

## Ways to More Efficient and Productive Piano Practice

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*This paper looks at four different ways to practise the piano, the most normal being at the piano both with and without the music, and the much less widely used methods of practising away from the instrument, again both with and without the music. As practising away from the piano is much more rarely utilised, the first part of the paper discusses various ways in which we can assist our students to make productive use of these practice techniques, and demonstrates how they can be used not only to expedite the learning process, but also to assist memorisation, reduce nervousness and generally enhance a performance. The paper then goes on to discuss the actual time spent at the piano, and how various time- and labour-saving techniques can assist students not only to make this time at the instrument as productive as possible but also to help engender confidence in public performance.*

The purpose of this short paper is to discuss various practice methods, and how we can assist our students to spend their limited practice time as productively as possible.

Naturally the most usual way our students practise is at the piano with the music, and many also practise at the piano without the music. But I think we also need to encourage our students to practise away from the piano, both with and without the music. Because these two practice methods are much less widely used, I would like to begin by discussing them.

With younger students it is obviously pointless to ask that they study the score away from the instrument. However we can ask such a student to look at home for particular patterns in the music. These could be formal patterns such as a simple ABA form, or sequences or recurring rhythmic figures, or even simple modulations. This can help develop an almost subconscious awareness of form, so necessary for the student's later development. On a more mundane level, if we have a student whose performance of a piece lacks dynamic variety, we can ask that student to open the music at home and just count the number of *f* markings, *p* markings, *cresc* and *decrec* signs. This can transform a performance. Again, many younger students (and unfortunately older students also) routinely overlook two-note slurs. So in a piece like the little Mozart Allegro in B flat K.3 or the finale of Haydn's D major Sonata Hob XVI/37, we can ask the student to count the number of such slurs. Again a remarkable transformation can occur.

Naturally with more advanced students we most definitely can urge them to study the score, almost as a conductor might. Quite apart from formally analysing the work students can observe such aspects as where phrases and paragraphs begin and end, how dynamics are structured or how the bass line progresses. In studying a score it is generally best to focus on one such particular area at a time. An especially important aspect is to observe how repetitions of the same material vary, e.g. the bridge passage in a recapitulation as compared to the exposition, or even how repetitions of theme itself vary. One of my students was quite surprised to discover that towards the end of Beethoven's Sonata Op.109, when the theme of the variations reappears, this time it is marked *cantabile* rather than *mezza voce* as at the beginning. Similarly how many students notice that in the lengthy second movement of Beethoven's Sonata op.90, each time in this rondo that the A section

returns, the main theme is marked dolce the first time, but the second time teneramente, which also explains the more lightly scored left hand.

Another very useful exercise is simply to read through the score while hearing the work mentally. Surprising discoveries can also be made this way.

Of course even advanced students can profitably use the more mundane methods mentioned earlier. Thus a student of mine was singularly reluctant to observe Beethoven's staccato markings in the finale of his Sonata Op.31 No.2. I therefore asked her to count the number of staccato dots in this movement. More than 360 were found, and again a remarkable change in her performance ensued.

One of the exercises I give students in my piano pedagogy class at Sydney Conservatorium is to write out from memory the first four bars of any piano piece they choose. They are then asked to take home what they have written and compare it with the printed score. Over seven years only a few students have managed this satisfactorily. What is rather alarming is that in many cases not only important inner voices, but often even the bass line is often only vaguely known.

Another exercise they do is to learn a short piece mentally only, then perform it. Students are pleasantly surprised when they find they can learn a simple piece such as Beethoven's Deutscher Tanz in G WoO8 No.6 relatively quickly. Many then even manage the much longer and more demanding Waltz in A minor Op.12 No.2 from Grieg's Lyric Pieces.

It is during this process that we discuss mnemonics, a mnemonic being an artificial aid to memory. A simple example occurs in the first movement of Beethoven's "Moonlight" sonata Op.27 No.2, where twice there is a perfect cadence to E major – the first time the music then moves via E minor to C major, whereas the second time it temporarily remains in E before modulating via a dominant seventh chord back to the tonic key of C sharp minor. In both cases it is really only necessary to be aware of the harmony following the E major chord, the rest following almost automatically.

All this may appear to be blindingly obvious, yet it is all too easy for students and even professionals to take the wrong turn here, for our reflexes are programmed to go in two different directions, so each time we must consciously make the correct choice. One eminent pianist, performing this work in London's Wigmore Hall took the wrong turning here, thus omitting approximately half the movement, but the critic remarked merely that he was so mesmerised by the poetry of his playing that that the movement seemed to be over scarcely had it begun.

A mnemonic can take a number of forms: it could be a harmonic progression as in the example just cited, it could be inner voices moving in a certain pattern, it could even be a certain fingering. Thus mnemonics can not only accelerate learning from memory, but also often deepen our understanding of musical structure.

There is even a school of thought which propagates learning all our repertoire mentally first, and only then beginning to play it. However piano playing is such an intrinsically physical and tactile activity that this viewpoint will not find general agreement although in my experience some students have used it quite successfully.

In regards to practice away from the piano without the score, again there are different approaches. (Artur Schnabel once memorably remarked that he did his best practice walking around Lake Geneva.) For younger students it is not a generally suitable method, although one can suggest to gifted youngsters that they play through a piece mentally in a quiet moment, e.g. while lying in bed waiting to go to sleep. For older students, when faced with something as subtle and elusive as the main theme of Chopin's Barcarolle, it is indeed very useful to repeatedly go over this paragraph mentally, imagining a wide variety of different nuances to shape it. This can be done while walking or travelling by public transport and can assist in arriving at a personally convincing interpretation.

On a larger scale a very beneficial activity is to sit in one's favourite armchair and with closed eyes hear the whole work through mentally. Because muscular memory is not involved in this process, this is very useful in detecting uncertainties, and moreover makes us much more aware of the general architecture of the piece. A similar and related activity is to do the same, but in addition imagining oneself physically playing the piece, being aware mentally of every movement of fingers and arms, without actually moving a muscle, all the while also mentally hearing the work. It is clear that both these practice methods are very beneficial to the memory, but they also serve to reduce nervousness and enhance the performance. Indeed one can go further and, if one is familiar with the venue, perform the work mentally on that particular piano in that particular space, even for that particular audience or examination panel. If the student is not familiar with the venue, one can conjure up an imaginary venue. By the time of the actual performance, one feels fairly used to the sensation of performing the work for an audience.

I have often been asked: do these methods really work? Of course we are all different, and some students and even colleagues have felt these ideas are generally not for them, but many have found these methods very helpful. In particular it has repeatedly been my personal experience and that of my students that when it has not been possible to spend time at the piano, due to travel, illness or misadventure, regular and consistent mental practice has proved almost as effective as normal physical practice. One of the reasons for this is that an only mentally imagined rendition of a work uses the same neural pathways in the brain as an actual physical performance.

Now to turn to the practice our students do at the piano: here it is vitally important that we encourage both efficiency and independence in our students. The question has been asked, are we here to teach or to facilitate learning? I cannot remember which wise person once even said one cannot teach, one can only learn.

Therefore the habits we should aim to inculcate in our students is that they themselves try to find solutions to problems that arise in their practice. In my view the all too limited lesson time is a very precious resource and should be reserved for problems where they really need our assistance. When such a problem arises in a lesson, I like to ask them, how would you as a teacher deal with this? Sometimes students will then come up with their own original and effective ideas. We can then encourage the use of this approach in their practice at home.

It is quite certain that many of our students waste a good deal of time and energy at the piano. For example, sometimes I will ask a student whether, by repeating an

awkward piece of passagework twenty or thirty times, it will improve. Naturally the answer is yes, but this is very labour intensive and time consuming as well as extremely tedious. I then go on to say that none of us has enough time to practice and that we need to use this limited time as productively as possible. At that point I talk about the well-known idea of practising such passagework using different rhythms. What is interesting however is that, when a student practises such a passage in say six different rhythms in the lesson, and is then asked to estimate how long this took, they generally overestimate by more than double, and find it difficult to believe that they have only spent three or four minutes on such a passage, and not the ten minutes they imagined. I then go on to explain that not only have they spent much less time than if they had played it twenty times, but because with each different rhythm they have to mentally rethink the passage, it becomes much more secure much more quickly. (If I might add a caveat here, it is that I recommend avoiding dotted rhythms as these can lead to unevenness.)

Another way to get our minds and therefore our reflexes to rethink a passage (and this is much less widely used) is to shift the barline. Thus in semiquaver passagework, if the barline is shifted just one semiquaver to the right, the four-note groupings assume a completely different physical and mental shape. After that, the barline can be shifted two semiquavers to the right, and then three.

Speaking of barlines, I always feel that visually they forcibly separate what really belongs together, and for this reason I always recommend telling younger students that barlines CONNECT the bars rather than separate them, using the analogy of telegraph poles joining the wires together to ensure uninterrupted flow of electricity, or in our case music. At a more advanced level we all have students who, working on a particular bar, always stop at the barline. On the contrary they should always go to the downbeat of the following bar, both for musical and technical reasons. A musical phrase nearly always continues beyond the barline, and from a practical point of view, if we only practise each bar in isolation, we then have to go back and practise the joins, a further waste of valuable time. Again, it was Artur Schnabel who once recommended that all music be printed without barlines.

Similarly, in a work like Chopin's Etude Op.25 No.1 I always ask students to be aware of the outward motion of elbows and arms to the next beat and across the barline. This contradicts the appearance of the music on the printed page, but is both more musical and more practical.

How often do we hear a student playing a passage over repeatedly, with the same mistake recurring each time? Here of course an error is being practised into the passage rather than eradicated. In such a case the student must focus on the error itself, not on the whole passage. A useful concept for the student is that there is no such thing as a wrong note, it is always a wrong interval, i.e. the finger and/or arm has misjudged how far it needs to travel. A simple remedy here is what I call "accent and stay", meaning begin a few notes beforehand then play only up to the incorrect note, accenting and staying on it. This forces the player to judge the interval correctly. After this has been done a few times, only then is the passage as a whole played and then put in its wider context.

More generally, when studying a new work it is often valuable, after one has read through the piece a few times, to begin by working on the more demanding sections. We all know students who put these off until later, with of course the

entirely predictable result that the most difficult passages are the least secure in performance.

It is often best to advise students not to always begin a practice session on a piece with the opening section. On the contrary, it is often useful to begin with the final section, gradually working backwards, or in the middle and then progressing forwards or backwards. In this way all sections of a work derive the benefit of being practised with fresh concentration, and it helps counteract the often observed phenomenon that many student performances of longer works deteriorate towards the end. On a smaller scale it will often prove profitable to practise a difficult passage starting at the end and working backwards.

In regard to practising at the piano without the score, this is one of the best ways to train our listening abilities. One of our most difficult tasks as teachers is to get our students to really listen to their own playing, and this is naturally easier if they are not visually distracted by the score in front of them. Practising in a darkened room also stimulates our listening abilities.

From the point of view of performance preparation another useful strategy is to perform the work while imagining oneself physically in the performance or examination venue, performing for those particular listeners. I even suggest putting two or three empty chairs near the piano, representing the examiners or audience. (One student of mine went one better by placing teddy bears on the empty chairs.)

Finally I always advise my students to know in advance whether they are about to practise or perform the work. Unfortunately we all have students who seem to only play through their repertoire, but it is equally counterproductive to only practise without ever performing the work as a whole.

These are the kinds of practising strategies that I have found valuable to my students over the years. Not every student will respond equally positively to each suggestion, but as teachers we need to be as creative as possible in providing as wide a range of practice strategies as possible to increase the productivity of our students' precious time at and away from the piano.

#### **About the Author**

Daniel Herscovitch studied under Alexander Sverjensky in Sydney and later Rosl Schmid in Munich. While resident in Germany he performed throughout Europe and at several international festivals, as well as undertaking three Australian tours. Since returning to Australia he has been very active both as soloist and in chamber music and has performed at the Festivals of Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide as well as the Sydney Spring Festival of New Music. His repertoire ranges from Bach to Carter and includes many contemporary works including commissions. He was a founding member of Symeron and the eclectic collective and has performed as guest artist with the Australia Ensemble, the Song Company, Synergy Percussion and the Seymour Group. He has also appeared with artists such as Wanda Wilkomirska, Jane Manning, Gerard Willems, Julie Adam, Carl Vine, Stephanie McCallum and David Bollard and is currently a member of the Apollo Trio, which he co-founded in 2004. Daniel is currently Senior Lecturer in Piano at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music where he also lectures in piano pedagogy and chamber music. His CDs have been released on ABC Classics, Continuum, CSM and Tall Poppies labels.

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