

Practicing at the Piano

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Practicing effectively is extremely important. When you practice effectively, you know what to do to learn your assignments quickly and efficiently with a minimal amount of frustration. Practicing effectively is also highly rewarding and makes lessons a lot more fun. I believe that many of my students put in enough time at the piano each week to be successful, but they don't always know quite what to do to make the best use of their time there. I also believe that many of my students "practice" pieces by sight reading (playing) through them over and over again. When practicing students practice this way, there will still be errors in their playing at the end of the first day of practice, so students are left to judge how many errors are acceptable on any given day of the week. This places students into a difficult position at best. The other major problem with practicing this way is that there is no clear amount of progress made from day to day, which can leave students feeling as though they are spending time practicing but getting nowhere.

My system of practice accomplishes two very important things: 1. It provides a systematic and methodical direction for how each piece should be practiced. 2. You know when you have practiced enough for one day so that you can walk away from the piano with a feeling of accomplishment after each time you practice.

Before you begin practicing, there are a few important guidelines to keep in mind. First, you should begin by playing everything slowly. If you play something and you have to pause frequently or make many mistakes, it is a sign that you need to slow down. When you play slowly, you give your brain a chance to take in all of the material. After you play something even a few times slowly, you will be able to speed up and play the music more quickly. Playing slowly is one of the keys to mastering pieces quickly.

Secondly, you should do everything three times. Research has shown that the first time you play a section of music, you may make some mistakes as you are unfamiliar with the music. The second time you play through a section, chances are that you will play it even worse than the first time because you may become overconfident after having played through the material once. The third time will be one of the very best times through, as you have some experience, but have learned not to be overly confident.

Remember, if you really stumble while playing the first time through something, it is a good sign that you need to slow down, or play hands alone to begin. It can be difficult to decide when to play hands alone and when to practice with both hands together. It is a good idea to practice each hand separately when the hands each do something which is rhythmically different from the other, when there are many notes, or each hand has a different articulation from the other. Now that we have laid some of the ground rules for practicing, let's talk about how we can practice most effectively. If you have been assigned a scale, this is a great place to start your practice. Scales are the single most important exercise we do each week to build excellent technique. You should practice your scale three times. As you play your scale, there are two things to remember: 1. Play each key with a curved finger shape. 2. Lift each finger and drop into the keys. As you play, be sure that your hands play at exactly the same time, with an even tone. Go slowly at first so that you don't make any errors. Watch the music closely to be sure you have the right notes and the correct fingerings. As the week progresses, you can begin to wean yourself away from the music so that you can play your scales from memory at your lesson. If you have been assigned two-octave minor scales you should practice one form of the scale each day.

If you have been assigned scale review pieces, you should practice one of these each day. If you were assigned C, G, and D Major, you should practice C the first day, G the second, D the third, back to C the fourth day and so on. As you practice each day, you should play your scale review three times. When you go to practice the rest of your lesson (Lesson books, Literature books, Fun books, etc.) you should begin by dividing up each piece into several small sections. Groups of four measures work well in shorter pieces while groups of eight measures works well in longer pieces. Dividing up pieces into several small sections can be somewhat tricky, so I am more than happy to provide you with assistance during your lesson. Label each section with the name of the day on which you will practice that section, allowing yourself one day's repose from practice. Also, you should structure your practice so that you are not attempting to learn any new material on the day of your lesson, but rather just review it before you come in.

When you begin to practice, you should first work on only a small section. Two measures works well, but for really difficult pieces, you might want to play one measure at a time. Begin slowly, and play through the first two measures. Watch carefully for the correct notes and be sure that you count out loud so that you play

the rhythms correctly. You will need to play the first two measures three times slowly. As you play the third time watch the music closely and be sure that you look for

- Dynamic signs (forte, piano, etc.)
- Articulations (slurs, accents, staccato marks, etc.)
- Tempo markings
- Be sure that you are counting out loud and playing with excellent technique!

After completing this step, play three more times and increase your tempo. You should be able to play the time with no errors. If you are still having trouble, go slower and play these two measures another three times. It is very important that you do not go on in the piece until you have corrected your errors.

Once you have learned the first two measures, learn the next two the same way you learned the first two. During this stage, we practice only the second two measures; we don't play the first two. Once you have mastered the second two measures, continue on to any other measures you haven't practiced yet. Work in groups of two measures until you have mastered the entire section you decided to practice today. As a final step, play through the entire section start to finish three times. If you have difficulty, slow down until you gain the confidence you need to move faster. Work until you have mastered this section and you are finished with this piece for today. Go on to the rest of your books and work in the same way until you have completed everything.

When you begin practice on the next day, start with your scale and scale review, then go to your other books. When you begin practicing in a book, begin by reviewing the section that you practiced yesterday three times. Then, go on to learn the new material for today. Work in small sections, beginning slowly and building speed, just as we did yesterday. Once you have mastered today's section, play through all that you have learned in this piece three times. Proceed through the rest of the week like this.

You may notice that the unusual thing about practicing in this manner is that you don't play from the beginning of the piece to the end until the end of the week. The reason for this is simple: playing through a piece over and over is simply not an effective way to practice. You will actually have to spend a lot more time practicing a piece to master it this way.

Practicing effectively takes a lot of self-discipline at first, but when you begin to see how good you feel about your progress, you will want to practice effectively all the time!