

# Why a student does not practise

- # practising takes them away from family activities and conversations
- # the piano is in an uninviting place
- # the piano has to compete with the TV or radio
- # the piano is out of tune and/or one of the keys does not work
- # a parent nags or is discouraging. ('I'm not paying for lessons if you can't be bothered practising'; 'I *hate* that song!' etc).
- # the student does not like their pieces, but is obliged to learn them because the teacher has taught them every year since 1979
- #. the student is overloaded with extra-curricular activities and finding time to practise is just too hard
- # siblings tease and complain about the noise constantly and loudly
- # the piano bench squeaks is at the wrong height
- # the pedals do not work and are too hard to reach
- # the room is too dark, too bright; too cold; too hot; too everything
- # how to practise has not been taught.

and

# The essentials of HOW to practise

by Ellie Hallett

ellie367@gmail.com    www.musicworks.net.au    www.pianoscales.com.au

# HOW TO PRACTISE

Tips for the teacher to teach the student in lesson time.

## Teaching Method Ideas

Ellie Hallett [ellie367@gmail.com](mailto:ellie367@gmail.com)

- ❖ Write down between two or five specific things the student needs to revise at home and that were covered in the lesson.
- ❖ Analyse a recurring error (like a pothole in the road) in lesson time to find out why it is happening. For instance, the problem may be caused by awkward fingering, misreading the dots, not understanding the counting, confusion regarding a rhythmic pattern etc. If the reason for this recurring pothole is identified by the teacher, and the way to fix it is both provided and proven in lesson time, home practice is more likely to be done.
- ❖ Teach this pothole-fixing learning routine:
  - i. Play the piece through without stopping in lesson time (as well as at home). On your way through the piece, make a mental note of the 'potholes' i.e. errors, but **don't stop**.
  - ii. After step i, return to each pothole in turn for an intensive practice work-shop on the bar or part-bar that needs the work. Do a maximum of four problem areas at any one sitting.

Do not keep playing the piece from start to finish hoping mistakes will fix themselves.

They won't, they don't and never will. (Sobs are allowed here.)

- iii. Try a variety of different fingerings to see which feels most natural, making sure to still observe the composer's notation and expression markings.
- iv. Play just notes the 4<sup>th</sup> finger, (for example) is in charge of in the passage. Do the same for the other fingers, watching carefully to see if there is a risky or error-prone spot that needs to be changed. Gradually add other fingers involved (e.g. what is the 3<sup>rd</sup> finger responsible for; what do the 5<sup>th</sup> finger and thumb have to do?) to lock the physical melody-tracks of each finger into the finger and brain memory. Also know which fingers need to be held higher to keep out of the way.

- ❖ Isolate certain notes in the trouble spot, and play just them in their written order. For example: 'Play all the dotted minims' to hear a counter melody that may be hidden there. Another example: 'Play all the RH chords with G in them to watch how your hand shape needs to change to be able to reach all notes involved.
- ❖ Play the difficult passage backwards (to really read the notes).
- ❖ Repeat each vertical set of notes in the problem area slowly 3 times to hear more clearly each finger's choreography. Now play each vertical set 2 times, and then 1 time (as written but still at a very slow speed).
- ❖ Repeat this 3/2/1 process until the each of the fingers involved in the problem bar or phrase knows its responsibilities without hesitation, *gradually* accelerating until the passage can be played faster than the required tempo. This is a good test for accuracy and finger security.
- ❖ Another test is to extend the trouble-spot section before and after the original error area by adding two or three bars on each side. Play this extended area three times up to speed without error. If there is still a hesitation or mistake, even if it happens of the last note, repeat the slow-practice small-section fixing process.
- ❖ Regarding practising, remember that the longest road home is often the quickest.
- ❖ Do not sound-smudge or pedal-cover notes that should be crystal clear.
- ❖ Match your finger technique to the passage being practised. Have a collection of different techniques at your disposal from which to draw.
- ❖ Learn how to listen with a critical ear. Be your own examiner and adjudicator.
- ❖ The more frequently you play an error, the harder it is to fix it.

- ❖ Lots of intensive five-minute 'snack' practices in a busy day can be better than a longer one-sitting practice session.
- ❖ Video yourself playing best pieces and technical work as part of a fortnightly progress schedule to get used to the performance do-not-stop process.
- ❖ The more often you play more slowly with no errors rather than up to speed with errors and hesitations, the better and more secure your playing will be.
- ❖ Repeated notes need a higher finger lift than other notes. You have to get off to get on.
- ❖ Prepare a chord's finger and hand shape in the air above the notes so that the playing is just a matter of descending onto those notes. The fingers needed will be lower in altitude, so to speak, than the ones not needed, usually held a bit higher and out of the way. (Turn your hand upside down to observe these fingers high and low for a triad, for instance, and then a dominant 7<sup>th</sup> chord. Lifting fingers up and out of the way is often harder to manage than getting the needed fingers into their readiness position. )
- ❖ Listen to professional and student performances of your pieces as often as possible because you will learn something every time. These will help you hear in your mind what you are working towards.
- ❖ **Have several types of practice in your learning locker: Desk practice where your fingers go through their routine; mind practice where you hear the sounds in your head just by reading the score, separate hands practice; slow, extra fast; the 3/2/1 method; duet for two people on two pianos playing the same piece; duet where one person plays the RH and the other the LH; playing with a recording.**
- ❖ Enjoy your practice. Have a schedule that is locked into your weekly plan of things to do. And remember that the best fun in life is the achievement that comes after effort!