

Welcome to the Introducing Irish Fiddle course at Waltons New School of Music.

This course is designed to teach you the basics of Irish fiddle playing and introduce you to the main forms of Irish traditional music. 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 her if you're having difficulty with anything.
3. **Have patience.** Although we all want to play recognisable tunes, the fiddle is a complex instrument, and we need to concentrate on good posture, sound production and bowing to begin with – all achievable if you follow your teacher's guidelines. Remember, good technique is the backbone of good playing!
4. **Listen to great fiddle 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.
- **Make your practice area comfortable.** Is the room well ventilated? Is there good lighting? Is your music stand at the proper height? 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. If you can, leave your fiddle case open with your fiddle ready to play, so you can pick it up and start practicing more easily.
- **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 Fiddle

Tuning your fiddle – and keeping it in tune – is vital to sounding good. 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. Finally, there are online tuners (there is one available on the school website) that provide you with the pitch each string should have. Fiddle strings are tuned in perfect 'fifths' to the following notes, from lowest to highest: G D A E.

Fiddle strings can be tuned with both fine tuners and pegs. Some fiddles only have fine tuners on the E string, while others have fine tuners on all four strings. As their name suggests, fine tuners are used for tuning the string if it is off-pitch by a small interval of no more than half a tone or so. When the string is out of tune by more than half a tone, then the pegs are used to tune the note initially, with the fine tuner used afterwards to make sure the note is exactly in tune. To begin with, you should not tune with the pegs unless absolutely necessary, in order to avoid unnecessary string breakages, and in any case always adjust in small increments. When tuning with the pegs, stand the fiddle on your knee, facing you, and place your left thumb across the strings to avoid a string hitting you in case it breaks.

When tuning any string instrument, you should always tune from below the note, up. This prevents string breakages and systematises the process of tuning, so you eventually become more familiar with the sound of a perfect, in-tune string. When a fine tuner has been wound right down to the end of the screw, you will need to loosen the fine tuner near to the end of the screw before carefully tightening the tuning peg. This way, you prevent the string from being over-tightened.

It is advisable to start by tuning the A string first, followed by the D, G and then E string. When you start to become more familiar with the sound of the notes of the different strings, you can try tuning the strings against each other. This is known as relative tuning.