

Piano Practicing Handbook



by Ben Warmuth

Introduction

Welcome to the world of playing a musical instrument! Playing an instrument is a lifelong journey that is well worth it. Like anything that is worthwhile doing, it sometimes takes effort and hard work to succeed. Enter practicing.

Personal at home practice is a crucial part of learning any musical instrument. A large part of our piano lessons will focus on how to practice effectively. There will be many times in our lesson that we actually practice how to practice!

This handbook gives my personal thoughts on practice after many years of being a musician and teacher. Parents of very young children should read this handbook and understand how to help their young child practice at home. Parents of older children should read this handbook together with their child so they both understand what good practicing is.

What is Practice?

My simple definition of practice is **doing something over and over again and getting better at it**. Practicing can include *anything* that you do to make yourself better at playing your instrument. As stated in the definition, practice should involve doing things multiple times, always with a mind toward improving your performance. After practicing your instrument, no matter how long or short your practice, you should be able to honestly say you are at least a little bit better at your instrument.

The ultimate goal of practicing is *mastery* of the song. That is, the player can play it without even thinking much about it. Sometimes we call this “muscle memory.” When a player has mastery of a song, they can play it effortlessly and with great musical expression.

The Science Behind Practicing

Your brain is full of tiny cells called neurons that communicate by sending electrical signals to each other. When your brain wants to tell your hands and feet to do something, it sends signals down through the nerves much like a computer sends signals down a wire. The nerve fibers called axons are wrapped with a thin fatty sheath called myelin. The myelin acts like insulation on electrical cables which prevents energy loss in the electrical signals. The more times your brain sends the same signal (i.e. the more times you perform an action), the thicker the myelin coating gets and the faster the signal moves down the nerve. The goal of practicing is to build up the myelin coating on the axons by doing the same motions over and over, making the motions faster and more automatic.

Here is a link to a great video that explains in more detail the science behind practicing:

How to Practice Effectively...for just about anything

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f2O6mQkFiiw>

Making Practice a *Habit*

Habits are things we do without even thinking about it. Habits are hard to change but once developed, they are easy to continue. Practicing should be a habit; that is, it should be a normal part of the daily and weekly routine. Often times practicing is easy in the beginning when first starting out on an instrument, but as the newness wears off the practicing happens less and less. It is at this point that it is important that practicing has become a habit.

Try to establish a regular time during the day when practicing happens, like right before supper or right after homework, or after feeding the pets. I believe that most children need an adult to help them set and maintain regular practice times. I know this because when I was young I would not have practiced regularly (or likely at all) and I *may* have even thrown a few fits when it came time to practice. I'm really glad I had parents that kindly but firmly let me know it was time to practice and made me stick with it!

The Practicing Spiral

I believe that we like to do things we are good at, and if we like to do it, we will do it more. This applies to school, sports, hobbies, you name it! If are good at doing it, it's going to be fun! If it's fun, you will do it more often! The goal of practicing is to get better so that you will enjoy playing your instrument. Most students who play a musical instrument will spiral out of control one of two ways:

Practice instrument→get better→enjoy playing→practice more→get better yet→love playing→practice even more→get even better→really love playing! (see where this is going?)

And then there's the other spiral:

Don't practice→don't get better→don't like playing→don't practice→fall behind because you're not getting better→eventually quit.

It's pretty obvious which way I'd like my students to spiral, but everyone will spiral out of control one way or the other. Get the ball rolling on practicing and start spiraling out of control because you love playing!

How Long Should I Practice?

Parents and students ask me all the time how long they should practice for. Much more important than **how long** you practice is **how often** you practice. I practice at home on a regular basis (I am a trumpet player as well as a piano player) and I usually have no idea how long I practice for! I practice until I feel I have accomplished my goals for the day, and then I am done. After practicing, no matter for how long or how little, you need to be able to say that you are now a better player on your instrument. If you can honestly say that, you are done!

If you need a guideline for how long to practice for, I would say roughly 20 minutes a day, 5 days a week for most students. This will vary greatly depending on the age of the student and the music they are seeking to play. The youngest of students may only be able to focus for a few minutes at a time, while older students can play for much longer.

What Should I Practice?

At every lesson I will write notes about what I want the students to practice to prepare for the next lesson. We will keep these notes in our notebook or shared Google doc. As stated before, the ultimate goal of practice is mastery, and the goal of weekly practicing between lessons should be to master the songs I assign. Typically near the beginning of each lesson I will hear the student play the songs I assign to hear how they progressed.

While time spent in lessons will largely be focused on the piano curriculum, I strongly encourage students to play their favorite pieces often! It's a wonderful thing to have a collection of pieces that are your favorite that you can play anytime (musicians call that their *repertoire*).

The weekly assignment will also often include exercise like scales, chord exercises, and finger exercises. These are important exercises that all piano players do to master specific motions and hand positions.

Practice Tips and Strategies

These are some practice tools you can use to help make your practicing more efficient:

- **Practice in a place that is quiet** and free from distractions as much as possible.
- **Always sit with good posture.** Sitting up helps place the fingers in the correct position on the piano, and by sitting up your body tells your brain that there is something important to do.
- **Practices s-l-o-w-l-y.** One of the biggest mistakes I see people make is going way too fast. Learn to play at a slow speed so you have time to think, and identify and correct mistakes. Students hear me say all the time “the fastest way to practice is slow” and “slow is smooth, smooth is fast.” **Generally, when you practice you should play at a speed that feels a little too slow for you. If it feels too slow, it’s probably just right!** Or another way I often put it: **“It’s not how fast you can play it, it’s how steady you can play it. It’s not how fast you can play it, it’s how smooth you can play it.”**
- **Identify what the problem is.** What is making this piece so hard? Is it the notes? The rhythm? Is there a particular spot in the music that is giving you trouble?
- **Practice in small chunks.** There are often a few measures or just a few notes in a song that give us trouble. Practice just those few measures or notes, and do them over and over. Skip the parts that are easy that you can already play. Look for these “trouble spots” at the beginning of your practice session and circle them or make a note of them when you find them as you are practicing a song.
- **Clap and count.** Clap the rhythm while you say the counting out loud (we do this all the time in our lessons). This is great for when the rhythm of a piece is giving you trouble.
- **Play with a metronome.** As we progress in lessons I will sometimes have students play with a metronome, which is a device that simply clicks a steady beat for the player. You can download a metronome app on your smartphone or look one up online. Just make sure to set it to a slow speed and play your music at the beat it is giving. Metronomes are powerful practice tools when used properly.
- **Practice it backwards.** *This does not mean actually play your music backwards!* Start by playing the last note. Then play the last 2 notes (forwards, not backwards). Then play the last 3 notes, then the last 4 notes and so on. This strategy is good because we often practice the beginnings of songs more than the endings, and it helps to work toward what is familiar, rather than trying to start from the beginning and dive into what seems like an endless sea of notes.

- **Note by Note.** Play the song (or just the “trouble spot”) but hold every note like a long tone (3-5 seconds in this case is fine). While you are holding one note look ahead to the next one, and don’t move your hand until you know where it needs to go to play the next note. This is a good strategy for when you have a fast section with lots of moving notes. You would be amazed how fast you can play a piece after you slow it down and go note by note!
- **Play every note twice (or three times, or four times).** This strategy works especially well when you have a song with a simple rhythm (think lots of quarter notes). When you play each note twice or three times in a row, you effectively slow it down. Plus, playing the song in a different way makes your brain think about the song differently and helps it “stick.”
- **Always think musically.** Too often piano players get wrapped up in just getting the notes right. The piano is a detailed instrument with lots of notes! However, this is only half of the music at best. The other layers to the music are the dynamics (loud and soft) and articulations (smooth, separated, or accented notes). Even beyond these, we have to remember that all songs have a certain musical direction and should be played with musical expression. As Beethoven maybe said: “To play a wrong note is insignificant, to play without passion is inexcusable.”

Common Practice Pitfalls

These are some *bad* habits to watch out for when you practice:

- **Mindless practicing.** This is practicing without a goal in mind. I have seen students practice for hours on end but not get any better, because they just play whatever they feel like with no regard for what they need to work on.
- **Clock watching.** Your parents say you have to practice for 20 minutes, so you play for 20 minutes with one eye on the clock, one eye on your music. When 20 minutes is done, you walk away and forget what you just played because you did not practice with a purpose or goal. You can technically write down 20 minutes on your practice chart for today, but did you really get any better?
- **All or nothing.** “I don’t have time to get 20 minutes of practice in, so I can’t practice today.” We are all busy and involved in lots of activities. Even if you have a busy day and can’t practice as much as you normally do, you should practice what you can. Even 5 minutes of practice can be enough to make you improve if you have a goal in mind. Remember, it’s not how **much** you practice, but how **often** you practice.
- **Polishing a shiny object.** You are very good at playing Hot Cross Buns. So you sit down to get your practice in for the day and what do you play? Hot Cross Buns! You play Hot Cross Buns 5 times and marvel at how great of a player you are! The problem? You aren’t practicing any more difficult music! It is okay to play the songs you are good at, but make sure to practice the music that gives you a challenge, too.
- **The starter-over-er.** You start playing a song and get to a trouble spot, where you have to stop. You start over, get to the same spot, have the same trouble, and start over again. When you get to the same spot the third time, you still have trouble so you start over again (and so on and so on). Now you’ve practiced the beginning few measure many times and are great at those but never got any farther. At some point you have to push through the trouble spots slowly and make it to the end.

What You Can Do as a Parent

- **Schedule practice time at home.** Remind your child to practice and insist that they practice on a regular basis.
- **Realize practice can be noisy at first.** Students need time to discover on their own how to make the best sounds on their instrument. **Be encouragers at all times.**
- **Listen to your child practice.** Try to notice what they are doing well, what they need work on, and what their habits are. Do you notice any of the good or bad habits listed above? Are they sitting up straight with good posture?
- **Never use practice as punishment.**
- **Help keep the piano in the best possible condition.** Acoustic pianos need regular tuning to sound their best. Keeping the piano clean and free of clutter shows respect and admiration for the fine instrument they are playing!

The Bottom Line

I believe that practicing should be **efficient**. Efficient means that you get a lot done with little time and effort. Practicing should be a **habit**, part of the daily routine. You should enjoy practicing but realize that practicing is sometimes hard work.

Motivational Quotes

Below are some quotes that have motivated me at times in my journey of playing a musical instrument, and maybe they can be of some inspiration to you as well.

- “It takes 20 years to be an overnight success.”
- “Commitment is what transforms a promise into reality. It is the words that speak boldly of your intentions. And the actions which speak louder than the words. It is making the time when there is none. Coming through time after time after time, year after year after year. Commitment is the stuff character is made of; the power to change the face of things. It is the daily triumph of integrity over skepticism.”
- “Begin. The rest is easy”
- “Becoming an expert in something isn’t just a matter of clocking up thousands of hours. What distinguishes a virtuoso violinist or an Olympic athlete from the rest of us is how they spend these hours. Enter deliberate practice. Deliberate practice is focused, consistent, goal-oriented training. It favours quality over quantity. It knows not all practice is created equal.”

Stay in Touch!

Lastly, let me know how practicing is going at home. Let me know if things aren't going well or if things are going wonderfully. I always love hearing updates on how practicing is going on the home front. Don't hesitate to contact me if you ever have any questions or concerns!