

Get Out of a Rut

Mixing Up Practice Sessions

BY ROBERT HINZ

Students show little enthusiasm for practice when teachers expect them to repeat a passage over and over to master a difficult technique. Repetition usually leads to monotony and creates little interest or variety during practice. I believe that effective practicing results from creative practicing. At the intermediate level I have students experiment with dynamics, articulations, rhythms, and tempos, as well as keys, balance, and phrasing. As a result they have a better understanding of the style and interpretation of a score.

To avoid monotony in practice, encourage students to improvise using the musical ideas in a composition. For example, they can treat a difficult left-hand pattern as an ostinato and build a new melody over it or change the harmony of the left-hand pattern while keeping its rhythm intact. Cramer studies would be good pieces to use, especially #56 in D major where the first measure has an arpeggiated D major chord in the left hand that covers over two octaves. Students can create different chords or melodies in the right hand while the left hand handles the technical work. This approach not only encourages students to be creative, it inspires a sense of spontaneity as students work to improve rhythmic coordination.

If a student thinks of a repeated rhythmic pattern as something to build upon, repetitious practice loses some of the tedium, particularly if two players work on the passage together at one keyboard. Whenever possible I use pieces that are published with accompaniments so the students have the challenge of practicing together, listening for rhythmic interplay while maintaining a steady pulse. With improvised music students learn to listen, react, and imitate the ideas of other musicians, and ensemble playing challenges a student to maintain the music's pulse and be responsible for his part in the score.

Group practice, whether it is students playing duets together, an ensemble of musicians, or a teacher playing duets with a student, can be more enjoyable than a teacher looking over a student's shoulder making comments. Practicing in groups also promotes a sense of unity among pianists; and students who practice and perform together will learn from each other.

Tape recorders are valuable in providing an objective way for students to evaluate mistakes or inconsistencies in a performance that they might

not otherwise notice. Rather than focus on playing, the student can give all of his attention to listening. Tapes also allow students to compare different interpretations of a piece. I encourage students to keep tapes as references and to listen to them after some time passes to check their progress.



Concentration is an ability that can be improved by physical activity and exercise, relaxation, imagination, communication, and a sense of a student's goals and the music he enjoys the most. It is never easy to concentrate on something that is not enjoyable; and forcing students to practice leads to resistance and an inability to focus on learning music. All too often when a student is told to practice or concentrate he will do neither. Musical growth comes not from necessity or requirement but through commitment. It should not be a forced choice but rather a consistent choice.

When a student is committed to the piano, there is no need for him to practice at a particular time of day or a certain number of days per week. Rather, the student is on course; what results over long periods of time and regularity is more enduring than what comes from a moment of enthusiasm. A student's efforts may occur spontaneously; however, by being taught the value of commitment, he may practice even when he doesn't feel like it. It is not just intelligence or talent that determines success in learning music, but persistence and commitment.

How students feel about their playing is also just as important as how much they practice. If a stu-

Robert Hinz is a doctoral student at New York University; he holds degrees from the Eastman School of Music and the State University of New York at Stony Brook.

dent is working on a piece that bores him, he will probably take longer to learn it than one he enjoys. By experimenting with different styles of music, I have seen students' attitudes change when they play familiar enjoyable pieces or when they learn to improvise using a simple scale.

If a student finds practicing difficult, encourage him to simply begin practicing without specifying how long the session should last. Once the student begins to play, he might continue without feeling burdened. I suggest that parents ask their child to play for only five minutes, because he may continue to play beyond that point, knowing that he can either continue to practice or stop at any time. Students don't even have to practice all the time; they can just sit at the piano and improvise.

The balance of work and rest are important elements of practice and motivation. Besides encouraging students to take regular breaks, many music teachers realize the importance of long periods of time away from the instrument to motivate students. After a student learns a piece, I allow some time away from it, which gives a chance for renewed clarity once he practices it again.

Students can master a difficult work by practice that is slow and deliberate, learning to trust themselves while performing. Conscious strain and deliberation during a performance can inhibit the natural ease of piano playing. This difficulty is analogous to other activities and disciplines that Timothy Gallwey discusses about sports in *The Inner Game of Tennis*:

As you are letting your serve serve itself, your job is simply to observe. Watch the process without exercising control over it. If you feel you want help, don't. But don't watch with detached objectivity; watch with faith. Actively trust your body to respond to your programming. The more you can bring yourself to trust in the natural process that is at work, the less you will tend to fall into the usual interfering patterns of trying hard, judging, and thinking – and the frustration that inevitably follows.

Daisetz T. Suzuki writes in *Zen and Japanese Culture* that "In swordplay, all the technique is to be forgotten and the unconscious is to be left alone to handle the situation, when the technique will assert its wonder automatically or spontaneously." Carl E. Seashore offers a similar thought in *The Psychology of Music* when he says:

No one acts musically until the techniques have been shoved back into the unconscious where they take care of themselves as habits. . . . At the learning stage, be intensely conscious of the element involved in the particular that is to be learned, then relegate these elements to habit and in musical performance give yourself up to the situation as a whole guided largely by a feelingfull intelligence.

Some philosophers profess that the best results are achieved when someone masters a complex skill without being overly attached to the results of his effort. Where there is no effort or struggle, practice becomes a natural and creative process.

A nonjudgmental attitude is invaluable with respect to a student's progress. Teachers should balance critical comments with support rather than simply pointing out mistakes. How students feel about themselves and their playing is just as important as how well they play and how much they learn.

When a student has trouble with a musical or technical detail, such as a phrase, pattern, rhythm, or fingering, I suggest that he think of the difficult passage as an opportunity for his musical and technical growth, as long as the difficulty isn't unusual or extraordinary. After all, everything that he finds easy to play now was uncomfortable at one time. A technical obstacle is not necessarily an indication of a problem; it is simply a temporary setback that can result in growth and discovery.

Steps to Effective Practicing

- Encourage a student who finds practicing difficult to begin by practicing for just five minutes. If he gets started, there is a good chance he will continue beyond the initial expectation.
- Tape record practice sessions and lessons, if possible. Have one parent present during a few moments of a practice session to make sure the student is following the teacher's written instructions. Parents can also occasionally be present during a lesson.
- Allow advanced students to create their own exercises, such as transposing selected passages or creating variations of passages.
- Encourage duet or ensemble practice for students who are learning to improvise. Part of a lesson can be used to accompany the student at a second piano, if possible.
- When teaching a new piece, begin with a summary; present an overview of the piece first, specifically

its form, and gradually look at details, such as key signature, accidentals, and phrasing. Presenting an overview of a piece gives students a context to understand some of the musical ideas within it; for example, explain how a classical sonata is constructed and how Beethoven worked around that form.

- While it is a good idea to make practicing part of a daily routine, don't insist that students practice every day; they can take one or two days off each week. Additionally, encourage students to make use of spare moments, however short, because short, quality practice sessions can be just as effective as long ones.

- If students are trying to memorize a piece, have them put the music aside as soon as possible so they realize which sections they don't know well and then focus on them.

Teachers should keep their playing in shape so they can serve as a role model as well as a teacher. Students are motivated as much by emulating role models as by listening to verbal instruction.
