

## Three Levels for Effective Practice

Learning new repertoire effectively is the key to an ultimate successful performance. Below are the three levels of practice that I require in my own studio. Keep a diary of your practice in which you set goals for each piece you are learning and track your progress.

### **Level 1: Preparation** – items are in no particular order.

Listen to performances, recordings. Get the piece in your ear. Never begin to practice a new piece that you do not know. An initial sight-reading is fine, but be careful not to begin repetitions – that will just start poor habits and hard-to-erase errors. One of the most useful questions to ask yourself is: “What is the character of this piece (section)?”

You should “fall in love” with your piece, especially if it has stood the test of time as a masterpiece. If you truly hate it, talk to your teacher, but mostly, trust that the piece is worth your effort and will eventually grow into a favorite. Be friends with the composer. Know how he/she was. What was the composer’s philosophy about music? What was his/her inspiration generally? Familiarize yourself with other pieces written by the composer.

Obtain score legally. Be aware of best editions. Then photocopy your working copy and keep the original clean. I recommend back-to-back copying. Do not use plastic page protectors. Number the measures (beginnings of lines is enough).

Divide the piece into several large sections. Label those sections in a rational way. For example E-D-R for a sonata form, or A-B-A for a three part form. Subdivide the large sections into 3-5 subsections, labeled E1, E2, E3, E4 for example. Further divide with vertical lines into short self-contained units, usually about 4 measures in length, each to be practiced in multiple repetitions with freshness. Create a separate “map” of the piece, including the names of the large sections and the smaller subsections. Include measure numbers in your map. This map will help you test memory later on. Create descriptive names for the main themes and motives in the piece (love theme, fighting theme, heroic smurf theme, etc. – label the themes when they appear, and note when they appear in a modified form.

Analyze and write in chords, scales. Do it at whatever your theory level. Discover your fingering. Edited fingering helps, but is often silly. Write in enough so that your teacher can tell your planned fingering by looking at the score. As fingering is often influenced by articulation (staccato, legato, pedal), basic articulative decisions are necessary also. Write in question marks to remind you of spots where you need your teacher’s help.

Rhythm: The key to correct rhythm is counting aloud. Avoid surface counting, but rather concentrate on finding a metric pulse counting that stays constant. For difficult surface rhythms, tap it out while counting pulse. Metronome is useless at this level unless you are unable to count steadily, which is rare.

### **Level 2: Getting the piece into your fingers, and memorizing**

Work in sections that you have labeled. Be willing to shorten to single motives if needed. Observe all the markings you entered in your score in Level 1, but adapt if you find better fingerings.

Practice consistently with dynamics, both vertical and horizontal. Fortes, pianos, crescendos, etc. need to become part of the aural memory. Allow innate shaping.

Practice slowly. This generates accuracy. Your goal is perfection in all parameters of the music – notes, articulation, fingering, rhythm and pulse, dynamics, and basic musicianship. Our biggest enemy is speed.

Always listen to yourself. You should concentrate on hearing the next harmony or group of notes slightly in advance. Think twice, play once.

Most memory will naturally come from repetition – I call it “osmosis” memory. The remaining memory will take extra time. Learn tricks of repeating with freshness. Be patient – but remember that all piano music is ultimately memorizable if you can break it into small enough pieces. Practice shorter sections from memory, then link together.

Never, never, never double—play. This means - never fix an error immediately, but continue to the end of the motive or section, stop, then come in the hard spot again. Ask yourself why the error occurred – poor fingering, too fast of tempo, inadequate physical preparation, etc.

Dynamics are the primary means of expression in music, just as they are in speech. Printed dynamics in the score provide a 5% start (or less) – the rest is up to your imagination and creativity. Do as much as you can to make your playing expressive. Try different interpretive possibilities, and trust your inherent musical instincts. Never be boring.

**Level 3: Performance** (note: This is the level I ask students to achieve before bringing a new piece to a lesson. Repertoire in my studio is performed from memory – lessons are actual performances.)

The piece is completely memorized, and now refinement and security follow. This may take some time. Levels 1 and 2 should take a matter of weeks – Level 3 may be measured in terms of months.

Continue slow practice (forever) but use metronome to gauge tempo progress. When building tempo, retain fluidity and ease of physical approach. Tension kills accuracy and musicality. Do not over-exceed your technical abilities – allow tempo to naturally evolve. You don’t need to be as fast as your favorite concert pianist.

Perform often for anybody who will listen politely – family, your iPhone, the dog, a friend, fellow students. Don’t let your first performances be in pressure situations (such as the studio recital). Most performance anxiety will then disappear after multiple performances.

Know thy left hand alone, from memory. Most memory slips occur in the left hand because pianists are almost all right-eared (we listen mostly to the melody). Working from your map, be able to independently play any defined section. Create a number of “mileposts” – places you can begin immediately, as well as the piece’s beginning.

Search for artistic possibilities. Re-listen to recordings to get ideas, but never slavishly copy. Find your own voice. You should create the piece fresh each time you perform. Reflect your own moods and experiences. Communicate. This is your opportunity to bring joy and beauty to others. Congratulate yourself on a piece well-learned. It will be your friend for life!