Practice techniques

VMT

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Introduction

I come to the concept of music practice from several different angles. First, as a pianist myself, I attended a specialist music school from the age of 14, where practising up to four hours a day was the norm. I then suffered an injury, and for many years I could practise no longer than an hour or two. During this period I had to think seriously about how to use my time efficiently. I'm also a piano teacher, working with children and adults of all ages and stages. And finally, as a mother trying to encourage practice in our house, working with a seven-year-old beginner pianist, and a nine-year-old drummer, I feel I can happily put myself in the shoes of any frustrated parents or teachers!

There's so much that could be explored around the theme of practising, and it would be impossible to cover all of it in a single resource. Therefore, this resource is focused around particular practice techniques that I've found to be most effective in my own teaching and playing. Many of these techniques are approached from a pianist's perspective, but there's plenty here that other instrumentalists and singers should also find relevant and helpful.

We'll look at these areas:

- The impact of creativity and mood on our practising
- Building fluency and accuracy through positive practice
- Use of colour in practice
- Effective sightreading practice
- Mental practice
- Practising for performance
- Structuring your practice

The impact of creativity and mood on our practising

Our most engaged practice will take place when we're feeling positive about it and clear about our goals, as well as when we're being creative with our practice strategies. Being aware of our mood when practising is important. I find that younger children's practice is much more effective if you can catch them at the right time of the day. Choose a regular time slot for practice each day, if possible, so that it can be built into a daily routine. As Suzuki said: you don't have to practise every day, only on the days you eat!

Some children are naturally early risers, so having a short slot before school might mean they're less tired and more focused than after school. As a parent, if you're able to sit with your child for even five minutes of their practice, it can be very beneficial. You might want to sit with them at the beginning to help them clarify their goals, and then come back at the end to see how they've got on, for example. Incentives, such as sticker or reward charts, are helpful, especially if they're written in a practice book and can be shown to the child's teacher each week.

With older students, who might be practising for longer, I encourage an awareness of mood in deciding how to structure practice. For example, the student might get their instrument out feeling very focused, and determined to sort out the most challenging section. Or, if they're feeling a little weary, perhaps they might start with a piece that they know they can play more easily, and focus on sound and shape. If they feel their practice has become a little stale, they might consider using some of the mental practice techniques discussed later in the article, or start with the challenge of learning a short, new piece, which in turn will aid their sightreading (also discussed below).

Maintaining a clear awareness of their short-, mid- and long-term goals will give students the freedom to achieve them in a slightly more flexible manner. A short-term goal might be playing a page of a piece hands together by their next lesson; a mid-term goal might be a school performance; and a long-term goal could be a grade examination, for example.

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Here are some further ideas for incorporating creativity into your students' practice:

- Could they find an art work that they feel represents the piece they are learning? Or could they draw their own?
- Can they think of a story which fits the piece they're working on?
- Can they make up their own technical exercises for the difficult parts of the piece?
- Could they try improvising over the main harmonies of their piece?
- Ask them to close their eyes and point at a spot in the music. Can they pick up the piece at that point?
- Before they play the piece, could they imagine being on stage in a big concert hall or another performance situation? Ask your student to think about how it would feel, and who they might want to have in the audience.

If your student is feeling a little tired when practising, one way of bringing focus to their practice is for them to ask themselves: why? If students make a rule that they will never play a note in practice unless they know what they hope to achieve, then their practice will become more engaged and effective.

For example:

- I am going to play slowly through all the sections in this piece that I find difficult, as a useful warm-up.
- I will try to perform the first page of this piece, focusing on the musical shape.
- I am going to spend ten minutes working on these two lines, trying to achieve even semiquavers.
- I am going to play the left-hand chords of this piece and improvise a right-hand line, in order to get to know the harmonies better.
- I am going to make a recording of my piece and listen to it, to see what I would like to improve.

Students should spend at least five minutes before they start their practice looking through their pieces or technical exercises, and thinking about what they want to accomplish in the following 20 minutes.

Building fluency and accuracy through positive practice

In order to demonstrate one rather simple concept of positive practising, try out a short exercise:

1. Bring to mind a piece you're currently working on, either by yourself, or with one of your students.
2. Think of the first place in that piece where you can be reasonably sure something will go wrong, or where you or your student will have to stop. (This is usually quite easy to do!)
3. Consider whether, during your own or your student's practice, you always start by working on that section.

A practice technique I very often hear about from students is to start practice by playing through the piece in question, to 'see how it goes'. In reality – and as just demonstrated by this simple exercise – students probably have a pretty good idea how it will go, so there's often very little to be gained by simply playing through a piece, at least at the start of their practice. A more positive technique would be to practise the section that they know is difficult, and then to play the piece through and expect it to go right. This also has an impact on their eventual performance of the work. If they have become used to stopping at particular points, it can be harder to break that pattern once they have conquered the section in question.

Now that students know where to start their practising, how are they going to practise the difficult sections? Positive practising means starting from a place of comfort and accuracy, ie playing the passage at a speed at which they expect to get it right. It's not necessarily difficult to play a passage quickly, once you have mastered it at a slow tempo. The speed can be increased gradually. However, it's vitally important to gain fluency, accuracy and comfort at a slow tempo first. Students should view their practising like sports training. If they were planning to run a marathon, they wouldn't go out on the first day of training and have a go at running 26 miles to see how it feels. Rather, they would start at a distance that matches their current fitness and experience, and work from that point. They should think of their practising in the same manner.

Practising fast passagework

Here, we'll look at some effective and positive ways to practise fast passagework. We're starting from a point where the notes are learnt, but the student is keen to play the passage at a faster tempo, with more evenness and control.

It can be helpful for the student to concentrate on three or four lines in one practice session, as they can lose focus if they play through longer sections. Get them to try using the following techniques:

- Play through the passage slowly, with good technique and posture (for pianists this would be firm fingers, emphasising the notes, but keeping the wrist relaxed). The student can keep coming back to this.
- Try playing the passage in dotted rhythms (dotted quaver followed by semiquaver, and vice versa) to gain control over the fingers.
- A particularly effective technique is to play four notes slowly followed by four notes up to speed all the way through the passage. The slow practice should feel physically comfortable, and they should aim to keep that feeling of physical comfort when they play the four faster notes.
- To build on this, they can later try groups of notes up to speed, pausing between each group to check in with their hands, wrist and arms, making sure they are managing to keep physical comfort. If this is successful, then they should try a group of 16 notes up to speed.

Once your student can play the notes of a piece, it is important that they try and practise even very small sections of technically demanding passages up to speed, as they may need to slightly alter the way they physically play, in order to achieve the section at the correct tempo. They can then incorporate this playing technique into their slower practice.

Backwards practice

A lot of effective work on fluency and accuracy is done by building up sections bar by bar. However, this is not necessarily most effective when one starts at the beginning of the piece. Often, the start of a piece or a difficult passage is the most reliable part, and it then gradually becomes less secure. Therefore, it can be useful for students to start their practice at the end of a passage. They should try playing the last bar (or beat, depending on the passage) and then gradually work backwards, adding a beat/bar at a time. In this way they are always consolidating the work they have just done, and again, they are now expecting the section they have practised to be accurate.

Use of colour in practice

The use of colour in music was first introduced to me as a useful practice when working with children with dyspraxia, a condition that affects physical co-ordination. But in fact its use has proved invaluable in working with a range of students, and in practising music myself. It's a strong visual cue to remind you of a change coming up, or a musical shape, for example.

Here are the some of the ways in which it can aid in practice. On a practical note, you might want to make a copy of the music before approaching it with any highlighter pens!

- Difficult fingering: you can use colour to highlight each time the thumb goes under, as a pianist, for example.
- Voicing: at a more advanced level, colour can be used to show the different voices in a Baroque fugue, or to show the voices that a student is aiming to bring to the fore in a Chopin Nocturne, for example. Here, they might use one colour for a main voice, and a second colour for an interesting countermelody.
- Black notes: with students who have found a piece very difficult, I have highlighted each time they need to play a black note, for practice purposes.
- Registers/changes of clefs: you could use colour to highlight where the clef changes, from treble or bass to alto for a viola or cello, for example, or to highlight an 8va passage, where it is not immediately obvious on the score that the music is played higher.
- Dynamics: could the student use a different colour for each dynamic?
- Character: perhaps they could even experiment with using colours for the different moods of a piece.

Effective sightreading practice

Although sightreading is often associated with the ABRSM grade examinations, it's probably the skill that most adults, who stopped learning piano at some point in their youth, wish they had developed. The ability to sit down and play a piece of music, or to play with friends, is central to our enjoyment of music.

It's important to approach sightreading practice with this goal in mind, and to make sightreading an integral part of your students' work at their instrument. Practising sightreading can take many forms, in addition to the traditional exam-based practice of looking through a short piece for 30 seconds and then playing it. One of the most effective ways to improve sightreading is for students to learn a large variety of pieces, taking a volume a few grades below their current level. This can also be a more satisfying way to practise sightreading than simply reading once through an exercise. Set them the challenge of learning one small new piece a week!

Mental practice

During the recent lockdown, I had many conversations with professional musicians and students alike who were struggling to find focus in their practising. For some, it was the lack of a goal to work towards, with exams and performances cancelled. For others, it was having too much time to practise and finding that it was a struggle to structure that time.

However, this gave rise to interesting discussions around the best way to utilise this additional time, and that sitting for longer with your instrument was probably not in itself the most productive way. Although I believe that mental practice should be incorporated into every practice routine, with limited time it's natural that our urge is to get straight to the instrument and start playing. The extra time gave some of my students the opportunity both to play their instrument for as long as they wanted, and to incorporate more aspects of mental practice. Going forward, I will encourage them to keep both the mental and physical sides of their practice active.

Here are some ways in which your students can effectively use time away from the instrument, in order to further their understanding of the music they are playing, and to maximise their goals during practice.

Prepare your practice time

Students should spend between five and 20 minutes (depending on their age and level) before they go to their instrument, thinking about, or talking to their parent/guardian, about exactly what they want to achieve during that period of practice. They could can also write it down if it's helpful. They should think about the following kinds of things:

- What technical practice do they want to cover during the practice? Can they come up with interesting new exercises to address technical issues in their pieces?
- What is the journey of the piece – where are the main points, and what is the direction of each phrase?
- Where is the main voice at any one time? Are there other interesting countermelodies that they could highlight? As a pianist, this is all down to them. If they're playing an ensemble instrument, do they know where they fit in musically at any given point? Where do they have the main voice, and where are they accompanying the piano?

Listen to recordings

- Students should try listening to three different recordings of their piece, perhaps from different eras. Can they critically respond to these performances? What do they like about them? What would they love to emulate? Is there anything they like less about them?
- Can they listen to three other works written by the same composer (not necessarily on their own instrument!) during the same year?
- As above, if they are playing as part of an ensemble, can they hear at which points they have the main voice and where their instrument becomes the accompanist?
- They should take time to learn some of the following about their piece's musical and historical context:
  - What interesting facts can they find out about the composer?
  - What was going on in the composer's life when they were writing the work?
  - Are there historical events which may have had an influence on their work?
  - If the student is learning a piece that's also a dance, for example a minuet, could they watch it being danced online? This will inform the way they approach the piece.

Practising for performances

If a student is working towards a performance, it's important that their practice is also geared towards the performance. This is where playing through pieces becomes crucial to their preparation.

As well as developing the skills to stop each time they make a mistake and correct it, they need to develop the skills to carry on no matter what. Even professionals make mistakes in performance, but they very rarely stop playing!

We've all had the experience of playing something perfectly in practice, only to find that unexpected mistakes creep in during a performance. Therefore, part of our practice must aim to recreate the performance situation. Can the student visualise the performance situation? If it helps, they could actually walk to the piano they practice on, turn to the 'audience', bow and sit down. They should try to make their re-creation as realistic as possible. They could ask friends or family to listen to a performance and try to timetable it into their weekly practice routine. Recording themselves is a very useful way to create a certain nervousness, and also an excellent way of assessing their own playing.

Structuring practice

There are many ways to structure practice, and they are dependent on factors such as time available, upcoming performances or exams, and mood, as discussed above. The following is therefore intended to bring together some of the different practice techniques discussed during this resource, through the example of a beginner pianist's practice timetable.

Sample practice structure for a beginner

Before you go to the piano:

- Have a chat with your grown-up, or look through your music yourself, and decide what pieces you want to practise today.
- What is your aim? Do you want to work hands separately, or are you ready to try hands together?
- Is there a special piece you'd like to be able to perform for your teacher, or make a recording of for yourself?
- Can you think about the character of each piece? Does the music remind you of anything when you play it, or listen to it? How could you make it sound like that?
- Rhythm reading: clap some rhythms together from your pieces. Where are the tricky rhythms?
- Can you name some of the notes in your music?

At the piano:

- Practise note finding on the keyboard: eg find all the Ds, find all the Gs, or find all the B flats, if you're more advanced!
- Now turn to your pieces. Can you remember your aim for each one? Start with the tricky sections, or work backwards, starting with the last bar.
- Creative time: can you make up your own tune today? Perhaps it's based on the same story as your piece, or uses the same notes. You could try the pedal, or maybe add some clapping or tapping.
- Performance time: choose a section of your piece, or the whole piece, and try to play it all the way through without stopping.

Conclusion

I hope that these suggestions have given you some ideas of the varied ways you and your students can approach practice. Encourage your students to plan their practice holistically, with an awareness of short-, mid- and long-term goals, both in terms of performances and exams, but also with regard to their development as musicians. They should remember to be aware of their mood when they're practising, and choose their activities accordingly. If they are creative in their practising, they will remain more focused, and therefore more effective, and hopefully also have more fun!