

Productive Practicing

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/Writings/ /Reviews/ _/Legacy/

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Recently I read an article about a father who started music lessons in order to appreciate what his 11-year-old daughter was experiencing in piano study. The impetus for this adventure came from listening to her practice; although he wanted to assist these efforts, he admitted, “When it came to helping her, I was useless.” Practicing is an art in itself, and too many students could use help in making practice time more productive.

Those who practice ineffectively will generally play at a mediocre level, which provides them with little enjoyment; students who do not enjoy playing usually drop out of lessons.

Teachers generally attribute poor achievement to a combination of factors, including competition for time from other after-school activities; a fragmented practice routine that leads to ineffective preparation. While these problems may seem beyond teachers’ control, in my experience when students learn to accomplish more during practice, they derive more satisfaction from music study and begin to allot more time to practicing.

If good daily practice is essential to progress for students, the same is no less true for teachers, who as professionals should continue to grow musically. It is only reasonable to require of ourselves what we expect of others, yet many of us fail to practice what we preach. We may allow extraneous matters to intrude into the daily practice period, assuming one exists. Instead of a well structured session with a variety of materials representing different

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styles and periods, practicing may be an end-of-the-day struggle with tired technique and resurrected repertoire. With a sharp focus on the music at hand and a better understanding of how to practice, both teachers and students should be able to accomplish more in the available minutes of daily practice. If good daily practice is essential to progress for students, the same is no less true for teachers, who as professionals should continue to grow musically.

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Thinking Musically

Piano practice is musical problem solving that combines thinking and physical coordination. In his *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, Howard Gardner theorizes that problem-solving skills are a basic component of intelligence. Few young students, though, can solve problems effectively in daily practice because the necessary disciplines — theory, ear-training, sight-reading, and keyboard harmony — are routinely postponed to the college level. Practice without adequate musical tools becomes a matter of trial and error through mindless repetition.

While musical thinking has much in common with thinking in other subjects, it differs in that music is a temporal art. Musical performance involves thinking in motion, attending to several things simultaneously while immersed in an ever-changing interplay of ideas, actions, and feelings. With practice we can develop the deep concentration that enables us to handle the variety of musical threads demanding attention at the same moment.

Teachers often advise students to practice early in the day because a player who is tired or preoccupied may have difficulty concentrating. This does not mean skipping practice

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when an early time proves impossible, even if everything seems to have gone wrong that day; it is when we don't practice that things really go wrong. To help stay focused during practice, keep a note pad and pencil on the piano, and if your attention wanders to something unrelated to practice, jot down a word or two to remind you about it later. This rids the mind of the distraction so you can resume concentrating on the music at hand. Use the note pad and pencil to tally even the slightest deviation of attention; this procedure is especially valuable for those who do not realize their concentration fluctuates during practice. In adding the tallies at the end of the practice session, remember that, as in golf, there is no prize for the highest score.

Students and teachers alike observe that when they work on a piece too long, they become bored and have trouble concentrating, particularly if the piece is beyond their current level. Set a reasonable target date for the completion of each piece; stale, unfinished repertoire is a poor practice investment.

Learning New Pieces

For a fresh approach to practice, select a new piece that is neither too hard (a mazurka, prelude, intermezzo, or sonata movement) nor too long (two to four pages). Because the goal is achieving the best musical results in the shortest possible time with the least repetition, target a completion date. Next, before playing a single note, look through the piece and try to hear it in your mind. Locate the hardest places, then find a tempo that will allow you to keep going without breaking down. Also, from the first look at the music try to retain as much of the design and structure as possible. Now you are ready to sight-read it and get a feel for the entire piece.

After the initial reading, plan how to bring all aspects up to a satisfying performance level.

Go over mental notes from the first reading and sort the easy places from those that seem more complex. Each time you play any part, be as accurate as possible with notes, rhythm, fingering, dynamics, touch, and phrasing, and still maintain a steady, manageable tempo.

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The next step involves greater detail. For example, notice if the melody moves by scale or chord tones and find any sequences or repetitions. Determine whether it is embellished by neighbor tones, appoggiaturas, suspensions, or other non-chord tones. How does melody relate to harmony, and what happens harmonically in chromatic passages? What are the basic rhythmic patterns, and where and how do they change? The answers to these questions will help in identifying phrase structures, cadences, and the overall form, and will facilitate learning the entire piece. Then it is time to concentrate on spots that call for immediate attention.

With this musical analysis comes the work of finding appropriate fingerings, touches (legato, staccato, portato), phrasing, dynamic changes, and pedaling. Ignoring these or performing them improperly in the beginning necessitates undoing mistakes later, which is both frustrating and a waste of time. Effective practice, though, is much more than taking a piece slowly in the early stages, then playing it over and over to bring it up to tempo. Practice is thinking with concentration and control to make everything happen at the right time and in proper balance.

Achieving accuracy for a good performance involves many mental messages to guide the fingers. For a young student the mental, emotional, and physical coordination inherent in good keyboard performance should begin at the first lesson, when each task is simple. When the basic processes for problem solving and musical thinking are set in motion early, they will grow and expand as the subject matter increases in complexity, enabling students to deal effectively with each successive level of problems.

Because learning music through repetition has been the modus operandi of most students' practice, at first many will understandably feel uncomfortable relying more on musical comprehension and less on repetition. As they practice thinking in motion, which involves simultaneous attention to ongoing changes and split-second decisions, they also develop problem-solving techniques that often are applicable to other areas of learning. Many theorists now view music study as an aspect of basic learning rather than as a peripheral activity or an enrichment.

Practice Tips

To improve learning skills in daily practice, look on each session as an opportunity to progress on your own in developing the ability to think musically and solve musical problems intelligently and independently. In studying each new piece, ask yourself how the composer intended it to be played rather than how a teacher told you to play it.

To keep the experience positive, never play a piece more rapidly than you can correctly execute everything on the printed page. No significant progress can be made without first overcoming any wrong fingerings, notes, rhythms, touches, and other negative factors.

Find the difficult spots such as harmonic changes, technical problems, and complicated rhythms, and begin working on these immediately. This may involve skipping around in the piece to find the hardest passages or even working on the last section first; don't always begin at the beginning.

Instead of repeating a passage with mistakes in hopes of eventually getting it right, play each phrase correctly the first time, albeit under tempo, and then repeat carefully for greater facility and polish. Learning a piece through mindless repetition is like memorizing a phone number by saying it over and over; once you stop repeating the number, you soon forget it.

Try using intense concentration to learn phrases or even sections of pieces more quickly. First study every detail of a particular phrase or section for a few minutes without actually playing it; then close the music and play as far as possible. With regular practice your success rate will improve. This activity also builds reading skills by developing the ability to absorb minute details of the score and play them correctly on the first try. With a better understanding of the music, you should be able to bring pieces to an acceptable performance level in less time and retain them longer.

Good practice involves both focus and sequence. While focusing on a certain piece or activity during a practice session, do not omit sight-reading, technique, improvisation, ensemble, or other components from the daily sequence. In each of these practice segments, analyze the task at hand and identify problems; then prescribe the most appropriate action for dealing with those problems. This might involve practicing each hand alone, taking a slower

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tempo, playing outer voices only, or blocking the chords. After a few minutes evaluate the results of this prescription for signs of improvement. Then decide whether to repeat the cycle of analysis, prescription, and evaluation on that segment or move on to something else.

The Fruits of Good Practice

Daily practice at any level should be enjoyable and rewarding in itself, but it should also foster sharing music confidently with others. Too often players of any age or level fall apart when trying to perform for someone else, even though they may have practiced the piece for weeks. They lament having played it so much better before that moment of truth, but what many don't understand is that the sterling performance they recall was the 15th try of the day; the many repetitions with mistakes are somehow forgotten. It is the quality, not quantity of practice that determines how well one performs.

Being able to notice improvement enhances motivation because a sense of accomplishment brings the personal satisfaction that inspires still higher achievement. This creates momentum for learning; the more a student learns and achieves, the stronger the urge for even higher levels of attainment and the accompanying rewards.

The best teachers help students learn to teach themselves, enabling them to progress beyond their mentors' expertise and to continue learning for the rest of their lives. Through thoughtful practice students develop problem-solving skills that demonstrate both ingenuity and artistry in interpreting musical symbols to create more satisfying performances. With the resulting independence, regardless of how students use music in later life, they can keep learning on their own with increasing expectations and more rewarding accomplishments.

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