

LISTEN TO YOUR BODY

Watch out for physical pain. This is a signal telling you to take a break, check for undue muscle tension, poor posture, etc. Get up and move around; shake out your arms, hands, legs. Stretch. Maybe it's time to stop practicing for the day. There are a lot of information resources available today that can help musicians prevent or deal with stress-related injuries and problems. Hopefully, you can prevent them from occurring.

ANOTHER USEFUL TOOL: AN AUDIO RECORDER

Audio recorders of various types are in the possession of most traditional musicians these days. They are certainly very handy for capturing music that you wish to learn later. Beware, however, of becoming over-dependent on them. It's all too easy to record a tune and not really listen to it, since you know you can listen to your recording later. In your archiving zeal, don't forget to live in the present. If you have the opportunity to attend a regular session, try learning tunes by simply soaking them in through repeated exposure. One day you will realize that you have already learned the tune in your head. Then it is simply a matter of translating it from your mind's voice onto your instrument. Even if you do not have contact with other Irish musicians, you can learn this way by listening repeatedly to favorite recordings, letting the music wash over you until you have absorbed it.

Once on a trip to Ireland, I left my cassette recorder back in the states because I wanted to work on training myself to listen more deeply, as musicians must have done in older times. I did learn some tunes that way and learned them very well, but I'm afraid many escaped me entirely. It was great ear training, but it was also a rash decision, considering I was not able to visit musicians repeatedly during my fairly brief stay. So, moderation in all things is a wise policy.

It can be very revealing to record yourself. As you listen back, you will no doubt hear things that you didn't notice while you were playing.

Some recorders are equipped with a variable speed control. It can be very instructive to slow down the playback of a great player. For the computerized, there are also ways to capture music and manipulate it with software, some of which is free or very inexpensive.

GIVE YOURSELF POSITIVE MESSAGES

A musician always has more to learn, no matter how many years she has been practicing her art. Everyone is a beginner in some sense.

Even if your playing skills are rudimentary, your listening abilities are not. If you didn't have wide-open ears you wouldn't be drawn to embark on the serious work of learning a musical language and how to play a musical instrument.

Be encouraging to yourself. One can always find fault if one wants to, but one can also find progress, commitment, and devotion. Give yourself positive messages.

THE PHYSIOLOGY OF "MUSCLE MEMORY"

Many people find it frustrating that it seems to take so long for them learn to perform physical actions that they can quickly understand conceptually. The cut, for instance, is not hard to grasp, especially once you have heard it played well. Yet it takes a very long time to gain the needed fine muscle skills. Why should it be that our muscles take longer to learn things than our minds do?

Research in biology, anatomy, and neurology has begun to address this question. It is intriguing and reassuring to know that during that long learning period you are literally building new nerve pathways that are very persistent and reliable. What follows is a somewhat technical explanation, courtesy of my friend Lawrence Washington, a musician and molecular biologist.