

Learning and Practising
How to do less and achieve more.
Techniques and tips.

There is a big DIFFERENCE between 'Practice' and Playing through !

1. Understanding how the brain learns.

The initial step in learning a piece is 'Programming' the brain with the information needed to play the piece. Brain Pathways are created through repetition. The more consistent the repetition the deeper and clearer and easier to access these pathways when we perform. You can't expect to perform at a level you haven't programmed. You 'lay in' the 'bed YOU made' !!! When students play a piece through to us we are basically hearing 'how they practiced'. How you practice also impacts your subtle, and not so subtle, psychological position towards playing the piece. You are practising attitudes as much as mechanics. Eg. Confidence, trepidation, tension, positive expectation.

- * Every experience we have in life is recorded in the brain 'FOREVER' !
- * Your brain does not distinguish between 'right' and 'wrong'. It learns whatever you 'do'!
- * The degree of Concentration/focus/intention in the programming phase increases the depth and ease of the learning.
- * Ironically, Genuine Confidence, knowing that you really 'know' the music because of the 'qualitative' programming you have done, leading to less nervousness, allows us to have more access to muscle memory.
- * Being unsure increases nervousness, which in turn increases adrenaline and adversely affects muscle memory recall which makes us feel unfamiliar in our playing which starts the -ve cycle again !

The learning process goes from CONSCIOUS learning, attention to every detail, to 'Muscle & Aural Memory', where you don't need to have any conscious attention to be able to play. (Eg. While watching TV)

At a 'deep' (or not so deep' level) we always know how well prepared we are.

The more the brain has previous experience the easier it is for it to programme something 'similar'. Eg Bach

The more foreign the 'language' of the music the slower the brain is able to process the information, therefore our learning strategy has to change. Eg Stavinsky or our first Fugue.

How to 'Program' complex music. (Bach Fugue & Vine Sonata)

- A) Slowly, the 'right' speed is the speed at which you can 'get it right'. If you are stumbling it is NOT THE RIGHT SPEED your BRAIN can't process the information. Properly at this speed.
- B) Small bits repeated, like chewing tough 'meat'.
- C) Analysis, making the components 'conscious' helps us remember. (especially contrapuntal music)

The Difference between 'Practice' and Playing through !

Practice = Concentration with a fixed goal and clear specific intention.

Repetition increases muscle memory and takes us from 'conscious' knowledge to 'unconscious' knowledge. Muscle memory is powerful IN CONJUNCTION with real 'knowledge'/analysis of the piece.

Playing Through is not necessarily practice ! Play through to find out what needs to be 'practised' or to check at the end of practice how things are now. Play through to increase muscle memory.

Clear specific 'Goals' increase focus and concentration.

What am I hoping to achieve in this Practice?

What's my plan to achieve that? What DOES that circle my teacher put on my music indicate !!!

Practice according to how 'awake' you feel. No point trying to do detailed complex programming when you are tired. Get Enough sleep !!

PRACTICE METHODS

Right Speed Practice. The Right Speed is the speed at which you can GET IT RIGHT ! If you are not getting it right your brain can't programme it at that speed. You need to simplify it for the brain's sake. Going slower, smaller 'bits', less complicated (eg. one hand) are ways to simplify it.

Mental practice before playing on the piano. 'Imagine' playing it mentally and don't try physically to play it until you feel confident in the mental exercise.

Analysis as a way to learn/practice. Chord recognition, pattern recognition, key recognition.

Right from Lesson one students can be guided through analysing the music.

Backwards Practice. From the 'end' by bar or line or section repeating the previous bit each time. Eg. 32 bar piece. Bar 32, then bars 31 & 32, then bars 30,31 & 32 etc. Or lines !! Don't always start at the beginning. Don't inadvertently be playing towards the 'weakest', lesser known part of the music (ending). A strong confident ending positively affects the whole performance and vice versa.

Random Practice. Number the bars. Write each number on a separate piece of paper. Choose randomly. Better bars put to 'other' side of piano, difficult bars replace in pile until all on other side of piano.

Anti-dote Practice. Speed up slow pieces to feel momentum, slow down fast pieces to focus on detail.

Target: At the beginning practice when you are most 'fresh', start with least known or most difficult parts. Use best concentration for that. Part of the analysing process.

Exaggerate balance dynamics. Melody VERY loud Accompaniment very soft.

Rhythm Practice to ensure all the notes are equally recorded in your brain, hence avoiding rushing towards the beat when you are nervous because the beat is more 'secure' in your programming. Triple time: practice in duplets alternating accent, Duple time: practice in triplets alternating emphasis.

Snakes & Ladders If you make a mistake you have to go back to a designated place. Eg. Beginning, that line, 2 lines, a page.

+ve 1 (particularly for those students resisting Snakes & Ladders) If you play perfectly the **first** time you have achieved +1 !! If not it's now -ve 1 and it has to be played consecutively 2 times to get to +ve 1. The record of my students is 158 times to get to +ve 1 !!!! (Don't even ask) !! Did the trick though !!!

Increase the difficulty and do that !!

Learn fast things faster than necessary.

Increase jumps by one octave or 2.

Eyes closed practice once memorised.

Cover Practice for leaps. Play first note and move as quickly as possible to new note or octave/chord resting on top of it without playing it. This makes the playing of the first note and getting to the second note 'ONE' action in your brain, the playing of the first one immediately takes you to the second, they are inextricably linked. Theoretically you can always be arriving at any leap 'ahead of time'. No mistakes EVER !!!

Control Practice for fast piece use the metronome to slow down each time after time. We are always getting faster when learning, reversing this teaches control.

Slow down, 'Men at Work' Practice. Where you tend to lose control, get faster, deliberately do a ritardando there in practice to practice control.

Back-up practice - when getting close to a performance. Reiterating details by playing 1/4 speed hence bypassing muscle-memory and also doing 'separate' practice.

Memory Practice. Learn music from memory separately, or in parts for contrapuntal music. Play right hand part with the left hand and vice versa, particularly good for Bach. Divide the music into 'sections' and memorise them out of sequence.

Listen to a recording and 'imagine' you are play and visualise the keyboard.

Training the hands to do multiple things at once. Start with EAR ! eg. 2 parts - one in each hand. Play the parts as a duet with student.

Analogies for quality of practice !!

Tidy Bedroom. (As if !!!)

Don't throw rubbish in it. Don't practice mindlessly/carelessly with mistakes.

Tidy it each day or it accumulates which leads to much more work down the line otherwise.

Handwriting: precise slowly at first then as musical memory builds **more automatic**. Be careful not to get untidy through too much mindless repetition.

Meal: Plan your practice like a meal. Don't start your meal with dessert (favourite or known bits) or you won't want to eat all your main course (parts which need most work). When you have done your main meal properly you can have all the dessert you want !! Reward yourself with Dessert.

Eating: don't put 'too much' in your mouth. You can't chew it properly. The tougher the food the smaller the amounts you try to chew. The more you chew it the better it is digested - learnt.

Learning a Language: In time, with patience and perseverance 'gobblety gook' becomes familiar and learning becomes easier.

REMEMBER THE GOOD NEWS !!!

Once you have learnt a skill on the piano you never have to learn it again. !!!!