

With a new teaching season upon us, it is a good time to consider the art of practising. As teachers, we have much musical expertise to share with students. We must, however, remember to also teach our students to practise effectively to process this information between the lessons and help accomplishments happen. Without good practice habits, frustrations can build and the enjoyment of music can easily be lost.

What is practice?

The path to improvement.

This includes

- technique exercises for proper muscle warm-up and technical progress;
- problem-solving for challenges in technique and pieces;
- repetition of correct versions to maintain solutions and build confidence.

Where should a student practise?

In a comfortable space away from distractions.

The practice space should not be a high traffic area of the home. If other family is around, asking them to forego distracting activity near the student is important. Perhaps a time of day may need to be chosen when distractions are minimal.

When should a student practise?

Ideally every day. One day lost can set a student back as much as three days, and can cause frustration if the next practice is spent recapturing previous success instead of progressing. If scheduling does not allow for a good working session on a certain day, advise students to at least play through a piece to maintain its level from the last practice.

At a regular, organized time. It is easiest to develop self-discipline if practice is a routine. Ideally this would be when the student is most alert—for some, mornings; others may prefer after other activities have passed in their day. Splitting the practice into two sessions per day can also help the student bring a fresh approach to more of their material.

Directly after a lesson is a good strategy to reinforce what was presented in the lesson.



How Much should a student practise?

Until success happens. Students should create a manageable task list for each session, not trying to fix everything in one session nor necessarily working on an entire piece. They should focus on a challenging passage, a technical skill, an area to memorize, etc. Ideally their teacher has given them notes at the lesson of what to tackle and they should read these lesson assignments frequently. Tangible improvements give a sense of accomplishment and create enjoyment in the process. This, in turn, helps students look forward to practising.

Students should not be told to practise a specific amount of time. This can lead to mindless time filling with no focus on progress. Suggesting an estimate of time can be helpful instead. Students should also include time to review and maintain the previous session's successes.

Before addressing **How** to practise, it's good to understand **How We Learn**.

My favourite analogy is imagining the learning process as a field of snow or sand with obstacles to navigate to get from point A to point B. As students begin a piece, they often make several stabs at finding their way. They may stumble upon a successful route but without any markers, the "brain field" becomes covered in random footsteps and no clear pathway takes shape. If students identify a solution such as a helpful fingering or a recurring pattern in rhythms or chords, they can put markers in the "brain field" and take the same path from then on. Using this same path repeatedly deepens the rut, provides a sense of ease and accomplishment and makes the practice rewarding.

The most **Important Tool** is a good pencil! Once a discovery is made on the learning path, students should

mark their score! It's not cheating to write in reminders—it's efficient! Writing in markers keeps extra brain space available for the creative side of musicianship such as making dynamics or rubato effective, or interacting with other musicians, etc. Practice sessions become very frustrating if students are constantly just rediscovering the same solutions. Markings can also be very helpful when relearning the piece in the future.

How should a student practise?

Begin with technique. Students should work on technique before their repertoire to properly warm up their muscles and allow technical progress to infiltrate their pieces. Remind students to keep practising their technique when preparing for performances. Leaving it out to focus on the repertoire only weakens the result. Would a hockey player forego his warm-ups on game day?

Practise slowly. When learning a new piece, students should handle all elements in a passage steadily and with an organized approach to fingering, rhythm, etc. Having everything in proper proportions rhythmically before bringing sections to a quicker tempo is very important and avoids making incorrect pathways that are difficult to undo. Treat hesitation spots as areas calling for attention. Slow practice is also very good to reinforce correct "data input" before a performance of a quick piece.

Practise in small sections. Students should avoid full run-throughs until the end-stage of learning a piece. Such run-throughs are simply playtime and not constructive practice. At all costs, students should avoid getting better at playing wrongly! It is wise for students to process an area only as large as where they can remember their pitfalls. They should carefully guide themselves along the correct path by anticipating these pitfalls and learning how to avoid them.

Keep the brain pointed forward. Instead of looking back to judge what went wrong, students should focus on how to guide themselves along the correct path without making the mistake at all. Learning to navigate through the music correctly avoids deepening the wrong path and will help them learn the music sooner.

Target challenges. Challenges can only be solved when students meet them directly. Simply starting again hoping a passage will work better shuts the brain off and does not encourage analysis of the problem. Instead, freezing where the mistake happens and learning to solve it will build progress. Playing the correct version more than the incorrect version helps the brain return to the

correct path the next day and helps students feel good about their progress. I recommend playing something three times in a row with no mistakes to lock in the accomplishment. Beginning a piece with the hardest segment will give that section the most time in the balance of the preparation and will build equal confidence throughout the piece. Creating a sense of understanding and control builds confidence, the satisfaction of accomplishment, and enjoyment when performing.

Avoid stuttering. When students repeat something they know while pondering an upcoming challenge, it only stalls dealing with that challenge.

Avoid practising similar material twice. Similar passages in Rondos or recapitulations, for example, only need a student's attention once in a practice session for best efficiency.

Avoid playing what is comfortably learned. When building a new piece, students should concentrate first on the challenges remaining. Maintaining what's already comfortable every 2nd or 3rd session will save it.

Rotate the material. Choosing different pieces or sections of pieces to tackle first brings the student's best and freshest approach to a balance of the repertoire.

Revisit material often. Every time a piece is revisited, it deepens its path in the "brain field." Most students assume practice is done once a day, but there's no need for an entire day to pass between sessions. Every time the brain is put to task on something else and then returns to a piece, it feels like a new workout. If a student has a deadline looming, revisiting that piece three or more times in a practice session with other pieces in between can equal three days of practice.

Mark sections still needing work. Organizing the goals for the next practice can help students control their progress.

Listen to other performances. I personally recommend delaying listening to recordings until students have developed their own ideas about a piece. Even if copying a very fine artist, a musical idea won't communicate successfully to an audience if it doesn't come from a student's inner understanding and exploration of the music. When students have taken a piece as far as they can, then listening to other performances can bring them fresh ideas or a better sense of the style of the piece.

Preparing for Performances

I have found a combination of the following two approaches helpful when doing final preparation:

- (1) **Build concentration stamina** by starting over anytime something is not the intended result. This not only includes wrong notes, but dynamics, tempo changes, etc.
- (2) **Build confidence** by continuing no matter what goes wrong. Students can prove to themselves that they can survive by learning to think on their feet. Having specific “cold start” sections can also be very helpful to feel their performance journey as being section to section rather than beginning to end.

Take the same brain onstage for the performance.

When students understand their discoveries from the practice process, they can bring these with them onstage. Taking control during the performance ultimately leads to enjoyment when performing. Not feeling in control builds fears and performance issues.

In closing I'd like to share an adjudicator's poignant comment: “Amateurs practise till they get something right. Professionals practise till they can't get anything wrong.”

Best wishes for a successful and enjoyable teaching year!

Edmonton pianist Sylvia Shadick-Taylor excels as a soloist yet is equally comfortable as a chamber musician, collaborative pianist, teacher and clinician. She has been heard in concert in Europe, Asia and North America. Sylvia has a strong interest in contemporary music, premiering many Canadian and American works resulting in being named an Ambassador of the Canadian Music Centre in 2009. A respected name in the musical community, Sylvia has worked for many organizations including the University of Alberta, Edmonton Opera, and the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra. She is also Co-Chair of the Contemporary Showcase Edmonton Society.



Sylvia Shadick Taylor



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