

One Education - Piano Practice Tips

By Ruairi Leonard

Introduction

There is no absolute 'correct' way to approach practising. What will work well for some people will not work for others and although specific 'method' courses often produce brilliant pianists, they are very subjective and are not the best way to learn for everyone.

Therefore, instead, of focusing on particular methods of playing, I have instead tried to write more generally, outlining how I feel a practice session should be structured to benefit the average pianist most. I have also included some general tips throughout which may be of use.

Please feel free to use as much or as little of this as you want, depending on what you find useful. Whether this is how to structure a session, what to practice, or any tips to improve your session I hope some of it will be of use!

Getting Ready to Play

It is important that you are sitting at a **comfortable height** when playing the piano. If you are not then adjust the piano stool or add cushions to your chair. Your **back should be straight and your shoulders should be relaxed** in order for the weight to flow down the arm. If you are with a partner they should be able to hold your arm up and when they release it it should flop down to your side (be careful not to do this above a piano as it will hurt)!

Your elbow should not stick out when playing as this will stop the weight getting to your fingers. **Your wrist should be floppy but controlled** and you should be able to rotate it easily and gracefully. If you turn your hand upside down, the inside of your palm should make the same shape as if you were carrying a ball. You may want to check your arm in a mirror and can use the other arm to gently hold the wrist and check that all energy is flowing down the arm and into the fingers.

Your fingers should feel relaxed but powerful from the energy flowing through the whole arm. It is **crucial not to play with collapsed knuckles** as this will not improve your technique and could lead to injury. Equally it is important that the fingers **should not be curled too much** as the same could happen. **You should play each key with the soft centre of the tip of your finger.** Be aware of any fingers that aren't relaxed and are sticking up or out. Try and work out how you can relax them by referring to the joints of the finger, the wrist, the elbow and the shoulder.

When you play, your shoulder, elbow, wrist and fingers need to work together. The weight is released from your shoulder and flows through your elbow. This energy continues through your wrist which should effortlessly move up and down as you play. The wrist also leads the way up and down the keyboard with the elbow following, and as the fingers move it should rotate gently from side to side with the elbow pivoting slightly. The fingers should also move up and down with the weight from the whole arm, and when one has played, it should naturally bounce back to its original position when the key is released.

Practice Length

There is no specific amount of time that you are supposed to practice for. It is recommended to practice every day, even if it is just for ten minutes. It is important to get into a routine

Practice Structure

There are many different ways you can structure a practice session. Like in most activities, however, it is advisable to do a warm up. This is in order to get your fingers moving and to prevent strains in your muscles.

If you are doing a short session it may be beneficial to start with scales. However, if you are practicing for an exam. scales often need to be played quite fast so it may be best to work up to these.

Below I have bullet pointed how a good practice session should be structured in order to be of most benefit to the student. Remember, however, this is subjective and you may want to change things around or focus on one section more than another depending on your practice session on a particular day. You may also prefer other exercises to the Dohnyani and Hanon exercises; I have included them as I found them beneficial to my playing, however, it is all subjective:

- Dohnyani Finger Exercises - 5 minutes
- Hanon - Virtuoso Pianist - 10 minutes
- Scales and arpeggios - 15 minutes
- Main practice activity - 25 minutes
- Warm down - 5 minutes

Dohnyani Finger Exercises

A good way to start your practice session is the 'Dohyani finger exercises.' This can be found on the following link and it is also very cheap to buy a copy:

http://petruccimusiclibrary.ca/files/imglnks/caimg/6/67/IMSLP314940-PMLP508711-Dohnanyi-Essential_Finger_Exercises_P1.pdf

In the preface to the book, Dohnyani argues that many studies (or Etudes) have only limited value and result in a 'few show pieces' being 'repeated to excess.' Instead the workload can be cut down with finger-exercises which can be played from memory with 'the whole attention being concentrated on the proper execution.'

He emphasises that it is 'absolutely useless to practice exercises in a thoughtless, mechanical manner, especially when the eyes are riveted on the page.' Instead 'full attention must be fixed on the finger-work... not to practice merely with the fingers, but through the fingers with the brain'

The first exercise is shown below as an example, along with a picture of text from the author on how they should be practiced. The exercises largely focus on building strength in the fingers and on the muscle relationship between the different fingers. It may at first feel painful as you are using muscles that are probably very weak. If this is the case do not continue. Although at first the

exercises may seem nearly impossible, if you do a little bit every day you will find your muscles will become stronger and your brain will stop trying to resist playing them.

However, even if you are very good at these exercises It is important only to do a few minutes of these a day - any more is likely to lead to injury as they are very straining for the fingers.

Nº 1

B-, H-, Desz- és D-dúrban is gyakor-
landó.
Ist auch in den Tonarten B-, H-,
Des- und D-Dur zu üben.
To be practised in the keys of B flat,
B, D flat and D major also.

The exercises are to be practised first of all, each hand separately, and only later on, with both hands together. Those exercises which are written on one staff, the left hand is to play one octave lower. The upper fingering is for the right hand. The exercises have to be played *forte* with all possible strength, slowly and with well raised fingers, as well as *piano* in more rapid tempo. For training, the forte and slow practising is more beneficial. To practice too slowly is waste of time. The most rapid tempo in which the exercises can be played faultlessly, gives best results. Overfatigue must be avoided, and rest must be taken, when tiredness sets in.

Hanon - Virtuoso Pianist

The 'Hanon Virtuoso Pianist' is a compilation of 60 exercises meant to **train the pianist in speed, precision, agility, and strength of all of the fingers; and flexibility in the wrists.** They also help with various problems such as 'crossing of the thumb,' strengthening of the fourth and fifth fingers, and fast trills: <https://www.mutopiaproject.org/ftp/HanonCL/virtuoso-pianist-pt1/virtuoso-pianist-pt1-a4.pdf>.

On the next page is a picture of the first exercise. Above it, like above all the Hanon exercises, is an explanation of which technique aspects it focuses on, and what to watch out for. **You should keep your fingers high when playing, play each note distinctly, and start at a slow speed.** You can gradually increase this as you get better, going from the slowest speed of 60bpm (beats per minute) to the fastest of 108.

You may not want to do all 60 exercises. I generally only focus on the first 20 and sometimes on a specific one or two if I know there is a particular fingering issue I want to focus on. These exercises are very useful as they can be played individually or straight through as a performance piece. **It is important to always use a metronome and start the exercise again if there is a mistake.** If you are making many mistakes then you need to slow the exercise down and not increase the speed until you have perfected it.

Scales & Arpeggios

For many years there has been too much emphasis on scales when teaching piano, and this has put off many students who often find scales boring.

However, despite their repetitiveness, scales are very useful as they not only **improve technique and timing, but also teach you tonality and which accidentals are in a particular key.** If you are only practicing for fun it is still worth doing a few scales a day in order to improve your evenness and learn the different major and minor keys. If you are practicing for exams then scales and arpeggios are essential and make up a large amount of your marks.

There are various scales that you will come across: major, minor, arpeggios, diminished 7ths, dominant arpeggios, chromatic scales, scales in thirds and contrary motion scales. Do not be put off by this. Within each of these, the various scales/arpeggios have the same pattern and revolve around certain intervals - **once you learn the pattern they should become easier and will become a case of repetition and muscle memory.**

Like the Hanon exercises it is important that scales are even, precise, not played too fast, and are practiced with a metronome. Again, practice at a slow speed until you are comfortable and then gradually increase the metronome speed once mastered.

For exams you need to be comfortable with all scales in the grade, most often they need to be played from memory and at a specified speed. Some examiners may ask you to play one hand, both hands, at 'forte' or 'piano' volume or staccato or legato - this depends on the exam board.

As well as playing slowly there are other ways that scales can be improved if struggling. One way is to practice **loudly** making sure that each note is clear and separated therefore **improving the quality of the note.** It is also important to practice as **quietly** as possible too since this will **improve finger strength and control.**

If you are struggling with evenness then you may find it easier to **swing the scales** (see the picture below) - playing in a jazz style. When this is mastered then try doing the opposite: **'reverse swing.'** To play reverse swing, simply swap the note lengths around so the first note becomes a semi-quaver and the second note becomes a dotted quaver. When you come to play normally again, you should hopefully find that your evenness will have improved and you have found a natural balance



between the opposing swing versions.

If you are finding the scales too easy and are relying on muscle memory instead of using your brain, then it may be worth stretching yourself and practicing the scales as **'Russian scales.'**

Although the pattern below may seem complicated, once you have learnt the pattern you will find it is not too hard and may find it a more entertaining way of playing scales than the standard conventional way.

The first two octaves of the scale are played in the standard way hands together. However, for the next two octaves the hands move in 'contrary motion.' This means that the right hand continues ascending two octaves whilst the left hand descends two - the hands will now be four octaves apart. The hands then switch direction so the left hand ascends whilst the right descends - they will now only be two octaves apart again. Both hands then ascend a further two octaves to near the highest point of the keyboard, before descending four octaves together and returning to the start of the scale.

See the picture on the left. You will definitely need an 88 note keyboard to do this!

Main Practice Activity

Like practice sessions overall, there is no correct way to structure the main practice activity. It is important to have a **pencil and rubber at hand for all sessions** and you shouldn't be afraid to write as much as you want on the page. **It is also important to have a metronome** whether physical, on the keyboard or on an App as they greatly improve timing.

If you are playing a new piece then it is advisable to **play through as much of it as you can first**. This will help improve your sight-reading skills, give you a flavour for the piece and help you identify any parts that you need to work on. If the piece isn't too long you may want to also play through it a second time, this time observing where there are dynamics, or any expression or speed markings.

Once you have identified a specific section of the piece that you are struggling with, it is important to work out what the problem is. This involves using a metronome to **slow the passage down, and writing in any accidentals, fingering reminders or notes if necessary**. It is advisable to focus on no more than one bar and play it at a slow speed repeatedly until you can do it about ten times without mistakes. You can then speed it up and keep practicing it, gradually speeding up, till you can play it perfectly at full speed.

Once you are happy with the bar, you can then add the bar before it to play it in context. Again play it several times at a slow speed and do not speed up until it is perfect. When you have these bars up to speed then extend again. Try playing the whole passage slowly and, like previously, repeat until perfect before speeding up.

Practicing this way requires discipline. Do not be too hard on yourself if you're making mistakes, this is normal. It is how you deal with the mistakes when you come across them that is the important part. If you practice the way that is described then you are more likely to retain the information in terms of both your brain and muscle memory, and you will be less likely to make the same mistake in future.

When you are practicing, the worst thing you can do is ignore mistakes. If you do this repeatedly then your brain and muscles will be likely to retain the mistake and it will be much harder to relearn the correct version in future. It is very beneficial to **circle the mistakes so you know what to practice for your next session**.

As you become more familiar with a piece do not always practice from the beginning. If you do this, the beginning of the piece is likely to be great whereas parts later on in the piece will probably be

**Preparatory Exercises for the Acquirement of Agility, Independence,
Strength and Perfect Evenness in the Fingers.**

Nº 1.

Stretch between the fifth and fourth fingers of the left hand in ascending, and the fifth and fourth fingers of the right hand in descending.

For studying the 20 exercises in this First Part, begin with the metronome set at 60, gradually increasing the speed up to 108; this is the meaning of the double metronome-mark at the head of each exercise.

Lift the fingers high and with precision, playing each note very distinctly.

less
so.
If
you
do

C. L. HANON.

(M.M. ♩ = 60 to 108.)

1. *mf*

want to play from the beginning, work on a particular section and then at the end of the session try playing from the start to hear your practice in context.

Do not be afraid to take breaks. There is only so much information the brain can retain and **regular rest and water are important.** You may find that if you practice for too long you either lose concentration, begin overthinking or become stressed with yourself. If you find that a particular section is not improving then take a few minutes break and come back to the section that you are struggling with; you may find you are suddenly able to play it when you see it afresh!

If you are doing a long session, then you may want to split your main activity time to focus on two pieces. This could be a 'List A' and 'List B' piece from one of your grades for example. **Playing different pieces is likely to keep you more engaged, however, this should not be an excuse to not look at each piece in detail.** If you feel that you are constrained with time then it is still best to focus on one piece.

It is not advised to focus on more than two pieces unless you are in the later stages of preparing for an exam and want to run through all the repertoire when you feel that all the pieces are mastered or very close to being so. When you are at this stage, **it is important to spend some time working on interpretation and making your version of the piece unique.** This could be in terms of dynamics, expression, pedalling or speed changes. Whilst the composer will have specified some ways to play the piece, **it is the job of a performer to convey their own message to the listener - every pianist will interpret a piece differently and this is part of the beauty of music.**

For some people it is also beneficial to memorise what you are playing. This is useful, since instead of being glued to the page with your fingers just doing what is in front of you as a reaction, your brain has to teach your fingers what to do relying on both **muscle memory and memory retention**.

It could also be useful to keep a **practice diary** to keep track of what you have worked on, how productive you found your session, and what you need to practice next time.

Warm Down

I believe a **warm down can be important mentally** since it helps you wind down from the intensity of your practice session.

A warm down could simply be a piece to play that you either already know or is just fun! This will give your mind a chance to unwind after practicing and take away any stress that may have built up. if you have been practicing classical then you could play a pop piece you like, or if you have been doing pop then you could try a jazz piece for example.

It is also worth **giving your muscles a stretch** when you have finished since they may have built up fatigue. This could be in the back, shoulders, elbows, wrists, fingers or in particular joints. **If you have developed pains then make sure to wait until you have rested and recovered before beginning your next session.** Even if this takes a few days it is important to wait as you do not want to risk permanent injury.

The image shows a musical score for piano, consisting of four systems of staves. The first system is in bass clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. The second system is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The third system is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The fourth system is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The score features various rhythmic patterns, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests.