

Ten Strategies for Teachers to help their Pupils Practise

by Jenny Macmillan, ESA Piano Teacher Trainer, UK

A music lesson comprises many different components, and many different skills are required of a music teacher. One of the most important tasks in a music lesson is for teachers to help their pupils practise at home between lessons. The weekly lesson length may be 30 or 60 minutes, and probably teachers would like their pupils to practise for around the same length of time each day. So, ideally, pupils spend seven times as long practising on their own as they spend in the lesson with their teacher. If that time is used effectively, great progress will be made. But if pupils don't know how to use their own time efficiently, they probably won't be inspired to practise much and, even if they do put in the time, they'll make little progress.

Here are ten strategies which I have found invaluable for helping pupils practise:

1 Identify problems, devise strategies to overcome difficulties, put into context

Initially it is the teacher's responsibility to identify individual pupils' problems. The challenge may be reading the notes correctly, taking care with the fingering or understanding the rhythms. Or the teacher may wish the pupil to work towards a more beautiful singing tone in the melody or listen for a more convincing balance between the hands. Or there may be work to be done on the technique of staccato playing or of slurred notes.

Of course, it's not enough just to say "work on the balance between the hands". We need to show our pupils in the lesson how to improve the balance. This may involve first playing a short section of the accompaniment very softly, then adding a singing melody to the soft accompaniment. Or *vice versa*, first listening for a deep rich tone in the melody and then adding a soft accompaniment. Or asking the pupil to watch the hand that is playing the melody, and then playing with eyes closed - listening carefully for the melody. Or the teacher gently balancing a heavy book on the pupil's melody hand and a light book on the accompaniment hand so the pupil feels the difference. Or any number of other imaginative ways of encouraging the hands to play with contrasting qualities of tone.

Gradually, as pupils get more advanced, the teacher will want to encourage pupils themselves to identify their specific challenges, devise strategies to overcome the difficulties, and work out how best to practise. If pupils have been carefully guided in their earlier years, this process of working out for themselves how to practise effectively will come more naturally than if they have never really practised well.

The next six strategies for practising all overlap, but I've separated them for clarity and ease of discussion. The first four strategies I call the four Ss - Short sections, hands Separately, Slowly, and with Stops.

2 Short sections

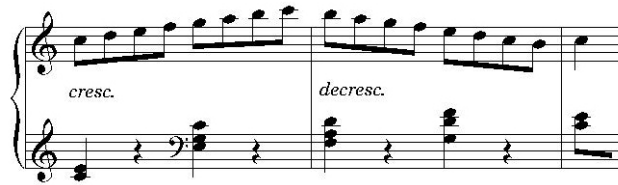
When is it useful to practise short sections? Certainly when learning the notes of a new piece it is better to practise a relatively short section and master that before moving on to the next section, otherwise pupils are almost sight-reading the piece each time they play through it. While it's good to practise shorter sections in the early stages of learning a piece, longer sections may be more appropriate as pupils become more familiar with a piece. However, short sections are still useful in order to focus on one issue, such as fingering, dynamics, rests or tone quality.

Many pupils have difficulty with rests - ensuring the note before a rest comes off at exactly the correct place. See example 1 from Lichner Short Story. Once these bars can be played easily hands separately, I recommend practising hands together the first three quavers in the RH with the first LH crotchet - listening carefully that the LH chord comes off exactly as the RH plays its third quaver (E). When that is good, practise the first three RH quavers while the LH plays the crotchet, lifts at the correct moment and

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then quickly moves to its new position down the keyboard and waits just above the notes of the next chord. When that can be done fluently, play the first seven quavers in the RH with the first two LH chords - listening that the second LH chord comes off exactly as the RH plays B.



Example 1: Lichner Short Story

3 Hands separately

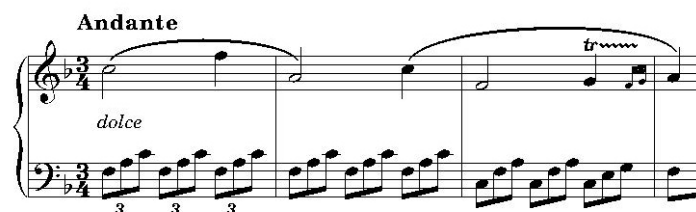
Hands separate practice is essential for pianists. If each hand on its own can be played musically, it becomes much easier to play the piece characterfully hands together. Hands separate work is useful to ensure fingering is correct, to work at precise rhythms, to listen for tone and shaping, and for security. Whether it is a piece with a melody in one hand and an accompaniment in the other hand, or whether there are two equal voices, as in so many Baroque pieces, hands separate work is vital. Being able to play a piece hands separately, especially the left hand, ideally from memory, ensures great security prior to a performance - if a mistake occurs in one hand, the performer can keep going with the other.

4 Slowly

Playing slowly is helpful to foster listening skills, to develop technique and to solve problems. It gives one time to think, time to prepare mentally and physically. Slowing a piece down, once it has been learned, can be revealing. It can be difficult to play slower than usual, and students will falter at places where they are insecure. Practising slowly reveals the uncertainties in the student's playing - those are the bars which need extra work.

When a piece is too fast for the pupil to play it immediately up to speed, it's good to learn it in a calm, unhurried way in order to keep the body relaxed. Having said which, it's also good, even at an early stage of learning a piece, to play short sections up to speed to ensure suitable choice of fingering and correct movements.

If a piece is already very slow, it can be useful to play part of it at a faster speed, for instance to understand how to shape the melodic line. See example 2 from Clementi Sonatina in C Op36 No1 2nd mov.



Example 2: Clementi Sonatina in C Op36 No1 2nd mov

5 With stops

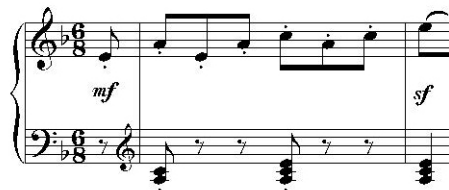
There are many occasions when it's useful to put in a stop in practice, for example before a tricky note. Go back a few notes, stop before the tricky note and prepare the

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finger on the note. Gradually reduce the length of the stop until that bar can be played slowly without hesitation. Then gradually speed it up.

See example 3 from Schumann Wild Rider. At speed, it's difficult to make the *sforzando* stand out amongst the quick quavers without getting louder towards the *sforzando*. So I recommend practising the first seven quavers lightly, and stopping before playing the *sforzando* E. Then prepare mentally and physically for the different movement required for the much bigger sound - and play it. Gradually reduce the extra time between the C and the E until the *sforzando* E can be played in time with no *crescendo* into it.



Example 3: Schumann Wild Rider

6 Repetition

A great deal of music practice involves repetition. Any new idea or new technique will benefit from being repeated many times. With repetition (in the correct way) something that was new and difficult becomes familiar and easy. Repetition involves rehearsing short sections, often hands separately and often slowly.

A pupil may be learning a piece which introduces slurs. See example 4 from Beethoven Sonata in G 1st mov. We will all have our own way of teaching slurs. I teach down/up movements - raising the arm and dropping down into the first note of a slur, and gently raising the wrist and playing the second note of the slur very lightly just before the finger comes away from the keyboard. So pupils will repeat the down movement many times, listening to their sounds, and then repeat the up movement many times, and then combine them into the down/up movement. When slurs appear in a subsequent piece, the pupil already knows the sounds and movements required to play them convincingly.



Example 4: Beethoven Sonata in G 1st mov

7 Variety - dynamic, articulation, rhythm, speed, balance

Following on immediately from repetition, let's discuss variety. Variety in repetitions encourages more repetitions, but it also encourages more useful and more meaningful repetitions.

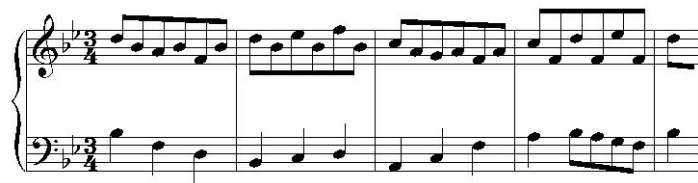
See example 5 from Bach Minuet 1 from Partita No1 in Bb. First the pupil learns to play the RH musically, singing the melody notes and keeping the off-beat repeated notes softer, and the LH with a sense of pulse. Then I demonstrate and ask pupils to play the first four bars of the Minuet very softly (keeping fingers close to the keys), then strongly (lifting the fingers well so they are active). We play the passage with different articulations, first short crisp staccatos (moving the finger tips well), then with a

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velvety warm legato (clinging well to the keys). We'll invent different rhythms (eg dotted or triplets) so some notes are long (and we can relax) and some are short (and we need to move quickly to play the next note). We can try playing the piece extremely slowly but still musically (enjoying every sound in every beat of every bar), and we can play it very fast (feeling one beat in a bar). We can experiment with playing the LH strongly with the RH very soft (and listen to the effect), and then the other way (again, listening to the effect).

And we can mix any two, or more, of these variations. I find playing staccato and varying the rhythms particularly beneficial when it's difficult to play fast passages evenly. Varied repetitions are good for security, memory and technique, but also for learning to listen and learning to play musically.

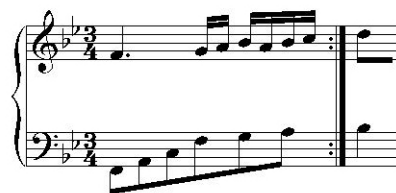


Example 5: Bach Minuet 1 from Partita No1 in Bb

8 Backwards practice

This is one of my favourite practice strategies. It's effective for building security in a tricky passage, otherwise sometimes the beginning of the passage may be practised many times, but the end is less secure - it's easy to stop listening critically. It's also useful for putting tricky passages back into context. It's good to feel more confident, rather than less confident, as one gets towards the end of a phrase or section. It's invaluable for those students who will insist on keeping going even when they've been asked to practise a short section such as one bar - the end of a phrase or section forms a good stopping point!

See Example 6 from Bach Minuet 1 from Partita No1 in Bb. These RH semiquavers are fast. They also probably need to start softly and *crescendo*. Play just the final note (finger 5 on D) with a well-balanced hand, not tilting over, with a good big quality of tone. Then play the last two notes (C and D). Listen to the quality of sound. Play the last three notes. And so on. If at any stage the playing becomes unclear or uneven, then go back to playing just the last note, last two notes, etc. And, of course, also vary the repetitions especially, in this example, the speed and the articulation.



Example 6: Bach Minuet 1 from Partita No1 in Bb

9 One main practice point for week

It is highly effective if the teacher can pick one point and send the pupil away for the week working on that particular point in that piece. The point may be focusing on getting the fingering right, learning to play beautiful staccato notes, working on the balance between the hands, or bringing out the character of each section of a piece.

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This one-point lesson or, at least, one point per piece, is especially useful with younger children who will find it much easier to focus on one point for a whole week (and will generally be more successful at this) than to have to think about many different points. It is far better to work effectively and thoroughly on one point each week than to attempt to improve many points, none of which is thoroughly addressed or practised. But the one-point lesson is also useful for older students - in all their scales, studies and pieces they can concentrate on the technique and musicianship required to play, for instance, with wider dynamic contrasts, or with crisper staccato.

10 Practise towards a known goal

We all work better if we have a goal. A concert coming up? We find extra time to practise those pieces. Ensure you set regular achievable targets for your pupils. It might be to learn eight bars of the left hand of the next piece. Or it might be to polish a piece for a concert at the end of term. Ensure pupils always know what they are working towards, how they should prepare for the target, and the best ways of practising in order to achieve their goal.

Conclusion

By using their practice time efficiently, as suggested in these ten strategies, pupils will make extremely good progress. When they find they make progress, they will enjoy their practice. So they will be motivated to practise more - and make more progress. See Figure 1.

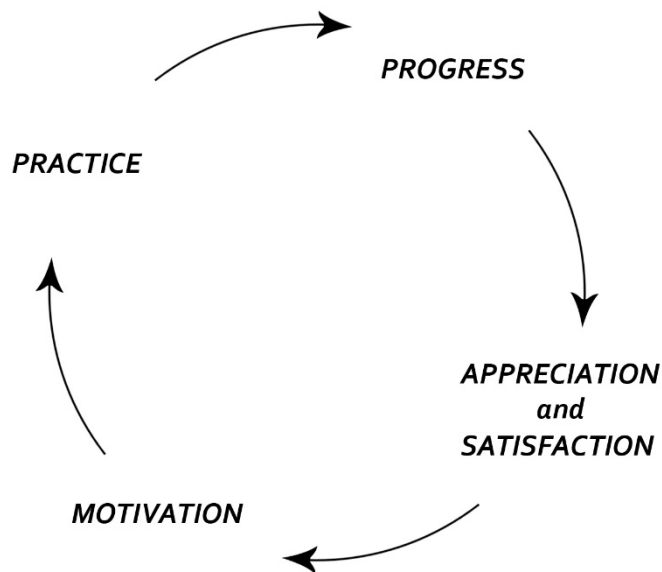


Figure 1

I would also recommend involving parents in guiding practice at home in the ways I've outlined above. See my contribution to the symposium on parental involvement elsewhere in this issue of Piano Professional.

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