

# PRACTICING SKILL DOMAINS WITHIN DIFFERENT MODES

Within each mode of practice (e.g. learning new tunes, playing scales, group jams) progress may be made on multiple skill domains (e.g. instrument technique, theory, pitch recognition). The following pages outline examples of how to do this, each page representing a particular mode of practice, with a set of skill domains listed in **bold-face type** complete with descriptions of what to do.

It is important to note that the examples given are merely *suggestions* on how to build musicianship in various ways. They are neither mandatory nor comprehensive in scope. Do not be daunted by their multitude – the goal here is to simply provide lots of ideas which you *may* incorporate into your own practice.

Some of these suggestions are mutually exclusive: for example when learning new tunes (shown on the next page), the “Pitch Recognition” skill domain suggests learning that tune by ear while the “Sight-Reading” skill domain suggests using only sheetmusic. This simply implies some skill domains must be developed separately in order to maintain the necessary level of challenge for rapid progress.

This approach is not unlike an athlete dedicating certain exercise sessions toward specific physical goals. An athlete might dedicate some exercise sessions to aerobic activities in order to build cardiovascular capacity, and then dedicate other sessions to weight-lifting activities in order to build muscular strength. Although both cardiovascular capacity and muscular strength are necessary for peak athletic performance, they are best developed through distinctly separate activities.

The philosophy of deliberate practice is that *we train hard so we can play easy*. Practice sessions should be challenging, focused, and goal-oriented. We do this so that when we play music for performance or just sheer enjoyment we will be well-equipped.

## PRACTICE MODE: *Learning new tunes*

There are so many different skills we may develop when learning tunes! Tune-learning is also important for its own sake, in building a repertoire you may share with other musicians.

**Instrument Technique** – Choose tunes offering specific instrumental challenges (e.g. tunes requiring challenging string crossings, unfamiliar keys, unfamiliar rhythms, faster tempos). Concentrate on playing challenging portions of the tune, after getting a feel for the tune as a whole.

**Theory** – Identify the key (A, B, C, E flat, etc.) and mode (major, minor, dorian, etc.) of the tune. Identify chords and progressions. Identify arpeggios (chord-tone sequences) in the melody. These determinations divide complex tune into “chunks” that are easier to play.

**Pitch Recognition** – Learn the tune by ear rather than by sheetmusic. Feel free to repeat a recording of the tune, especially on challenging sections, if necessary.

**Rhythm and Timing** – Play to a metronome at various tempos. If appropriate to the genre, add rhythmic ornaments (e.g. “turns” within Irish tunes). Learn tunes of a different genre which have different rhythmic structures.

**Sight-reading** – Learn the tune by sheetmusic rather than by ear. Feel free to focus on specific aspects of the tune separately (e.g. tap just the rhythm without tones, play just the tones without rhythm), if necessary. Force yourself to play without stopping when you make a mistake!

**Music Memory** – Hum, whistle, sing, and/or audiate (play mentally) the tune before trying to play it on an instrument. Do the same *while* playing it. Recall the tune from memory and hum/whistle/sing it when not with your instrument.

**Accompaniment** – Play just the chords, accompanying a recording of the melody if practicing alone. Experiment with varying volume (dynamics) according to the emotional flow of the tune.

**Composition** – Create your own harmony, and write in sheetmusic form.

**Improvisation** – Play multiple solos over a recording of the tune.

## PRACTICE MODE: *Playing scales*

Scales (sequentially playing a set of tones, usually all the tones of a particular key) have a bad reputation for being boring, but *properly practiced* are both engaging and invaluable for building a number of skills.

**Instrument Technique** – Perhaps the most obvious benefit of scales, as they force you to fluently navigate up and down your instrument’s range. Play each scale across the instrument’s entire range, not just one octave.

**Theory** – Play the scale in interesting orders: skip by fixed intervals (e.g. by thirds), play in up/down cycles (e.g. 1, 3, 5, 4, 2, 2, 4, 6, 5, 3, etc.). Play the scale as whole *chords* instead of individual notes (e.g. a C-major scale could be played as Cmaj, Dmin, Emin, Fmaj, Gmaj, etc.). Play scales of each key in the Circle of Fifths. Play arpeggios of all chords, plus all inversions of chords.

**Pitch Recognition** – Hum, whistle, or sing each pitch of the scale as you play it. For extra challenge, play the scale out of order and try to vocalize the correct pitch of the next note *before* you play it on your instrument.

**Rhythm and Timing** – Play to a metronome at various tempos. Experiment with different rhythmic patterns (e.g. “swing” the notes, apply percussion rudiments such as rolls, drags, triplets). Record yourself playing scales and then listen to that recording for rhythm inaccuracies. Play *arpeggios* instead of chords.

**Sight-reading** – Play scales written on sheetmusic, not just by ear.

**Music Memory** – A scale is just a key played in sequence. To learn the whole key and not just the sequence, try playing the scale in *random order* (note: wrong pitches will stand out very clearly if the key is familiar to you!).

**Accompaniment** – Play a harmony to a recording of repeated scales. Audiate (i.e. play back mentally) a harmony as you actually play a scale, or vice versa.

**Composition** – Create a simple melody based solely on scale tones.

**Improvisation** – Play a recording of a tune in a recognizable key, then create a solo based on the scale-tones of that key. Practice playing just the *pentatonic* tones of that key (the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 5th, and 6th degrees of the major scale, or of the major scale relative to the key you’re practicing).

## PRACTICE MODE: *Group practice*

Group practice sessions are distinct from group performances or “jams” in that the focus is on the development of specific skills rather than entertainment. Highly valuable, they can be logistically challenging because they require a group of musicians seeking to improve the same skill(s). Musicians of mixed ability may all benefit, but only with well-planned activities designed to accommodate those differing levels of ability.

**Instrument Technique** – Watch other musicians’ form and technique. Ask questions. Experiment with different techniques and approaches. Get feedback from others in the group observing you.

**Theory** – One person plays a scale, and then others identify the key and mode of that scale.

**Pitch Recognition** – One person plays a note, or a sequence of notes, and then others try to mimic that same note/sequence. Start with tones belonging to a specific key, then expand to any and all tones. For additional challenge, the leader may span multiple octaves.

**Rhythm and Timing** – One person leads a tune, varying the tempo (*rubato*) as they go while others closely follow the changing tempo. One person introduces a rhythm, which then everyone repeats (e.g. drum circle).

**Sight-reading** – Everyone plays a new tune from sheetmusic at a slow tempo. It is important that no one stops at a mistake in order to keep everyone else moving! Cycle through the tune many times.

**Music Memory** – Each person plays a different portion of a common tune.

**Accompaniment** – Play accompanying chords/harmony to others’ melody playing.

**Composition** – Everyone contributes to a group composition, experimenting with melody lines, finding harmonies and accompanying chords. Use a computer to document the tune in sheetmusic form and then give electronic copies to all.

**Improvisation** – One player at a time plays a solo, while the others accompany with a backing rhythm and/or melody.

## PRACTICE MODE: *Tune maintenance*

Once you have built a repertoire of tunes, it becomes necessary to rehearse those tunes to keep them fresh in your memory and easier to recall when performing. Such tune “maintenance” may easily cease to be *deliberate* practice if rehearsals become too comfortable. The goal here is to challenge yourself even with the most familiar tune.

**Instrument Technique** – Choose to rehearse tunes offering specific instrumental challenges for you (e.g. tunes requiring challenging string crossings, unfamiliar keys, unfamiliar rhythms, faster tempos). Force yourself to vary your technique where applicable (e.g. different bowings, fingerings, positions than usual when playing the familiar tune). Concentrate on playing the most challenging portions of the tune if you find yourself making mistakes there. Record yourself playing complicated sections, then listen/watch your recording to locate and diagnose problem areas.

**Theory** – Transpose a tune into a different key. Alter a tune’s mode (e.g. from major to minor). Use new “inversions” of chords rather than the chords you’re familiar with. These alterations should be planned *before* playing so as to challenge your application of theory rather than rely on an intuitive sense of pitch (see next).

**Pitch Recognition** – Play a tune in multiple keys (there are twelve of them altogether!), relying strictly on your auditory sense of relative pitch and *intervals* to predict which tone comes next.

**Rhythm and Timing** – Use a metronome when rehearsing. Challenge yourself to play familiar tunes at slow and fast tempos. Set the metronome for a relatively slow beat and then switch from normal time to double time and back.

**Sight-reading** – Start the tune from some point in the sheetmusic *other* than the beginning, in order to force more reliance on sightreading and less reliance on memory.

**Music Memory** – Rehearse tunes using no sheetmusic whatsoever.

**Composition** – If you only know the tune by ear, transcribe it on sheetmusic. While this is not strictly *composing* a new tune, there is some originality involved because there is usually more than one way to correctly notate the same melody.

## PRACTICE MODE: *Playing with recordings*

This is an excellent way to simulate a group-playing environment when you are practicing by yourself. The available range of musical genres, playing styles, speed, and sophistication is limited only by the size of your music collection! It is interesting to note that a number of fantastically talented musicians (e.g. guitarist Frank Vignola, conga drummer Giovanni Hidalgo) learned much of their technique by listening to albums and playing along.

**Instrument Technique** – Choose recordings showcasing challenging techniques (e.g. ornaments, harmonics, etc.) and follow along as best you can.

**Theory** – Identify the key of the tune, and then predict chord sequences that should work with that tune.

**Pitch Recognition** – Learn the melody and/or harmony of the tune by ear, while it is playing at full speed (let the tune repeat as often as needed).

**Rhythm and Timing** – Regard the recording’s tempo as a metronome, playing as closely in sync as possible. Experiment with “back-beat” rhythms to complement the recording.

**Sight-reading** – If you have sheetmusic for the recording, read that music while simultaneously listening to the recording at full speed.

**Accompaniment** – Play chords to accompany the melody. Play your own harmony to complement the recording’s melody. Capture your accompaniment using an audio recorder, then play back for self-critique.

**Composition** – Transcribe your chord progressions, harmonies, counterpoint, etc. to sheetmusic, from your own audio recording if available. Transcribe the melody note-for-note by playing sections of it, duplicating on your instrument, and writing it down.

**Improvisation** – Play a solo (or “break”) during portions of the tune. Create a counterpoint to complement the recording’s melody. Capture your improvisations using an audio recorder, then play back for self-critique.

## PRACTICE MODE: *Group jams*

Technically, a “jam” is more of a *performance* activity than a *practice* activity, but there are still many things one may learn here. It is of paramount importance that your playing be tastefully executed so that you do not detract from the enjoyment of other players in the session. Play softly, and always respect whomever is leading the tune!

**Instrument Technique** – Observe the other players’ technique closely. Ask questions of other musicians if and when appropriate. It is not uncommon for informal jams to become mini-lessons to beginners, given the right mix of personalities.

**Theory** – Note the numbered progression of chords (e.g. 1-5-4), especially similar progressions in different keys. Identify instances of “passing” chords.

**Pitch Recognition** – If a tune leader launches into a tune without announcing chords, keys, or starting tones, play quietly until you identify all those attributes from ear.

**Rhythm and Timing** – Let the tune leader set the tempo, and do your best to follow along. Tap your foot to the rhythm of the leader’s playing. If the members get out of sync with each other, sync yourself to the leader and increase your volume if necessary. If you play a stringed instrument, try performing just percussion using “chops” or “chucks” during a jam.

**Sight-reading** – Play from sheetmusic if a tune leader brings copies to share.

**Music Memory** – Does your mind go blank when asked to suggest a tune during a jam session? Maintain a notebook with tune names and keys, with just a few of the opening tones written down to jog your memory. This will help you access your full repertoire of tunes without becoming completely reliant on charts.

**Accompaniment** – Pay closer attention to others’ playing than to your own, picking up on cues for chord changes, breaks, etc. Focus on good dynamic control (i.e. turning down your volume) to let others take the lead.

**Improvisation** – “Freestyle” playing where everyone improvises to a common key or chord progression. This works well following a familiar tune, where everyone’s minds and fingers are already in that mode.

## PRACTICE MODE: *Playing a different instrument*

At first, this may seem like an odd way to practice, especially if your goal is to improve on your chosen instrument. What playing a different instrument does for you, however, is force you to engage with the music differently. For example, when playing a different instrument it becomes impossible to rely on muscle memory developed with your regular instrument, which is a good thing if that muscle memory has become a “crutch” masking a weakness in some other aspect of your playing.

Playing a different instrument is just another way to practice any of the other modes (e.g. tune learning, playing scales). The following points explain how those skill domains may benefit as a result of using a different instrument.

**Instrument Technique** – Every instrument has its own unique technique, but different techniques may have “cross-over” application. Fretting strings on instruments with differently-sized fretboards (e.g, guitar versus banjo versus ukulele) challenges your fingering to be more versatile.

**Theory** – I highly recommend any serious student of music theory own some form of keyboard instrument (even a toy!) in order to easily experiment with intervals, chords, and other elements of music theory.

**Pitch Recognition** – The differing timbres of each instrument challenges your ability to identify tones and intervals. This is especially so if moving to an instrument with infinitely variable pitch, such as one with strings and no frets.

**Rhythm and Timing** – I highly recommend all musicians own a pair of drumsticks and use them as a training aid in developing rhythm, coordination, and hand-independence.

**Sight-reading** – Very challenging, as it forces you to “map” each written note to the new instrument.

**Music Memory** – Recall and slowly play tunes from your repertoire.

**Composition** – It is sometimes easier to compose an original tune on a instrument less familiar to you, because its different layout naturally suggests scales and melodies other than you may be accustomed to playing.



## PRACTICE MODE: *No instrument*

Don't forget to use the instruments you're born with: hands, fingers, feet, vocal cords, lips, etc.! Also, feel free to explore the range of smart-phone apps and computer software designed to train your sense of pitch and rhythm. Sheetmusic-writing software can be a useful training tool as well, when the software permits audio playback of your chart.

**Theory** – Find some good books on music theory and practice memorizing the various keys, modes, etc. Hum/whistle/sing scales, using a tuning fork or other pitch source as a starting-pitch reference.

**Pitch Recognition** – A variety of smart-phone apps and computer programs exist for ear training. Record yourself humming/whistling/singing a melody from memory, and then check the accuracy of the pitch against an instrument later, noting whether you tend to err on the side of sharp or flat.

**Rhythm and Timing** – Tap your fingers, toes, etc. to the beat of recorded music, especially pieces with tempos and/or rhythmic structures you find challenging.

**Sight-reading** – Read the pitch-letters from a piece of sheetmusic (e.g. read out loud, “C, B-flat, G-flat, etc.”) as fast as you can without making mistakes. Percussively play just the rhythm of the written music. Use computer software to write scales, then play those scales back as a MIDI track to check for correctness (also great for building your knowledge of music theory).

**Music Memory** – Recall tunes from your repertoire and “listen” to them mentally (this is called *audiation*), or feel free to hum/whistle/sing them.

**Accompaniment** – Hum/whistle/sing harmony to recorded music or with other singers.

**Composition** – Create a melody using computer software to write sheetmusic and play it back. Add chords and harmonies, each one with a different voice.

**Improvisation** – Hum/whistle/sing solos to recorded music, or just “play” solos in your mind as you listen to a melody.

## PRACTICE MODE: *Observing other musicians*

It may seem like the act of observing other people playing music is not even “practice” at all because you are not making a sound! However, the deliberate observation of other musicians’ playing affords many learning opportunities. Like all deliberate practice, this is not done for the sake of entertainment, and therefore requires a focused mind-set. The goal is to pay close attention to all the technical details of the performance, rather than focus on the emotional message of the playing.

**Instrument Technique** – If permitted, video-record a musician’s playing (zoomed-in if possible) for later playback where you may closely analyze their technique. Playing the video back frame-by-frame or in slow motion may reveal details you cannot see at full speed.

**Theory** – Identify scales, arpeggios, chords, and intervals used. Note where chord changes take place, and where (if at all) the tune changes key.

**Pitch Recognition** – Try to determine the key and mode of the tune strictly by ear.

**Rhythm and Timing** – Carefully note the coordination between the different musicians, as well as coordination of hands on a single instrument (e.g. pick versus fretting fingers).

**Sight-reading** – If the musicians are playing from sheetmusic, pay close attention to their use of that music: how often do they look at it, versus looking at their instrument? At which point(s) of the tune is their attention most focused on the chart?

**Music Memory** – When observing the performance of a tune you know, anticipate upcoming parts and melodic details based on what you remember of the tune. Audiate (i.e. “play” in your mind) your own solos.

**Accompaniment** – Note body language and eye contact between musicians used to coordinate transitions in the tune.

**Improvisation** – Note the form of any solos: how the solo follows or deviates from the melody, how different musicians’ solos vary from each other, any common soloing patterns (e.g. riffs) used by each musician.

# RESOURCES

- **Books**

*Peak* by K. Anders Ericsson – written by a cognitive psychologist on the strategies used by masters in multiple disciplines to attain peak performance.

*Guitar Zero* by Gary Marcus – written by another cognitive psychologist on the topic of people learning to play music for the first time in their later years.

- **Software/apps**

*EasyABC* – a free program for writing and playing back sheetmusic, based on the “abc” markup language used to format tunes on Irish tune repository *The Session* (<https://thesession.org>).

*iReal Pro* – an Apple app for playing chord sequences, which you may improvise to.

*HarmonyCloud* – a new app for chord ear-training, which you may also improvise to.

*Amazing Slower Downer* – software/app by Roni Music, useful for slowing down a recording to make it easier to learn by ear.

- **Lessons and Group Sessions**

*The Bellingham Folk School* – something is *always* going on here! (<http://bellinghamfolkschool.com>)

*Slow Jam at the Green Frog* – every Sunday afternoon at the Green Frog Tavern in Bellingham, focused mainly on classic rock, country, and folk songs/tunes.

*Irish and Folk Night* – every Monday evening in Bellingham: at Boundary Bay Brewery in summer, Honey Moon meadery the rest of the year. Mostly Irish session tunes during the open session, followed by a feature act.

*Ceili Club* – first Wednesday evening of most every month, at the Roeder Home in Bellingham. Mostly Irish session tunes played slowly at first, with the pace picking up at the evening goes on.

*Mojo Music* – this Bellingham music store hosts a range of “jams” – check their calendar for details.