

Tips & Tricks – Class & Jazz

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Tips & Tricks – Class & Jazz

You have subscribed at Class & Jazz to learn music. This booklet is offered to you in order to help you, as much as we can, to know exactly how to get started in the big adventure that music is.

This is a collection of **Tips & Tricks** that we'd like to share with our students. Most of the tips are of general use, but of essential value. Typically the kind of things that we sometimes mention during the lessons, but that we fail to repeat often enough because they are considered as being obvious by most active musicians (but not always by students). Thanks to this booklet, you can always come back at these tips, and consider them as references.

(You will find this text also, almost in its entirety, and in three languages, on our [Class & Jazz Webschool](#).)

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Practicing

HOW MUCH do I need to practice every day/week?

Here's the simplest answer:

Pick your aim

- Leisure amateur => 30 minutes to one hour a day
- Good amateur => 1 to 2 hours a day
- Professional => 2 to 4 hours a day
- Virtuoso => 4 to 8 hours a day

To play an instrument is a major challenge for the coordination. It needs a lot of exercise and repetition. Patience and regularity are indispensable. Compare it to a child that learns how to walk. That child tries every day or he wouldn't learn it. And once he knows how to walk, he will continue to practice every day, otherwise he might forget how to walk.

Recent scientific study has demonstrated that we need 10.000 hours of practice and exercise to become an « expert », in any domain possible. That means that music is actually not more difficult than any other discipline (e.g. cooking, playing video games, soccer, ...).

10.000 hours = +/- 3 hours a day during 10 years = +/- 20 hours a week = +/- 1000 hours a year.

Of course, we don't all aspire to become an "expert", but, even if we'd like to become a fifth of an expert (say, a good amateur), we'll still need to practice ...

... 200 hours a year, 4 hours a week, 35 minutes a day!

(And ... after 50 years, we'll still become an expert.)

So, the simplest answer to the question is unmistakably "A lot!".

But be aware of the psychological pitfalls.

Practice with motivation, not by *obligation*!

A child that learns how to walk doesn't feel like he's exercising, let alone that he feels *obliged* to. He simply tries to walk, and keeps on trying until he succeeds. He does it because he wants to, not because *he has to*.

If you oblige yourself to practice you risk jeopardizing your much needed motivation. The average human being doesn't like *obligation*. You must keep your eyes on the ultimate goal, and that is that you want to play an instrument. And, of course, it won't work without the necessary practice. Not practicing is no option, because "practicing makes perfect".

But practice because you want to, not because *you have to*.

Avoid the overdose, keep it limited. Don't exaggerate!

In the beginning, everything is fun. Moved by the best intentions, we practice, and we practice a lot, but usually not in the most efficient way. After only one week of exercise we are already fed up with it, mostly because the much awaited results aren't met, due to a lack of efficiency. (for "efficiency" read on)

Practice, in the beginning, preferably with relatively short sessions. Only advanced musicians, with a good working plan, can study in long sessions. Try, of course, to practice every day, but keep it limited, don't exaggerate! If you have fun doing it, continue, but do not force yourself! If one exercise doesn't succeed immediately, know that you can always come back at it later, perhaps even on the same day. (Young children often practice more efficiently in 3 x 5 minutes than in 1 x 15 minutes.)

Plan your work!

One often hears that one must practice every day for (at least) 30 minutes in order to accomplish some progress. But studying with the clock is one of the worst methods. It simply distracts us from the ultimate goal. We prefer to say that a student needs to be "occupied" by its playing, often and regularly. It could as well be in X sessions of 5 minutes per day.

The most important factor in order to practice in an efficient way is to have a good working plan and to know the answers to these three essential questions:

1. How to practice?
2. When to practice?
3. What to practice?

The answers to those questions are, respectively: **be P.R.O.**

- | | |
|----------|-------------------|
| 1. How? | P atient |
| 2. When? | R egular |
| 3. What? | O rganized |

PATIENTLY: At the right tempo, with precision!

Finding the right tempo to the study, and applying the much needed precision, are actions that are much more complex than you would think at first. These two aspects of the study are not easily described, nor solved, just by the few tips that we give you below. This is why your coach, your teacher, is so necessary. But the ultimate goal is of course for you to become your own coach, to learn how to recognize the complex mechanisms of the study and to correct the (too) frequent errors.

The tips that we give below all risk to miss their goal, and might even create new problems, if they are not well understood and applied correctly. It is indispensable to learn how to "feel", physically and mentally, the tempo and the precision with respect to the coordination of the movements (= the technique) at one hand, but also with respect to the music itself at the other hand.

It's true, for example, that working at a slower tempo (see first tip) will help you to solve most problems encountered, certainly if these problems relate to the coordination. But it is sometimes necessary to work at a faster tempo to be able to hear the music and to feel the beat.

It's also true that one needs to apply the highest precision to the study, that we cannot afford to let any mistake pass (see second tip). But it's also true that, when playing music, we need to keep on playing in the beat, neglecting the occurring mistakes. If we don't, we're not playing music.

The three stages of the study

One can schematically subdivide the study of a (difficult) musical phrase in three stages:

The Puzzle stage: placing the notes, the movements, the rhythm, the breathing, ... step by step, in the right order, without any mistake, with a lot of patience. At this stage, we are not yet playing music.

--> VERY SLOWLY

The Beat stage: same as above, but this time on the beat, with a metronome if possible. At this stage, it is sometimes useful to neglect certain elements mentioned above. For example, when studying a complex rhythm, one can choose to concentrate on the rhythm only, leaving the "right" notes out for now. At this stage, one starts to translate the puzzle into music.

--> SLOWLY at first, then gradually faster

The Music stage: usually, this means "now faster", but not always! At this stage, you need to concentrate on the musical concept, on the sound itself. You need now to "forget" en "let loose" all technical aspects worked on in the former two stages to play music. Sing along! Singing is a "musical thinking" that will replace the "technical thinking". The best grasp at this stage (but not necessarily the only one) is to concentrate on the song's dynamics: How loud, or soft should this song sound? Where should I place the accents?

ATTENTION! One needs to put these three stages in the right perspective, and not always follow them in the right order. When (and only if) possible, it's best to start at the Music stage. Because when we have a good idea of how a phrase should sound, the technique will often follow easily without any problems. While we can sometimes get stuck at the Beat stage forever because we do

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not yet feel any music. If some problems are still met at the Music stage, at least we will know exactly what the problems are, where they occur, and how we can solve them by going over one or both former stages (again).

SLOWER!

The most frequently encountered mistake is to study at a tempo that is too fast.

If you are frustrating, chances are that you are playing too fast!

Learning a difficult coordination is always possible when working step by step (Puzzle stage), sometimes also at a slow tempo (Beat stage), but mostly (temporarily) impossible at a fast tempo. To keep on playing stubbornly at a high tempo unmistakably brings a good proportion of frustration, which is a real motivation killer. The results stay out. We gradually feel more and more insecure, we feel incompetent, we think we will never be able to play, and we risk eventually simply to give up.

Worse! The high tempo causes mind and body to tense, which results in bad attitude and posture: we feel cramps (that risk evolving to tendinitis on the longer term), we develop bad habits that are difficult to correct.

Quite stupid, isn't it, when we realize that success is at grasp if we only would take the time to play at a slower tempo. But quite understandable also, for patience is not the most developed quality of the human being. We are all beings that preferably want immediate results. But we lure ourselves constantly by thinking that a fast work brings the fastest results. The contrary is true, the slower, and more precise, we work, the quickest the results will follow.

You will inevitably catch yourself doing a whole series of unsuccessful attempts at a tempo that is too high, before having the reflex to tell yourself "SLOWER!". Even more advanced musicians make this mistake. But teach yourself to recognize this "stupid" mistake and to block it right away.

Learn yourself the magic word: "SLOWER !"

CORRECT !

It is of course also essential to study CORRECTLY, that is WITHOUT ANY MISTAKES. Learning mistakes is simply not an option. The more you repeat a mistake, the hardest it gets to get rid of it. But it's not easy – and even impossible at a tempo that is too high – to play everything immediately right from the very start. You will certainly play mistakes. What you then need to do is to tip the balance in favor of the CORRECT playing: playing right more often than wrong. To do this, you can use ...

"The 5 proof"

The purpose of that exercise is to play 5 correct attempts in a row. If attempt n°3 is unsuccessful, you need to start counting from 1 again.

Be aware though! This kind of game can be very very frustrating if you do not apply the right tempo. If the first attempts are unsuccessful, that probably means that the fragment still needs to be played at the Puzzle stage, and that you need to play it step by step without the beat. Or possibly, you are already able to play it on the beat (Beat stage), but then slower.

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"Accidents" and "Learned Errors"

The 5 proof is not fit to the Music stage, because at that stage, you shouldn't be concentrating on mistakes, but on a fluent and musical playing instead. However, you need, at that stage, to be able to distinguish between "accidents" and "learned mistakes".

"Accidents" are random errors caused by lack of concentration, but that do not occur again (at the same place in the score) when you repeat the attempt. You can, in principle, ignore these errors. Of course, if you can never play without "accidents", it means that you need to work on a sustained concentration (see below), but without needing to work on the mistakes themselves.

"Learned Errors" are errors that repeat themselves on and on, always on the same place in the score. This type of error needs to be eliminated as soon as possible, by working SLOWLY at the Beat stage. This usually brings a new challenge in tempo control. The error is probably stuck somewhere in between two fragments that you already master, and that you can play fluently. When playing those fragments at a slower tempo, one tends to take all the music and feeling out of it, provoking serious boredom.

If you are bored, chances are that you are playing too slow!

"The Movement"

You can quite easily avoid this boredom by making use of "the Movement". The movement is a way of playing that alternates fast and slow tempo's in a measured and gradual way. Play the known fragments at the usual tempo. About one bar before the error, start slowing down the tempo – just like a car slows down before the turn, gradually, not brutally – until you reach the slower tempo that you need to be able to correct the error. Once you have passed the (corrected) error – after the turn for the car – start gradually to fasten up your tempo again.

If you repeat this kind of exercise often enough, you will eventually be able to play the whole thing, with the correction, at the same (fast) tempo.

CONCENTRATION: Subdivision of the song

To be able to sustain the best concentration throughout the whole song, it's indispensable to make a good analysis of the structure of the song.

- How many parts are there in the song?
- Which parts are repeated, and when are they repeated?
- Where does the (a) musical phrase starts? Where does it end?
- How many musical phrases are there in this or that part?
- How many rhythmical or lyrical motives are there in this phrase?

The "Carrure" and the Form

To subdivide the song in a proper way, it's useful to know that the structure of a song is dependent on the "carrure" (French word, without apparent fitting English translation). The carrure is a higher rhythmical level – higher than bars and measures – that works with the grouping of a specific number of bars (usually 4 bars).

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A standard carrure can be for instance (AB-form)

- 2 musical parts (A and B) of 16 bars each
- Every part subdivided in 2 phrases of 8 bars each
- Every phrase subdivided in 2 semi-phrases of 4 bars each
- The semi-phrases sometimes subdivided in musical motives of undefined length (e.g. 1 or 2 bars)

Another well-known carrure (AABA-form) is:

- 4 musical parts of 8 bars each. The first part (A) is repeated once (A), then alternated with a new part (B), and finally repeated again (A) --> AABA
- Every part is a musical phrase of 8 bars
- The phrases can be subdivided in 2 semi-phrases of 4 bars
- The semi-phrases sometimes subdivided in musical motives of undefined length (e.g. 1 or 2 bars)

The carrure thus usually works with these numbers of (grouped) bars:

(1) - (2) - 4 - 8 - 16 - (32) - (64)

Attention! Exceptions on this rule are always possible. One of the most known exceptions is the "overlap". With an overlap, the last bar of a phrase – e.g. of 8 bars – is at the same time the first bar of the new following phrase, resulting in two consecutive phrases of only 15 bars instead of the standard 16 bars.

Another very well-known exception is the 12 bar-Blues:

- 3 short phrases of 4 bars each, resulting in a theme – and a so-called "chorus" – of only 12 bars (instead of the standard 16 bars)
- In traditional Blues, the phrases are subdivided in 2 semi-phrases of 2 bars, alternating vocal - bar 1 and 2 – and instrumental – bar 3 and 4 – parts.

Breathing

It's almost impossible to keep a sustained concentration throughout 64 bars. It is, however, easy to keep your concentration during 8 or 16 bars. You must then subdivide the song in 8 x 8 bars or in 4 x 16 bars. (When learning a new song or phrase, it can be useful, if possible, to subdivide in smaller parts, e.g. 4 x 2 bars.)

During the execution of a part of the song, you can let yourself go to a freely musically play (even on "automatism"). But in between parts, you need to breath, that is starting consciously to play the new part. A good comparison is the underwater swimmer that resurfaces every X meters to refresh his air. This way, you can avoid all concentration errors quite easily.

More tips

DOSE THE STUDY

Never learn too much, or too difficult, in one session. Too much to digest!

Never learn too little, or too easy. Usually quite boring!

REGULARLY: make a weekly plan

Anticipate the moments of the week when you have time, or can make some time, to practice. Plan approximately 5 practice sessions a week (just like the 5 working days of the week). So, feel free to take a day off from time to time (remember: Avoid the overdose !).

Each time you have accomplished one session, you can stop your work with a sense of satisfaction. That will help to avoid the feelings of guilt that tend to emerge when "you failed to practice again". If you wish to add some extra sessions, you can of course. But at least you won't feel "obliged" to.

Don't forget to play, but do it outside the weekly plan.

Next to the practice, you must absolutely also play. That was your original intention when you decided to learn how to play an instrument, wasn't it?

Create your own repertoire of songs that you already know, and that you like to play. Keep up that repertoire and keep it alive: regularly replacing the old songs that are no longer exciting by some new songs that you've learned. Take every possible opportunity to play the songs of that repertoire: just for relaxation or fun, at a family party, for a school fair, ...

We learn a lot, on pure musicality, but mainly on the much needed physical and mental relaxation (the ease of playing) simply by playing (as opposed to practicing). Even "tinkering" and "discovering" are both beneficial to the musical development. But remember:

"Playing" isn't "Practicing" !

Do it outside your weekly or daily plan.

Feelings of guilt? Useless, worse, destructive!

Hold on to your working plan as much as possible. That way you won't forget to practice. But remember the wise words of John Lennon: "*Life is what happens to you when you're busy making other plans*". You will inevitably have moments that you won't be able to hold on to your plan. A week without practicing is not an exception (and is not always that negative). Often feelings of guilt then emerge, strengthened by the partner, the parents, and mainly the teacher (us!), who, well intentioned, remind you that you *should* practice.

Feelings of guilt are disastrous! They put you under a negative pressure that risks destroying your motivation. Moreover, they are absolutely useless. Get rid of these feelings of guilt at once, and just resume your work with a minimal program that allows you to get used to the practicing rhythm again.

ORGANIZED: Make a daily program

Here's the ideal daily program:

The indicated timings are good for young beginners and are noted here just for information (Do not work with a clock!). Later, these timings will gradually increase, certainly if you have the right mental attitude while practicing.

A. Technique and Theory

The warming up – short (2 minutes). Aim: the perfect execution, not (necessarily) the fast execution

- Scales, Cadences, Arpeggio's, ...
A widespread misconception is that melodic instruments (violin, cello, singing, sax, trumpet etc. ...) cannot play chords, and thus that one doesn't need to exercise them. Nothing is further from the truth! One can, and should, exercise broken chords (note after note).
- Short technical exercises, studies, ...
- Difficult phrases (problems) that can't be solved in only one day (See B below) issued out of the songs that one is studying.
- Sight-reading (not to be confused with "Reading" below)

Choose, in the beginning, only one of the above mentioned subjects. But try to alternate from day to day.

B. Practicing and Reading

The core of your program – (10 minutes)

- Track and solve problems in the songs that one is studying
- Playing the songs perfectly on the beat (slowly!)
- Learning new text (= reading)
- Analyzing new text (= intelligent reading)

C. Rehearse and Play

Finalizing – (5 minutes, depending on the number of songs)

- Rehearse the songs (of B) and the exercises (of A) that have no more significant problems, that are already perfectly on the beat, and that you will present at the next lesson, at the next concert, ...

Important: It is absolutely necessary at this last step to keep on playing perfectly on the beat and in a measured way, even if "accidents" (errors) do occur. Elvis Costello said "*Accidents will happen*"; nobody's perfect! It's in the musical way of ignoring the error while playing that one recognizes a great performer.

Do not confuse this last point with the playing of the repertoire that you will do outside of your weekly plan or daily program.

The right focus thanks to the right circumstances

A lot of little things, that *appear* only to be details, and that *apparently* have nothing to do with music itself, can facilitate, or, at the contrary, sabotage, your progress in music. *That too* is part of a good organization.

- Are you punctual? Present in due time, at the lesson? At the rehearsal? At the concert?
- Do you have all your sheet music with you? Ordered, always and everywhere?
- Do you have a note book, that you'll bring to the lesson (to the rehearsal), in which your teacher (or yourself) can write what needs to be trained in the coming week?
- Is your instrument in a good working state? Adjusted and tuned?
- Do you have at home a space where you can work undisturbed?
- Are you careful not to let anything or anyone disturb you at work? (Smartphone, internet, radio, television ...)
- ...

These *little things* are all part of a good *discipline*. The word discipline comes from the word *disciple* (the pupil), and means a lot more than *to obey the rules*. It means:

To create the right *learning* circumstances in order to enforce the right “focus”.

**The student's parents also have a predominant role
in helping their child to progress in music
by creating the ideal learning circumstances.**

Stimulate your kid(s)

In addition to creating the ideal circumstances, there are still many other things that parents can do to stimulate and motivate their children. For (almost) all the tips below no prior musical training is necessary. These are all small activities available to all.

- **Listen to music every day.**

At home and in the car, on the radio and other music media and channels.

Try as much as possible to alternate musical styles and cultures.

Parents who play an instrument can of course also play music themselves, whether or not with their child.

- **Ask questions about the music you listen to.**

What instruments do you hear?

Is the music high or low?

Is the music fast or slow?

Is the music loud or soft?

(For advanced :)

What is the meter of the music?

Is the music in major or in minor?

- **Have your children dance to the music.**

Dance along. Just moving to the beat is enough.

And even just beating time with handclaps is a good activity.

- **Learn to sing.**

Sing with your children, dare to sing! Singing is the most essential activity in music. It's through singing that one really passes music to the children. It's really not necessary to be a great singer. The song really doesn't need to be "perfect." If in doubt about your abilities to sing, you can always ask advice to your child's teacher.

You do not always need to know the "lyrics" of the song. You'll do just as well with "la, la, la."

And even just humming is all right too!

- **Take your children to concerts and other musical activities.**

- **Ask your child from time to time to play for you, or for family and friends, the songs he/she can already play. However, watch out for ...**

Do not force your child if he/she doesn't want to play for others.

Do not correct your child. Leave that to their teacher.

Using Internet and music software

We could not, nowadays, imagine learning music without using the Internet (and music software). Indeed, you can find virtually everything you are looking for on the World Wide Web: the best ... but, sadly, also the worst. For most beginners, it is impossible to make a clear distinction between carefully selected information, that will help them move forward, and everything else, that is likely to lead them in a hopeless impasse. One should also NEVER forget that *free* and *quality* rarely go hand in hand. The culture of YouTube, for example, is to generate as many clicks as possible for profit (advertising), not to help you to become a musician.

The best advice is always: 'Ask your teacher about it!'

Not because your teacher always knows best, but because your teacher, who coaches you following a specific and personalized method, knows exactly where you are. Without a structured and tailor-made method, students would tend to drown in the immense diversity of information (as well as "the best and the worst") found on the net. Even the most reliable internet source may still be too ambitious for you, but it is even more likely that you'll find a lot of information that is only "half correct" if not "completely false".

Audio references and Tutorials

Quote from a musician friend: "*A learning system that teaches music almost exclusively through the eyes (= learning how to play from sheet music) generates deaf musicians !!!*". It would indeed be foolish not to use audio examples, while there is so much to be found on YouTube, Apple Music, Spotify and other streaming services. But watch out for traps!

Bad examples: Unfortunately, they exist too! I've caught students, on several occasions, who persist in playing a mistake they are no longer able to get rid of. Until they admit that, for weeks they've been listening to a particular audio example with, you guessed it ... exactly that same mistake. Remember that anyone can place a video on the Internet. Even young inexperienced apprentice musicians like to upload *their* version of a song (with mistakes or not), mainly just to brag.

Good examples: Possible traps too! Mostly, we'll imitate the example to the best of our ability, without understanding what one is playing. Here's an example seized from my lessons: The excellent pianist on the recording plays the song in a *rubato* way (a tempo with lots of movement), the student imitates, without feeling the meter, and ends up understanding nothing about the meter and the rhythm of the song.

Tutorials: These are videos that show* you how to play a piece, step by step. Apart from the mistakes that are found too often (see above), the great disadvantage of this method is, once again, that we'll tend to imitate, but without really understanding what we are playing.

* Show: This brings us back to a learning method through the eyes (and not through the ears). The ideal method should actually use both senses, hearing completing the view, and vice versa. But it is useful to make a good distinction between different musical cultures and traditions.

Sheet Music

Classical Music – written tradition: Classical music is mainly transmitted through sheet music. That is because classical music mostly dates from a time (but also from the specific culture called "Western Music") where sheet music was the only available means to sell music. The publication of sheet music was therefore "big business" in the 19th century. One used to edit, and re-edit, the score until it was near "perfect" (the "perfect" score doesn't exist!).

When learning a classical piece, it is, of course, useful to go listen to how other musicians interpret the score, but when in doubt, the score is always right, not the audio example.

You'll find most classical music scores, for free, at the [International Music Score Library Project \(ISMLP Petrucci Music Library\)](#).

Non-classical music – oral tradition: You'll find it difficult (if not impossible) to find *good* sheet music for non-classical music, the music that, since 1900, is spread mainly through audio recordings, the music that most of us listen to today (Pop, Rock, World Music, Jazz, ...). You actually will find a lot of "scores", but these are generally not complete and comprehensive. They merely give us, at most, the direction to follow when learning the song.

This music almost always originated in improvisation (collective or not). This means that musicians who "composed" the piece, actually only agreed on the musical frame (meter, tempo, chords ...) in which each musician freely "does his thing". The "best score" – that is the one that best fits the origin of the song – is a so-called *lead sheet* that provides the musical frame, without the details. You'll have to learn the details by ear (oral tradition). It is therefore essential to have a good understanding of meter, rhythm, tonalities, chords ... to be able to complete the lead sheet.

Surely, you'll also find scores that seem more complete (but rarely "entirely complete") that can help us to understand (to hear) the details that one seeks to learn. WARNING ! These scores are, at best, transcripts of audio recordings that are never 100% correct. I consider myself pretty good at the transcript of records, but I am never 100% sure that what I write is exactly 100% what I hear.

BUT, more often these "complete" scores are hastily (and often badly) written arrangements (the *quick arrangement* is a concept learned in American colleges of music, for the commercial music business), published for the sole purpose of extorting you money, but that will not even sound, neither close nor far, like the original recording.

When learning this type of music, the audio example is always right, not the score.

For jazz, the best lead sheets are indisputably to be found in the [Real Books](#) collection (renowned all over the world). For (somewhat dated) Pop, I generally advise the [Buskers](#) collection. For the latest music, it is not easy to find (good) lead sheets on the net. We write these ourselves at Class & Jazz.

Looking for a lead sheet (or score)? Ask your teacher about it!

Music Theory

You'll find on the Internet also about everything you want on Music Theory. The websites on the subject are plentiful. **Wikipedia**, for example, is a pretty reliable source. The reliability of Wikipedia is due to the fact that users can monitor each other for content and completeness, and even advise, or make themselves, changes.

BUT, on Wikipedia too, everyone contributes. This means that one finds information from different musical styles (classical school, jazz school ...) but also of different languages/countries (American School, French School, German School ...). All this can be extremely confusing for a beginner. One can indeed find, on the same topic, apparently contradictory information. Because the angle of approach, the teaching (and the tradition) of music theory of these different schools can be, obviously, also very different.

Second: Was "this specific contribution which I am now reading" already sufficiently monitored and adjusted? Not always!

A few trivial examples:

A **ternary meter** doesn't mean the same in classical music and in jazz.

I found lots of different **Eastern** scales and **Gypsy** scales, all on the same Wikipedia.

What is then the "right" meter? What is the "right" scale?

If you are looking for information on music theory, according to the "teaching" of Class & Jazz, you can buy my book [Parent Scales and Chord Scales](#) '. You'll also find a very brief summary of all the "facts" you absolutely must remember, if you do not want to get lost in music, on the [Cheat sheets](#) page of our [Class & Jazz Webschool](#).

Software and Apps

There are many music software. The big disadvantage is often that the student is left alone to learn how to understand the software itself. From experience we know that few students know how to properly use this kind of software.

The list below is obviously not complete. Every year there are new software on the market. But these (older) software have already proved their worth, while the new software are now often mobile applications, less efficient, less useful or less "complete".

- **Play Along:** [Band-in-a-Box](#) and [iReal Pro](#) are the best-known software that provide you a (digital) "comping group" (accompanying band).
YouTube also provides (real) accompanying groups on [Jazz Play Along](#) (and Karaoke). You should nevertheless always ensure that the chords played matches the lead sheet that you are using. An experienced ear, your teacher for example, can help you check this. Once again, be aware of what you use!
- **Ear Training and Theory:** [Auralia](#), [Earmaster](#) and [Musition](#) are (paying) software that are very useful for learning.
- **Note reading:** [Jalmus](#) is free and also very useful, especially for beginning students.
- **Score writing:** [Sibelius](#) and [Finale](#) are the best (and most expensive) programs in this category. [MuseScore](#) is a free open source equivalent.

Playing Music

This chapter discusses the essence, and the ultimate goal of any musician: playing music. It may be that the material seems too abstract for inexperienced students, but reading this chapter should, we hope, open your eyes to some aspects of music which you may yet never have thought of.

In order to *actively* live music (i.e. playing), as a musician – not *passively*, as an auditor, or a music lover – it's important to be aware of the "4 pillars" of the musical art.

1. We must give priority to the **togetherness** (ensemble)
2. We must be able to **explain** the music
3. We must **enjoy** the music
4. We need to **contemplate** how everything comes together

Playing together: be one with the music

Music has a *binding* effect (some would say *religious*, from "religare", *to link*) in our brain. It connects us with the other musicians, with ourselves, with our audience, with our past (own, and shared*), with our (shared) present, with our (shared) senses, with our (shared) basic instincts, with our (shared) spirituality, with our (shared) ideals, with our (shared) anxieties also (read the next chapter on stage fright), with our (shared) culture, with our (shared) community ...

There is virtually no part of the brain that is not stimulated by music. Modern sciences (neuroscience) can't stop publishing about it in recent decades. If the subject interests you, we urge you to read the following books: [This Is Your Brain On Music](#), [Musicophilia](#), [Musicking](#) ...

See also the documentary [The Music Instinct - Science: Song](#).

* *Notably through our [mirror neurons](#)*

Playing together is, given the *binding* effect of music, the most important pillar of musical art. We'll find ourselves, of course, and maybe more often, playing alone, but this *binding* pillar, is for the soloist also the most important pillar. Imagining to play music "*together with others*" simply allows the subject to be more easy "to grasp".

Here is a quote that pretty much sums it up: "There are musicians who play WITH (the music, the others), but unfortunately, there are also musicians who play AGAINST (the music, the others)."

Music has a clear meter, a pronounced rhythm, a specific tempo, an inevitable direction, a desired atmosphere, a defined style ... The music must always show us (me) the way. If the song doesn't sound properly, it is only due to the fact that we (I) have not yet understood the music, and that we (I) still have to find the right balance between all aspects mentioned above. When the puzzle is complete, we (I) will be one with the music, and with the others (and myself).

If the music is not mastered yet, if you are too concerned with the technical aspects of the music, with how you come across to the public, with the fear of playing mistakes ... you will not be open to others (or to yourself) and you will not play well.

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One feels the *togetherness* especially consciously at the level of meter and rhythm (playing perfectly and equally *together*), dynamics (alternating loud and quiet *together*) and movement (slowing down and/or speeding up the tempo, *together*). But more deeply human aspects, too often forgotten by beginners, also play a major role, such as "listening to one another" ("hearing each other"), "understanding each other", "following each other", "paying attention to each other", "supporting each other", "loving each other"...

For the soloist, this means that we must not only play rationally, but we must also engage our senses and our instincts ("listening to oneself", "understanding oneself", "feeling oneself", "following oneself", "paying attention to oneself", "supporting oneself", "loving oneself", ...). In other words, we must have all aspects of our personality playing together.

Concretely: The right *Attitude* to adopt to be one with the music (and with the others)

Go for it! Lose all the brakes! Do not let decency hold you back! (See below: pleasure)

The reverse, called "tentative playing" (to modestly and timidly attempt to play) does not work, ever! We cannot afford to be only a *chilly and frigid lover* of the music (and the others). Instead, we must *passionately embrace* the music (and the others).

Are there any parts/aspects of the song that we have not yet fully under control? Then the "go for it" attitude definitely is a lot clearer to sort out (to hear, feel or see) *what works* and *what does not work*.

Play on! Do not, ever, stop! Never let your fellow musicians down! Even though you might make a mistake, or the result isn't (yet) what you've expected. Perfection does not exist, it is like the horizon, a goal to strive for, but that is never reached. "Accidents will happen" but, whatever happens ...

Take the trip! Stephen Smith, a teacher specialized in singing ([The Naked Voice](#)), pertinently compares the performance of music to a trip. It is clear that we need to plan the trip in advance (book the plane, hotel, car, prepare hiking ...), otherwise the trip might be quite boring because we don't know what to do. But during the trip itself, things do not always go as we had planned. We must often improvise. This sometimes brings many fun things, and sometimes less fun things. All considerations to bear in mind when planning the next trip. But we cannot, on *this* trip, decide in mid-flight to jump of the plane because we happen to dislike the airline company.

Play at the service of your fellow musicians! (Also read further: roles in music)

Are you the most experienced musician in the band? Then, play mainly a supporting role for your young fellow musicians. Keep a firm and regular beat in order to provide a good frame to hold on to. Keep playing, allowing the other to catch up when in trouble.

The support you give to your fellow musicians will naturally get back at you when you happen to be in need of support yourself! This way, we form a solid group, in which everyone feels supported by all. "One for All and All for One!"

Explain the music: the interpretation

You must also be able to *explain* the music you are playing, to your audience, to yourself, to your fellow musicians.

The *clear cut of the structure* (the story) of the piece is done by alternating dynamics (loud and quiet) and (sometimes, depending on the style) of movement (deceleration and acceleration).

The story: This is the (strong) *introduction* ... that ends with a (diminishing, and slowing down) *transition* to ... the *first verse* (taking up tempo gradually, while remaining soft) ... until the (crescendo) *transition* to ... the (powerful) *chorus* ... which brings us, through this (diminuendo) *transition* to ... the (soft) *second verse* ... etc. ... up until the (powerful at first, but then slowing and decreasing) *finale of the song*.

Highlight the surprises of the song using the accentuation.

This rhythmic effect, this phrasing, this target note, this line, this modulation, this special chord, this cadence ... must not be lost to the attention of the listener. I have to accentuate them, or sometimes maybe play them more quietly, to grab attention.

Roles in Music: Always be aware that every musician in the band has a specific role.

Always know if you are accompanying ("comping"), for example, the singer (the melody). Then play quieter, give her space. When it's "your turn", play as clearly as possible, take the lead, allow your musicians to follow you, to understand your interpretation.

The same is also true for the different roles of, for example, the two hands of a pianist: one is possibly "the singer" (the melody), while the other is the "comping".

Bigger than life! Music is a performing art (an art of the stage). A musician always seems quite small, on that stage, seen from the back of the (large) concert hall. All your *intentions* (your interpretation) should therefore be *intense* (Go for it!), and performed "bigger than real", so that the audience actually see, and hear, you!

Exaggeration is not possible! The audience still perceive only a small part of the message. Only very experienced musicians can "really" exaggerate, turning art into "kitsch" (which in itself can sometimes be funny, and become part of the "show"). You should always extend your effect just at the limit of kitsch!

Enjoy

You should always enjoy, intensely and sensually, not just the music you're playing, but also the musicians with whom you're playing, just as one intensely enjoys, all friends together, an excellent meal with top wines. Don't hold back, how "sinful" that pleasure may sometimes feel! (Lose all the brakes! Do not let decency hold you back!)

It's only when you are fully enjoying (together, or alone), that your audience will feel and share that same joy!

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Notice also how musicians, after the concert, hug, kiss and congratulate each other. That's when they are, at last, able to share and express to each other the joy – shared up to now only through sound (thus, through air) – in a more tangible, physical way.

Contemplation

Finally, we need to *contemplate how everything comes together*. I call this part of my personality, while playing, the "conductor". The conductor doesn't play along, he surely doesn't need to explain anything, he does not intervene (when, ideally, musicians do not need him). Yet he enjoys too, but not in the same exuberant, sensual, bodily way as do the performing musicians. He's all ears, all attention, all "Zen", a silent recipient, in a spiritual, transcendental way ...

He saw that it was good!

What is "Stage Fright"?

How to deal with it?

You might have experienced once before: you're about to perform in front of an audience and you feel your stomach tighten up, your hands are wet and shaking, your mouth is dry, your heart is beating faster ... These are all signs of Stage Fright. Rest assured: EVERYBODY has it! Even the greatest professionals.

Stage fright is a perfectly natural reaction to "exposure". Our subconscious mind interprets this as a "threat", even as a "lethal danger". We feel exactly the same as a mouse that is about to be eaten by the cat. Our body reacts with an overdose of adrenaline to prepare us to fight, or to hide, or to flee for survival. And when we cannot choose between one of these three solutions, we feel completely paralyzed (without any chance of survival). It's actually an indispensable and instinctive survival strategy that is anchored deep in ourselves. At such threatening moments we are anxious not to make any mistake, because only one mistake could be fatal. So we become hyper-alert, but at the same time totally insecure.

So, what can we do about it? How do we avoid total paralysis?

Here are a few tips on how to deal with stage fright.

Mentally, it's important to see the situation in the right perspective:

- There is, of course, no lethal danger! Our body is only overreacting. On the other hand, we should be happy with this reaction. It means that we are healthy and well prepared for any "real" danger. Thank you, body!
- Since there's no "real" danger, possible mistakes aren't harmful at all. We actually must accept the idea of making mistakes. "Accidents will happen!". Perfection does not exist. Never has a musician been able to say after a concert "Now, this was really perfect!". Professionals know that very well. Therefore, they are better prepared to ignore their mistakes, and to keep on playing as if nothing happened. By accepting that we could make mistakes, we actually avoid most mistakes because we are not thinking about it. We actually don't care.
- Some aggressive behavior towards the audience, a so-called "attitude", or at the contrary, the withdrawal into ourselves by totally ignoring the audience, are perfectly natural reactions (see above: fight, or hide) and can actually help (as long as it stays inside accepted social boundaries, of course). Fleeing would mean that we would decide not to play, which would be a sorry option, isn't it?
On the other hand, never forget that your audience is friendly. It wouldn't be there if it wasn't. The audience is not "a cat" that's about to eat you, "the mouse".

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- The adrenaline shot makes us hypersensitive and alert. This allows us to actually play better than usual. And once the music has started, most unpleasant symptoms of stage fright disappear to make way for pure concentration. Once again, thank you, body!

Practically, here are tips that we should keep in mind:

- **The Training:** During the weeks and days before the performance, we need to prepare ourselves for the best. We need to practice, and to practice more, until we feel absolutely sure that all the "difficult" phrases are really mastered and that they've now become "easy". We need to rehearse, and to rehearse more, to test the songs in as many mental and practical situations as possible. Challenge yourself: play the songs slower, much slower, play the songs faster, much faster, play for an audience of friends and family ...
Always sing along with the music that you are playing. It helps you to understand the music and the interpretation better, but mostly, it will help you on stage, because singing is a *musical* way of thinking that will replace the *technical* and *verbal* thinking (thinking about the notes, the fingers, the audience ...).
When we then hit the stage, well prepared, we can think and feel, with a clear conscience, that nothing can go wrong.
- **The Ritual:** Plan in advance HOW you will do the performance: what will you eat before, what will you wear, what talisman will you bring with you on stage, how do you see your entrance on stage, how will you salute your audience (or not), how will you arrange your seat, your sheet music, your footstool and other accessories, how will you hear the music internally before you hit your first notes, how will you leave the stage, ...
The ritual gives us a frame to hold on to and that makes us feel more secure.
- **Relaxation:** In the hours before the performance, it is useless to keep on thinking about it with stress. Relax! Watch a movie, listen to music, read a book, play a game, go walking, do some sport ... If one is well prepared, it's actually better NOT to rehearse the concert songs on the same day as the performance. You SHOULD warm up your technique though, but do this with other songs and with technical exercises. If you still do play the concert songs, then these shouldn't be perfect! Don't give it all yet! That's for later, on stage.
- **Anticipation:** In the minutes that precede the performance, it's important to anticipate what we are about to play and to imagine the planned ritual. (Just listening to the music that is possibly being played by some other musician is also a good option. See **Relaxation** above.) NEVER anticipate worst case scenario's! Speaking about stage fright with colleagues in the backstage is TABOO, because it's contagious. We only manage to frighten each other.
- **Breathing:** Breathing is so natural that we don't even think about it. But the instinctive fight, hide or flee behavior tends to let us hold our breath, to be able to react swiftly, or to keep as silent as possible. But we aren't about to fight, hide or flee! We must breath!
Simply breathing slowly and calmly can do miracles to control your nerves. The best technique is to breath a few times in a row by inhaling for about 4 seconds, and exhaling for

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about 8 seconds. This provides the much needed oxygen to our brains.

- **Water:** Always bring a glass or bottle of water with you, backstage and on stage. It's important to drink enough, to hydrate our body, and to moisten our dry mouth.
- **Take your time!** : This is the mental equivalent of breathing. The adrenaline shot pushes us to act faster. It makes us play faster (dangerous if not well prepared. See **The Training** above). We must act calmly and slowly.
Take your time to calmly go over the ritual: salute your audience, arrange your accessories, anticipate the music in your head (a little slower, to compensate for the faster tempo induced by your nerves) *before* you start hitting the first notes, ...
- **Enjoy!** : Once the music has started, it's important to let yourself go along with it. Sing along with what you are playing (see **The Training** above). Enjoy intensively, enjoy the sound and warmth that you are producing. This is, after all, what you wish for your audience too.