

Practice Technique 101

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Practice is the most important issue confronting any music student and parent. It is an art that musicians must define, study, learn, redefine, restudy, and relearn. Parents and student alike must realize that learning to practice is a process that continues indefinitely, and one that all musicians would rather avoid.

I do not know anyone who really wants to practice. However, I do know musicians and even musician-students who have begun to view practicing as a journey through which they discover the intricacies of music composition and the beauty of instrumental technique. These same people have also discovered a part of themselves: How they learn, how they focus and concentrate, how they handle frustration, how they problem-solve, how they persevere, how they face disappointment and how they handle success. These people have discovered that practicing is a pathway to the joy of music making and the joy of knowing who they are, and therefore, a path they reluctantly and yet, more willingly take as each day passes.

I remember years ago one of my favorite teachers telling me that as a working musician I would one day view practice and rehearsal as a luxury, and that I would wish for the days of being a student when I had all the time in the world to practice. He could not have been more correct. I even find myself envious of many of my adult students who have uncovered a way to integrate practice into their daily routine and commit themselves to the discipline.

However, children cannot do this alone, especially at first. Most children need encouragement from both teacher and parent for them to practice. They may even require help from either mom or dad on a regular basis. They need to understand that developing the habit and understanding that practice is just one more aspect of their daily routine is expected. Just like homework, practice needs to be set for a specific time in the day on a 6-day basis. Practice should be broken up into two or three 10 to 15 minute segments through the day: Scales and technical exercises (Dozen a Day, Czerny, etc.) in one segment, pieces in the others. Schedule the segments first thing in the morning, first thing home from school, just before supper, just after supper or anywhere in the day when the child will not be too hungry or too tired to concentrate well.

Making charts and graphs to track one's progress, organize one's work and to help control the use of one's time is a wonderful activity where both children and parent can be involved and invested. One family I taught years ago developed a practice chart. It lists the assigned piano work for the week down a column on the left, with the days of the week across the top. The children decide the amount of work they will complete for each day and, when achieved they place a check mark in the day of the week column. The chart helps to keep track of their

progress and reminds them of what they have yet to finish. It works very well. Naturally, their mom is directly involved in helping them complete the chart by copying the assignments out of their notebooks, and breaking it down into smaller daily tasks, but most importantly, making sure the scheduled practice times are kept.

The idea of breaking down the assignment into small tasks however seems rather foreign to many people. Many of my transfer students have said that their parents insist that each piece be played at least 10 times through at each practice session. Never, Never, Never! When learning a composition it is important not to continually play through the piece from beginning to end. This technique is sight-reading not practicing. Continually sight reading a composition, and hoping that with each pass one will gain more skill, is the least effective, the least efficient and the most destructive way to practice. It promotes poor reading skills, destroys rhythmic development, fosters bad technical habits, encourages daydreaming, and never allows the student to know the composition intrinsically.

Sitting at the keyboard for 30 minutes straight is another Never, Never, Never! I do not know any child who can sit and do anything (even while they watch TV) for more than 10 or 15 minutes without needing to do move on to something else (or change the channel). Children and even adults have limited powers of concentration and as teachers and parents, we need to recognize this and work with it. It will do us no good to pretend otherwise. Forcing the child to practice beyond his/her ability to concentrate is ludicrous. Tasks that require high levels of concentration and focus need to be broken down into small segments throughout the day with preset and limited goals.

Learning a piece of music is much like building a beautiful brick wall one block at a time making sure each brick is square, straight and true and that each brick aligns itself with the others and becomes an intricate part of the whole. Building a composition begins the same way, one measure at a time, making sure it is performed accurately, with the correct articulation, dynamics and style and then allowing it to become an intricate part of the whole piece.

Pick out one measure anywhere in the piece, most people start at the beginning but there is no reason why they should not start at the end or anywhere in between. Place a red sticky (3M Post-it) on the right bar line and a green sticky on the left bar line. While using the metronome, play first the right and then the left hand of the chosen measure; make sure the pitches, rhythms, and fingerings are correct. As the metronome continues to maintain a slow beat, play hands together at least three times or until the pitches and rhythms are correct and that the fingerings are consistent. The red sticky prevents you from going any further forward. Once mastered, move the green sticky one measure to the left and play

both measures three times, again making sure the pitches and rhythms are correct and that the fingerings are consistent. Keep moving the green sticky back measure-by-measure (always stopping at the red sticky) until you reach the beginning. Only now do you move the red sticky one measure forward. Place the green sticky on the left bar line and begin the process again. Continue to move the green sticky back measure-by-measure and always stop at the red sticky. The metronome remains ticking at the same slow tempo through the entire process. Once the piece can be performed accurately and comfortably from beginning to end the metronome can then be used to build a faster tempo.

Obviously, this method provides no entertainment and demands that the student pay close attention to his/her work. In the beginning, it is tedious, arduous, and most demanding. It is taxing on the student's concentration and therefore, should not continue for more than 10 to 15 minutes at a time. As one employs this method, he/she begins to read more accurately and faster and find themselves able to move the green sticky back two, three or four measures at a time rather than one. In addition, their powers of concentration and memory increase and they find themselves sitting for up to 20 minutes without losing focus or attention. Furthermore, because they become more confident they discover more enjoyment and therefore, are more willing to go to the instrument without much or sometimes any prompting from their parents. Success breeds success, but success can only come with a good practice technique.