

7 Habits of Highly Effective Practicers

As a performer and piano teacher with more than a few years of experience, I've had a chance to think about the principles that result in effective practice. That is, practice which helps one improve. I would like to share seven of those principles here. There could be more than seven, and some of these are strongly related to the point that you may want to simplify and condense them, but this is a good provisional set of ideals you may find informative!

Consistency

This principle is about getting to the instrument as often as possible, working towards an unbroken streak. A student who practices every day for 15 minutes will always do better than the student who crams for two hours the day before the lesson. Learning music is a combined mental and physical activity and improvement happens via many correct repetitions of the key physical movements. Understanding a piece of music counts for very little if the body is not used to what it has to do to achieve that musical result. Do a little bit every day. Of the seven principles here, it is the *only* one that is non-negotiable; I have never seen a consistent practicer (i.e. 5 to 7 days a week) fail to advance at a steady pace.

Defining Goals

This principle is best framed as a question: “*what* are you practicing?” or even better “when you are finished practicing this, what do you hope to achieve?” Once consistency in practice, a.k.a. “just sitting down” is established, how can you focus your time? A common goal is to play through one's piece a certain number of times. A better goal would be, for example, “go over the rhythm in the second measure ten times.” This is the number one duty of the teacher, to help outline goals for the student.

Repetition

Despite all the inspiration and creativity that has to go into a great practice routine, an unbreakable rule of practice is that it must involve at least *some* repetition. As a parent, if you *don't* at some point hear the same thing repeated 10, 20, 50 times, then there is a vital ingredient missing. Repetition is a double-edged sword, however, as it can bring us close to the dangerous territory of mindless practice, which is why I advocate slow tempos and *short* sections. This way, one can quickly re-evaluate at the end of a repetition. I also would never advocate the higher repetition ranges to young students. These students are likely not ready to focus for more than 10 repetitions of a given passage (which is where the *Consistency* principle comes in...they can do it 10 times again tomorrow!)

Reflection

After some practice has been done, it is time to ask yourself whether what you are doing is working. There's no easy answer for this question: if your practice is not working, is it because you haven't done enough? Or are you just on the wrong path? Again, this is where a good teacher can help! In the days where you are not with your teacher, a real honest look at what you are doing is what's needed. Don't feel bad

about abandoning or modifying your approach if it is not working. Likely you needed to go through a period of frustration to get to the right path. That's the thing they don't tell you about mastery: you have to go through a lot of failure to get to the right answer. This is more commonly heard as "Thomas Edison had a thousand failed patents before the light bulb."

Understanding/Analysis

Although "analysis" is a scary word, all this principle really entails is stopping and thinking about the big picture of your piece. Where are the big sections? Is there some sort of plan? What is repeated? Can you detect a big change in the rhythmic feel? Does it change key? Try to look at the different layers of the piece: melody, rhythm, harmony, dynamics, articulation, and sometimes even the words can help determine the scheme behind a piece. This information can give you clues on how to practice. Probably the most universal benefit is discovering where the more difficult sections are so you can devote more time to them, as opposed to playing the whole piece over and over again, spending time on the parts you already know well.

Environment

I used to do in-home teaching and would be horrified to find that the TV would be blaring loudly in the other room, siblings would thunder by, and snacks would even be served in the middle of the lesson. Having a quiet area with no distractions is a basic requirement of effective practice. The mind provides enough distractions! Other signs of a good practice environment include an instrument in good repair, a good music stand (for non-pianists) and enough writing (and erasing!) implements.

Inspiration

I don't yet know exactly why I practice more and harder in the week after I've seen a great show, but I do. It could be the exposure to real, in-the-flesh musicians, reminding me of my own humanity and inspiring me to fulfil my own potential, or it could be the desire to be able to perform a musical feat I saw. Branford Marsalis, in a masterclass given at Humber College, underlined a need for a culture of inspiration to be nurtured at home. Kids who play sports, in his example, watch their sport on TV, go to games and have friends who are into the same team. They have a favourite player. In the GTA we are very fortunate to have a tremendous number of live music performance (in many cases, free) and YouTube has spoiled us with the amount of music and recorded concerts we have access to. If anything, the problem is that there is too much to sift through. So remember: *become a fan of something*. Find more fuel for your flame.