

ON PRACTICE

Suddenly, I find that many of my students have reached a crossroads in their music study. No longer beginners, they must begin to dedicate themselves to the study of the piano in a way previously unnecessary if they are to achieve the high level of performance ability they dream of. But how does one renew his commitment to the study of a musical instrument after the initial excitement has worn off? How do we keep motivation high when learning to play the piano becomes, frankly, plain old hard work? For some, the hurdle seems insurmountable. Here, I offer some words of encouragement to my students and their parents.

To piano students, I say this: “To whom much is given, much will be required.” You are both intellectually and musically gifted; you have the ability and the talent to become accomplished pianists. To complement that, your parents have provided you with a keyboard or a piano and have sought out the best teacher to nurture your progress. And they willingly pay your tuition and drive you to your weekly lessons, rehearsals, recitals, and other important events. Most encourage you to practice; some even help you with your practice. What, then, is your responsibility?

The fact is, the quality of the practice time is perhaps more important than the quantity. Here are some tips to help students improve the quality of their practice time.

1. ***Remember that accuracy is more important than speed.*** With my youngest beginners, I often recommend that each piece assigned for practice be played three times each day. This is usually enough for those students, but the nature of practice must change as a pianist develops. Too often, students continue to play through their pieces three times quickly just to get them done. And playing a piece incorrectly over and over makes it more difficult to eventually execute it correctly. As Aristotle said, “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit.” Unfortunately, shoddiness can just as easily become a habit.
2. ***Learn the art of “spot practice.”*** Too often, students practice only the parts of pieces that are easy for them, and ignore the areas that really need work. Students must learn to practice with full concentration and to focus on mistakes and problem areas. Another mistake students make in their practice is playing easier passages much faster than the more difficult parts, and then the slower passages never quite catch up. It is necessary to learn to “spot practice” the harder sections until they are as polished as the easier sections.
3. ***Practice with the metronome.*** Even after students have mastered the more difficult sections of a piece, it can be difficult to play through the entire work at a consistent speed. Often, students are not even aware that they are speeding up and slowing down. The metronome can be very revealing in this situation. Use it often and wisely.

4. ***Playing the rhythm correctly is just as important as playing the notes correctly.*** Painstaking as it seems at times, you must remember to count! Fortunately, counting becomes easier the more you do it as you play. Count out loud or count to yourself, but COUNT!
5. ***Use your practice sheets.*** As we go over new pieces or seek ways to improve old ones, I will make specific practice suggestions and notate them on your music and practice sheets. Pay attention to these notes! And when you have carefully practiced your assignment, use any remaining practice time to sight read new music and review previously learned pieces. Doing assigned music theory and music history worksheets are essential components of lesson preparation, as well.

To parents, I say this: The development of good practice habits requires a great deal of effort on the part of the student. Here are a few things you can do to help your child to be successful.

1. ***Establish a practice routine.*** Do what you can to make it possible for your children to practice on a consistent basis. With my own children, I have found it helpful to set aside a specific time every day for music practice. In doing so, the decision to practice has been made ahead of time and conflict is avoided.
2. ***Provide an atmosphere conducive to good concentration.*** Make sure the piano is in a location relatively free from clutter and distractions (television, radio, etc.) and allow adequate quiet time. Recommended practice times are as follows:
Beginners (5-6 years old): 10-15 minutes/day, 5 days/week
Elementary (7-11 years old): 20-30 minutes/day, 5 days/week
Intermediate (12-15 years old): 45 minutes/day, 5-6 days/week
Advanced (16 years and older): 60+ minutes/day, 6 days/week
3. ***Provide frequent performance and listening opportunities.*** Children should be allowed to play for family members and friends whenever possible, and they should be encouraged to take advantage of performance opportunities provided by the teacher. It is very motivating to have events such as *Federated Festival*, *GCMTA Ensemble Concert*, and studio recitals to prepare for. Listening to classical music and attending live concerts is also very motivating.
4. ***Keep your piano well-maintained and in tune.*** It isn't much fun to play an instrument with keys that stick or pedals that do not function properly, and it isn't good for developing ears to play an instrument that is not in tune. It is always troubling to me when a student tells me that a piece they have practiced at home doesn't sound "right" on my piano. An annual visit from the technician is minimal.
5. ***Praise your children for all their hard work.*** This may be the most important suggestion of all!

Students and parents, I challenge you to give these guidelines a try. Strive to accomplish these goals each week; then, fill in your *Daily Practice Sheet* on a regular basis. The results will be dramatic!