

Piano Practicing

- 7 Steps to Improve Your
Practicing Quickly

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7 Steps to Improve Your Piano Practicing Quickly

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Learning and refining the art of practicing piano is a life-long project, and there are a vast number of techniques and strategies you can evaluate and learn to apply in specific situations.

This short guide is not an attempt to cover detailed practice techniques but provides you with a few quick ways to immediately improve your practicing routines and get more out of your practice time.

1. Plan your time

One of the most important points for a satisfying and consistent progress is regular, well-planned practice sessions.

Compare your piano practicing to a physical workout. There is not much point in going to the gym once a month even if you spend a full day there. Even as little as an hour once a week would give much better results. Since learning piano is both a physical and a mental process, regularity is crucial. And although daily practicing is generally recommended you will be able to achieve excellent results with only three or four practice sessions per week. For most people, it is easy to set up ambitious goals but very difficult to keep to the plan unless it becomes part of your daily or weekly routines.

It is important to set up long-term goals for what you want to achieve in the coming 3-6 months. But, in order to schedule an appropriate amount of weekly practice time, you also need short-term goals consisting of a selection of pieces or technical issues to focus on in the next few weeks. You should try to find your own optimal balance between the goals you plan to accomplish and your weekly practice time. As a brief rule of thumb, for each page of music included in your short time plan you need at least 30 minutes of weekly practice. So, for example, if you are working on a two-page Bach Invention and a four-page Chopin Nocturne, six pages in total, an appropriate minimal weekly practice time would be $6 \times 30 = 180$ minutes (3 hours). Your speed of progress should then be satisfactory and this will keep up your level of motivation.

Now, go ahead and set up your long-term and short-term goals as well as a realistic weekly practice schedule with at least 3-5 sessions of 30-60 minutes. Consider this to be the minimum practice time you must put in and, if for some reason you miss one practice session, try to reschedule it for the next day.

2. Prepare your mental and physical state

To get the most out of your practicing, it is important to have a focused awareness of sound, touch and movement.

At the start of each practice session, take a few deep breaths and find a balanced posture with relaxed shoulders and heavy arms.

Perk up your ears to be prepared to indulge the sound of your instrument. Play, for example, one single note with a careful touch and listen to its subtly changing timbre and tonal shades throughout the whole life cycle of the note. Repeat with a few different notes and listen to and enjoy their unique sound!

3. Analyze and mark up

When starting working on a new piece, sit down away from the piano and analyze the piece. Mark up sections and repeated patterns, translate foreign words and work out harmonic progressions and difficult rhythms. It's also a good idea to copy the fingering which, in most editions, is left out when patterns and section are repeated. Depending on your music reading abilities you might want to pencil in the sharps (or mark them with a highlighter) and flats for every single note according to the key signature. Do not forget notes with accidentals where the affected note recurs later in the same bar.

4. Repeat correctly

Learning to play an instrument, or more specifically a piece of music is, to a great extent but not only, a matter of programming your brain to execute a number of tasks in a certain order. Undoubtedly the most effective way to program your aural- and muscular-memory is to repeat shorter sequences several times in a row.

Bearing this in mind, we can set up a general rule for learning music and working on technical problems effectively:

Repeat everything you practice four times correctly

That sounds obvious and easy to implement but most people have an over-optimistic and impatient part of their mind which, rather than spending the required time on focused practicing, instead wants to try to get through the difficult passage once correctly in order to skip over the problem for now, in good conscience, and continue playing through the piece.

That usually leads to repeating a section several times incorrectly and then finally playing it once correctly. Let's say, with some luck, it took you four repeats with errors to finally play it once correctly. You have then spent 80% of your time practicing playing incorrectly and 20% playing correctly. What are the chances you will nail the passage on the first go tomorrow? Probably around 20%.

Imagine how much time you would save and how confidently you would perform if you never made a mistake when practicing. Of course that is not realistic, but this insight gives us a good second general rule to aim for:

Make no mistakes!

The keys to following this rule are to maximize your mental focus and to always play at a tempo where you have full control, which often means practicing slowly.

Slow practice

Slow practice is crucial when dealing with problematic passages or when learning, for example, structurally complex or polyphonic music.

It is often helpful to use a metronome for improving discipline when practicing slowly. A very common strategy when practicing a problematic passage or section is to start out very slowly and, with each repetition, to increase the speed by one step on the traditional metronome scale (or by steps of 5 BPM if you have a digital metronome with whole number steps only) for each repetition until you reach the limit beyond which you cannot play with full control. Then drop back a few notches and start over, increasing your speed step by step.

Another strategy is to start at a moderate speed where you have full control and repeat five times, decreasing the speed by one step for each repetition and then gradually increasing it again up to, and beyond, the original speed, until you reach your limit.

Since mindless slow practice can easily lead you into one of the most horrific states of piano playing: mechanical playing, you can prevent this from happening (and relieve yourself of worry) by sticking to this last general rule about slow practice:

Always shape every phrase and bring out all the musical detail, even when practicing slowly!

Mental focus

A great way to maximize your mental focus and help you achieve a very effective ideal practice routine by which you will be able to repeat a passage four times in a row without any mistakes, is to take four items, such as pencils or buttons, and place them all to the left of the keyboard.

Each time you play the section correctly you move one over to the right side of the keyboard. If you make a mistake, continue playing until the end of the passage and then, since you made a mistake, move one of the items back to the left side.

Continue this way until all the items have been moved to the right side.

Try it and you will realize why it is a great system...

(Note that the reason for continuing to play rather than stopping when you make a

mistake is very important. When you stop you are programming yourself to stop as soon as you make a mistake. This is a very bad habit which causes problems when performing. You need, instead, to get into the habit of “playing over” mistakes when and if they should occur.)

5. Practice the difficulties

When working through your pieces, mark difficult sections in pencil and spend most of your practice time on these parts. During your next practice session, first work on these difficult sections before playing through the whole piece.

Every now and then it's good to start practicing from the end instead of the beginning. Well, you're not supposed to play the piece backwards but to work through the piece one bar, phrase or line at a time until you reach the beginning. A very effective strategy is to add one bar/phrase/line each time this way: Last line, two last lines, three last lines, etc.

You wouldn't want go through the whole Hammerklavier Sonata this way, but for a one or two page piece in which you are more familiar with the beginning rather than the subsequent sections, this is very effective. You also get great practice in starting from difficult places, helping you increase your awareness of what your fingers are actually supposed to do in each and every bar, rather than relying solely on your aural and muscular memory.

You are probably familiar with the proverb “Repetition is the mother of learning”. When you want to remember something for a long time it is often necessary to repeat it at longer intervals, such as days or even weeks.

On the other hand, a common mistake is to practice a difficulty “for a while” every day and then, without really mastering it, to put it aside leave it for tomorrow. That can often continue for a long period of time without the problem being solved.

What would you do if you wanted to boil some water for a cup of tea?

Warm it up a little every day, hoping it will start to boil tomorrow? Probably not. You would heat it up to boiling in one go. This saves both time and frustration!

The same can be applied to piano practice.

It has been said that when Russian pianist Sviatoslav Richter was learning Prokofiev's Sonata no 9 he had problems with a particularly difficult section in the third movement, and the way he mastered these couple of complex bars was simply to repeat them without interruption for two hours!

It is also know that Franz Liszt often practiced in the same way, repeating difficult bits over a hundred times.

6. Practice performing under pressure

Once a week or so, and most importantly of all a few days before a lesson or performance, make a video or audio recording of yourself performing your pieces at

home. Invite a family member or a friend to be your audience or call up your grandmother and have a "live broadcast" over the phone!

Allow yourself no more than one take of each piece. The pieces do not have to be concert ready, but chose tempi which allow you to play them through correctly with full technical control and all the details in place.

This is a great way to practice playing under pressure, which we all need to get used to. Being a bit nervous in a lesson or performance situation is no big deal if you know that you can play well even when you are nervous!

Also, these little home performances will help you keep your practice sessions more effective since you will need to prepare for them a few days ahead.

7. Be your own teacher

When you have made the recording in step 6, leave it for a day or two and then listen to it again with untainted ears. First, listen through without looking at the score and focus on the over-all musical performance. Are you getting your musical ideas and your intended expression across?

What can be improved? Make a note of it.

While listening a second time, close your eyes and imagine this to be one of your favorite pianists playing at a recital. Can you pinpoint anything you would expect that pianist to do differently or ehh... better? Make a note of it.

Then sit down with the scores and a pencil and listen a few more times. Try to find textual errors in your playing, such as wrong notes and rhythms, missed dynamics and articulation, etc. and mark them with pencil.

If you find this process difficult and you end up with no notes at all you can develop your musical awareness by also listening to one or a few CD-recordings of the pieces. Listen many times and you will not only locate your own wrong notes and rhythms but also increase your musical imagination by trying to answer the questions above.

Now you have a set of notes which will help you start your next practice session in the right direction.

This strategy is by no means a substitute for working regularly with a teacher but it has some special value in itself. You will not only develop your own musical experience and knowledge considerably by regularly following these steps but also, since you will fully understand every detail of the feedback you have given yourself, it will be relatively easy to implement it in your playing.