for practicing.

Many of Us Don't Know How to Practice

Many adult musicians aren't really sure of the most effective way to spend their practice time. Even if they do have a teacher, almost everyone I've spoken to admits they have no idea if the things they spend time on will help them achieve their musical goals *effectively* or *efficiently*.

We all know that repetition is involved, and time, and consistency. But *how much* time should we spend? *What* should we work on during that time? Should we focus on notes, ornaments, speed, intonation? How much music theory do we really need to know? What should our goals be for each day, each week, or longer?

As adult musicians, we may not expect to become famous and take the world by storm. At the same time, we have a right to want to improve and to take ourselves seriously as musicians. This book was written to address that desire.

How This Book Is Structured

Musical mastery is achieved through incremental progress. Every day we spend some time practicing and playing, and over weeks, months and years, we improve.

This book is written for you to read it in a similar fashion to the way you practice: in small, regular measures.

Each chapter offers a single concept or idea. Many offer practice techniques. Other chapters address the “mind game” of creativity

and practice. Some chapters are about ensuring your body provides the most effective support for your playing.

It may surprise you to find these subjects jumbled together, rather than presented in a more structured way. There's a reason for this "scattershot" approach. In order to learn deeply and permanently, we need to absorb new material in small quantities. We need time to try ideas, practice with them in mind, and even forget about them and come back to them later.

If I had organized the content subject by subject, it would certainly have been easier for me! Readers would have then been likely to read the book in a few sessions, and might walk away with three or four new concepts. My hope for this book is that you will take away a few more than three ideas.

There are 197 self-contained chapters. You may want to read one whenever you sit down to practice, or one every day or week, or whatever you want. You can read them in order, skim until you find one that appeals, or use the *sortes sanctorum* method: Flip through the pages, stick in your finger in a random spot and see what you come up with.

Even though the subject matter is scattered, there *is* some progression throughout the book. Some of the initial chapters apply to beginners along this road to mastery and self-knowledge. Some of later chapters build on concepts from earlier on.

I wrote over a period of many months, during which time I was playing and practicing myself. Many subjects surfaced for me again and again. I often had to be reminded of things I thought I already knew. For that reason, there are themes that recur throughout the book.

Each chapter ends with an intention. In the practice of yoga, teachers often begin class with a sentence or two, a suggestion that students try to keep in mind through the entire practice session. This concept translates well to music practice. An intention can help you stay focused during your day's practice.

Becoming a better musician and becoming a better person have much in common. Both involve listening to others; being honest, yet kind, to yourself; and integrating both humor and humility into your efforts. My experience as a musician, a martial arts instructor, a yoga teacher, and even as a broadcast video editor are represented here. I've incorporated learning from neuroscience, psychology, meditation, and subjective "research." Sometimes I may go a little far afield, but I hope I always relate the topic back to its relevance to our practice.

Writing about music, as the wags say, is like dancing about architecture. If I use words or ideas that seem out of context, or don't quite make sense, it's only because I was trying (and failing) to express the inexpressible.

I suggest you keep this book near where you play. Abuse it. Make notes and drawings. Highlight it; dog-ear and mark favorite pages. Do whatever you need to help you remember things and find what you need.

Happy practicing!