

Introducing 5-String Banjo

Welcome to the Introducing 5-String Banjo course at Waltons New School of Music.

This course is designed to teach you essential 5-string banjo techniques and introduce you to a range of songs and repertoire. We ask you to keep four important things in mind as you begin:

1. **The more you put into the course, the more you will get out of it.**
2. **Communicate with your teacher** if there is an area you're having difficulty with or something you don't fully understand. Your teacher is here to help you, so don't hesitate to approach him if you're having difficulty with anything.
3. **Have patience.** Although we all want to play recognisable tunes, we also need to concentrate on the basics of holding and playing the instrument to begin with. Remember, good technique is the backbone of good playing!
4. **Listen to great banjo players.** Doing this should be an inspirational rather than frustrating ('I'll never be able to do that') experience!

Practice

Practice is an essential aspect of any music course, and we all know the phrase 'practice makes perfect'. Yet even the most eager learner might cringe when told to practice daily. Perhaps the most challenging aspect of learning a musical instrument is developing a healthy, productive approach to practice. Your teacher will give you guidelines on how and what to practice, but the real work is up to you, and mostly on your own time. Here are a few tips:

- **Aim to practice every day.** Even a small amount of daily practice is much more effective than a long practice session the day before your next class. Make practice a part of your daily routine. Determine when is the best time for you to practice. If you like practicing in the morning, get up 30 minutes early so that you won't be late for work. If you're an evening person, do your practice before going to bed or before you become sleepy. If you skip a practice day, don't worry, but do try to make up for the missed practice session by extending your practice time for at least 5 minutes for your next session.
- **Make your practice area comfortable.** Is the room well ventilated? Is there good lighting? Is your mobile switched off or on silent? Make sure that your practice area is comfortable and free from distractions so that you can concentrate when practicing.
- **Practice for at least 20 minutes.** Why 20 minutes? We find that this is a manageable time for beginners. Note that 20 minutes refers to work on the course material itself. Devote 5 minutes for warm-ups and 5 minutes for cool downs, just as you would for other physical exercise. That means you should try to set aside at least 30 minutes a day for practice sessions – a reasonable length for most students. As your interest and skill level grows, you will find that your daily practice time will also increase.
- **Reward yourself.** If you have just learned to play a piece or exercise that you've previously had trouble with, by all means reward yourself! You don't have to splurge; just doing something you particularly enjoy will give you a morale boost and further inspire you to learn.
- **Focus on your practice.** Effective practice requires concentration and focus. If you are rushing to do it or are distracted by other things that need doing, you won't get much out of it. Try spending a few minutes in silence before you begin in order to take a few deep breaths and clear your head of other concerns.

Tuning Your Banjo

Tuning your banjo – and keeping it in tune – is vital to sounding good. Just as your playing will improve over time with continued practice, your ability to tune the banjo will develop as you develop an ear for the proper sounds. Electronic tuners, which can be used to tune each string separately, are inexpensive and easy to use. There are also several tuner apps for smartphones available, some of which are free.

The open strings of a banjo in standard 'G' tuning, from the top 'half' string to the bottom, are:

- G, the fifth and highest sounding string (an octave higher than the third string)
- D, the fourth and lowest sounding string (an octave lower than the first string at the bottom)
- G, the third string (an octave lower than the fifth string at the top)
- B, the second string
- D, the first string (an octave higher than the fourth string)

Here are some basic steps to tune your banjo:

1. Find the third, centre string. This is the first one to tune. If you don't have a tuner at hand then a piano, pitch-pipe, or any other fixed pitch instrument will do. All you need is a constant, even pitch.
2. Follow this middle string to the 'head of the banjo, and find its corresponding tuning knob. Keep plucking the string and turn the knob until it is tuned perfectly to a G below middle C.
3. Use the same method to tune the adjacent, slightly thinner string to a B (below middle C).
4. The next and last string in that direction is thinner still; tune it to a D.
5. Go back to that first half-length string. Tune this to a G, a full octave above the first G you tuned.
6. Finally, tune the adjacent, thickest string to a low D.