

A PROBLEM-SOLVING APPROACH TO PRACTICE

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What is it that makes a successful piano student? Is it the time given to practice? Is it talent? Is it attentive parents who insist that practicing be done on a regular basis? Is it a motivated teacher who nurtures as well as inspires? All of this and more is needed to assure success for any piano student.

One thing, however, does come to mind when looking for differences among successful and not so successful students. Problem-solvers identify barriers and to develop a strategy to successfully overcome them. I find that students who successfully learn to solve dilemmas for themselves in the practice session fair far more favorably than even those who may have more raw talent.

Nowadays, children must be taught and approached differently than just a generation ago. It is not enough to memorize, recite, and regurgitate. Today, facts are obtainable at a touch of a mouse. Identifying patterns, recognizing their relationships and using this information to conceive, design and construct, is the key to success today. Learning must involve creative and critical thinking leading to a strategy for solving problems.

Students must be guided to develop a system where they invent a series of appropriate questions, research the answers, and create a solution for themselves. This type of education requires a commitment from both the parent and the student and ascertain level of maturity. It takes time and most importantly patience. This type of learning is not immediate it is a process that continues forever.

Over the nearly 30 years of teaching I have noticed, particularly among boys, that patience is a virtue lost. Young men tend to develop a special self-imposed pressure to be immediately *successful* and at the first sign of struggle or difficulty retreat in despair. If I had a nickel every time a boy said how stupid he was after a mistake, I would not have to teach anymore.

Girls are not exempt either. They have the other difficulty, time. They have a self-imposed pressure to *do it all*—if only they were better *organized* or worked *faster*. The working faster issue is a recurrent theme among most of my girls. Not finishing the piece is simply tragic.

One problem that does not discriminate by gender is a syndrome I call "I can do it better at home." The syndrome is more accurately called performance anxiety. The students are not making this up; they can do it better at home. This is a result of low self-esteem, poor self-confidence and more importantly, a self-imposed pressure that everything in life is a test (even a piano lesson) controls their performance. Furthermore, each test must be passed with no less than a *perfect* score. Unless I use the word "*perfect*" while describing a performance, the student tends to view his or her work as inadequate. Anything less than perfect is bad.

Why? Children are learning that results and not process are what count—high grades, higher grades, and highest grades. The discovery of the self, the enlightenment of the intellect, the joy of progress, and the process of education in and of itself is not good enough. There is no time, therefore, for learning strategies, no patience for developing psychomotor skills and, unless there is immediate gratification and *perfection*, no hope for having fun. Admittedly, there is another reason it is "*done better at home*". Pianos vary a great deal and

when one goes from one piano to the next it may cause technical and aural difficulties. This also adds to the performance anxiety. This is only one reason I insist that each student has the best piano possible. It is the only way to develop an even, consistent technique as well as self-confidence.

Concisely, practice takes time, patience, a decent instrument, a metronome and a plan for solving problems. Before presenting the plan however, I want to make it clear that practice is a process toward learning. It is not sight-reading and it is not performing. Often students misunderstand the difference between these three activities.

Sight-reading is the first activity and usually takes place in the lesson. I try to have the students "read" through the piece so that I can point out various issues related to fingering, rhythm, chord structure, etc. Most of the time I have them read the music written for each hand separately while I play the other. Then I let them try it hands together. Sight-reading is a wonderful skill to have if you are doing accompanying, coaching, or teaching. I sight read through pieces for students on a regular basis. Obviously, I cannot learn every piece of music I teach; therefore, I am forced to sight-read pieces for the student. Sometimes I have never seen these pieces, and sometimes these are pieces I have done perhaps 25 years ago. I never worry if I am entirely accurate. The function of sight-reading is to gain an over-all view of the piece and to get through it as accurately as possible while keeping a steady beat. Mistakes are always acceptable while sight-reading as long as you just keep going.

However, sight-reading is not practicing. Sight-reading allows one to skip over the details and eventually if the piece is sight read through enough, the details remain missed and the mistakes become implanted. Constant sight-reading leads to very poor reading habits and performance practices.

While sight-reading is the first activity with a piece of music, performance is the last. Performance only comes after the piece has been dissected and studied bit by bit for its rhythmic material, fingering issues, chord structure, melodic design, articulation properties, and dynamic range. Performance is the result of hard work, time, and patience. Performance must be earned through practice.

In addition to time, patience, and energy, practice is a process that requires concentration. It needs to be done away from any distraction. The piano is often the central piece of furniture in the living room of many homes. As a result practice takes place in the center of bustling activity where televisions play and radios blast and where siblings and parents are listening and often making comments. Practicing, just like homework requires quiet. Try to find a moment or several moments in the day when the family activity around the piano is at a minimum. If necessary move the instrument to another room so that it can be used for study as well as entertainment. Piano and television are not compatible. Ask yourself this question: Is my piano a tool that will improve my child's learning habits, extend his powers of concentration, develop fine and small motor coordination, promote good listening habits and instill self-discipline and self-confidence while providing hours and hours of enjoyment for him or is it a piece of furniture? After answering the question, decide where the piano should be.

In my plan for practicing there are five rules that I have found to be a successful foundation for music learning. I have discussed each of these rules with each student week after week and I will continue to do so because this is what piano instruction is all about. Teaching how to practice is the best gift I could ever give my students. It will last a lifetime. Long after the various pieces of music studied are forgotten the skills for good practice will hold them in stead through many and varied

learning difficulties. Once they have learned how to practice, they have also learned how to study, solve problems, and work through to a solution.

- Practice slowly enough to be able to perform the correct *notes* with the correct *fingering* with the correct *rhythm* while keeping a *steady beat*. Slow practice is the key to successful *physical coordination* between the hands, and between the hands and the eye. It also teaches good reading skills and reinforces good rhythm.
- Always use a metronome. Even slight increases and/or decreases in tempo present real coordination problems. Using the metronome develops better listening skills and promotes an accuracy and steady beat.
- Depending upon the difficulty of the piece, learn *one measure, phrase, or section* at a time. Perform it correctly *3 times* before moving on to the next section. Perform the two sections together again *3 times* before moving on to another. I recommend that each student use the post-it method described in a previous article. It works! It has been tested repeatedly.
- Begin working from the *end* of the piece and work backward toward the *beginning*. Learn the last measure, then the second to the last, the third to the last, etc. , and each time play to the end. This assures that the student will remain focused on practicing and not slip unwittingly into playing or sight-reading.
- Once the entire piece can be performed well at a slow tempo, with the metronome, the student may begin to build tempo. Before each performance of the piece move the metronome gage one or two increments at a time toward the desired tempo. This process should take at least 3 or 4 days of practice. Do not push too hard and too fast. The nervous system must gradually get used to the increase of speed.

Naturally, these five rules are not all there is in the world of practice but they are an excellent foundation for development.

Parents, keep an ear and eye on your children while practicing. You can help a great deal with a simple reminder from time to time.