

4 Killer Ways To Practice Your Music Theory

Tommaso Zillio

1 The Minimal Application

Use this tactic: anytime you learn a new concept, or anytime you have trouble understanding how you can make music out of some theory you learned.

For every music theory concept you learn, search the simplest possible application and start from there. The idea here is not to make the application merely “easier”, but make them the simplest that it can possibly be. Do not be afraid to make the application so simple that it seems “too easy” or “obvious”: you can always increase the complexity later.

Once you found the simplest possible application, you will have to perform it at least once before increasing the complexity. Do not ASSUME that you are able to perform it: actually do it. Here are some examples to get you started:

- When you learn a new scale pattern:
 - play the pattern on a backing track made by a single chord (-> avoids complication due to changing harmony)
 - play the pattern on a SLOW backing track (-> allows you to learn the scale without having to worry about speed/physical technique)
 - play the pattern only up & down (-> avoids any technical complication)
 - play the pattern on only two strings and in a single position (-> so you don't need to remember the whole thing... and then you can add one string at a time until you remember the whole pattern.)

NOTE: these are just examples. There are many other situations other than “learning a scale” where you can and should apply this idea.

2 Familiarity Practice

Use this tactic: if you find that you are “too slow” in thinking about scales and chords, or if music theory confuses you in general.

Often music theory concepts are not difficult per se but they seem hard because you are not familiar with their elements. This is how to increase your familiarity with the basic music theory concepts:

1. Pick a random note (say: G). Then pick a chord quality (major or minor to start with, let's say you pick "minor")
2. Ask yourself: "what are the notes in the G minor triad?"
3. Spell out the notes in the G minor triad ¹
4. Repeat from step 1.

Note that you DON'T need your guitar with you to do that, and so you can do this exercise anywhere, anytime. Once you have learned all the major and minor triads, you can:

- introduce diminished and augmented triads
- introduce 7th chords
- spell all the notes in a scale
- spell all the chords in a key
- spell out all the triads that contain a specific note ("what triads contain the C note?")

(You will start seeing the benefit of this tactic well before you finish with this list... already knowing major and minor triads will put you ahead of 80% of "normal" guitar players)

3 Sing Before You Play

Use this tactic: if you find that you play always the same things, or if you struggle to take the music out of your mind and play it on your guitar.

Most guitar players are not doing their ear training efficiently (or at all). Here is how to train your ear for real-life musical situations. Do this and your ability as an improviser and songwriter will skyrocket.

1. Sing a simple melody (or even just one note) and try to reproduce it on your guitar. In the spirit of Technique #1 "the minimal application", start with VERY simple melodies.
2. Start a backing track and improvise singing a short melody. Then try to reproduce it on your guitar. The use of a backing track helps in creating melody lines that "fits" an existing musical situation.
3. Take one of your favourite songs and transcribe the *vocal* melody (ignore the guitar part). Try also to reproduce the style of the singer using bends, slides, vibrato, etc.

¹If you don't know how to do it, check out the Beginning Music Theory free eBook at this link: <http://www.musictheoryforguitar.com/beginningmusictheoryguide.html> and the Finding The Right Chords For Your Melody eBook at this link: <http://www.musictheoryforguitar.com/howtoharmonizeamelody.html>

4 Creativity As Soon As Possible

Use this tactic: if you can understand music theory concepts and their application, and yet you find yourself unable to compose or improvise.

Despite popular opinion, creativity can be trained, and in fact creativity training should be part of the daily practice of any musician. Here's what you need to do:

1. For every music theory concept, tip, trick, etc that you know already or you are going to learn from this moment on: compose a *MINIMAL* piece of music using that concept. "Minimal" means that the piece of music can be made of 2 chords, or can just be a 5 second melody. Don't try to make it "good": just put it together.
2. Only after you have composed a minimal piece of music: start thinking on how to "edit" it in order to make it longer/better. For instance you can consider:
 - Repeating the music you have composed more than once.
 - Play the piece faster or slower, higher or lower.
 - If you have a melody, add chords. If you have a chord progression, write a melody.
 - Compose a "variation" or "call and response", i.e. compose some other music that "goes well" with what you have already.
 - Put this little piece of music together with ANOTHER little piece of music you composed previously and see if the "work" together.
3. Keep "editing" your piece of music :-) (you never "finish" a song: you only stop working on it!)

If the minimal piece evolves into a song, great! If not, you are still learning a lot about what works and what does not in music. And maybe in future you will reuse this piece of music in a song, you never know!