

Private Music Instruction Primer!

So you have an instrument, a pile of instructional DVD's and books, 2 broken strings that you are not sure how to change, a bunch of questions like "what are all those lines and dots" and "what's with those lines and numbers...is it some sort of serial number?" Or perhaps you are just "in a rut" with your playing and want to move forward. Not sure what to do next? Signing up for private lessons may be just what the doctor ordered!

Where do you look for private instruction?

The local Yellow Pages and the internet are the best sources to find listings. You can check with your local music shop where you buy your equipment as well as your place of worship, or school. Then there is "word of mouth" or referrals from friends who are taking lessons.

Ask for a Tour

Once you have narrowed down a couple local places, call them up and see when you can come in for a tour. Many private music schools today have MySpace pages or websites they will refer you in the meantime to but it is best to check out the facility for yourself. Once you go there and had your tour, you should ask about the instructor's background for your instrument, the instructor's musical interests, tuition rates, payment schedule, instructor availability and school policies. If you like what you see and hear you could then schedule a lesson.

Scheduling

Most facilities offer evening and weekend lessons and have multiple instructors so check your personal calendar and your work schedule and find the time that would be perfect for you to get to your lesson every week. Do not assume you can make up a missed lesson. Double check the cancellation policy with the school. Most do not credit for missed lessons.

What to work on before you go to your first lesson:

So you booked your first month of lessons...good for you! Musical brilliance is on the way! The first lesson is usually a "feeling out" period. It's an opportunity for you and your instructor to get to know each other and for the instructor to see where you are with your playing. You can prepare for this lesson in advance by doing some basic "fact finding" about your instrument on your own. If you are a true beginner on bass for example, do a little homework on the parts of a bass guitar (where the tuners are etc...) the string names (EADG low to high), how to tune the instrument to itself, how to hold a pick etc... Do as much of this study on your own as you can. It will save time in the initial lesson and you can get on with playing! If you are somewhat experienced, review your scales and so on so you can show your instructor what you know.

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Set goals for yourself

So what do you want to do with your playing anyway? Do you want to be able to play in a band? Do you want to be able to play for your worship service? Do you want to write a song? Do you want to play like (insert favorite player here)? Did you just have some money burning a hole in your pocket and decided to play an instrument and you really don't know what you want to do but always wanted to try it? There is no right or wrong answer. Music is personal and sharing your goals with your instructor will help him or her guide you're learning to meet that goal efficiently.

Practice Schedule

Once you have committed to lessons once a week, you should also commit to practicing everyday. Purchase a music stand and set up a "music area" in your home. Plan on turning off the cell phone, video games and the computer and put 30 minutes a day into making you a better musician by working on the exercises your instructor gave you.

Be a Kid

Attitude is everything! Playing music is a great way to entertain yourself and others. And you should be free to relish in all your successes as you go. Getting to your goal should be a fun journey for you.

Kid's, they have little problem with that. Adults, well...not always.

Adult learners are very hard on themselves especially when it comes to making mistakes. When taking music lessons, you have to allow yourself to make mistakes. I'm convinced adult learners think the instructor will yell at them for making a mistake like their bosses would. I have said too every one of my adult learners at some point: "Hey look, I know you are frustrated but you have to remember that this isn't an audit or surgery or something, it's a music lesson! Making mistakes won't get you fired or in trouble in here. Let's slow it down and see where we are...." That always gets a laugh and lightens the mood. So prepare to screw up, but keep a smile on your face and be optimistic.

When you are there...take charge!

I tell all my students in their first lesson: "I don't care what wonderful things you may have heard about me...most of them are true by the way...but 'the ability to read mind's' part I am still working on so please tell me what you want to do and feel free to ask questions"

You are new so you will make mistakes, but don't think you won't get it. The instructor's job is to help you "get it". Your instructor may plow forward and talk about some music theory deal that may make you dizzy with its complexity. When that happens, don't worry, it will happen, remember, you are there to learn and are paying for it to boot so don't be shy! Interrupt them. Have them explain it again and again and in different ways until you do "get it".

True Story: I was teaching a mechanical engineer about modes of the major scale. I explained the concept many different ways but he wasn't getting it and was getting down about it too. When I took a piece of drawing paper and a crayon out (I keep crayons in my room for the younger kids but now, it turns out, I have them for adults too) and we drew out a Mode Graph. His eye's lit up and he got it! That Christmas, he bought me a box of colored sharpies!

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More about Your Home's Practice Area

The Music Area can be a real creative place. Paint it a wild color, hang up AC/DC posters, pick up instrument hangers and hang your instruments on the wall, store your music collection in there. Buy some cool lighting, really make it a room you want to go in and practice!

Be sure there is room for more than just you in there too. Any instructor will tell you that playing with others as often as possible makes you a better player and jamming is a very enjoyable social activity. Get to know some other people who play, a fellow student who takes lessons at the school perhaps, and have them come over to your "Studio" for a jam.

Hopefully this guide helped you make an informed decision on music instruction. Once you have found the instructor that is right for you, practice and enjoy playing your instrument.

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