

Willow Creek Productions

A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO PRACTICING

As a performing pianist I'm often asked how much I practice.

My usual reply is, "Not very often."

When asked to elaborate, I explain that I *rehearse* a lot but I don't practice.

To my mind, practicing is something that one does to achieve a desired level of proficiency. When that point is reached, the most important thing becomes *repertoire*.

My own repertoire includes hundreds of songs all filed away neatly inside my head. I pride myself on my ability to roll out any of these songs and perform them in the way that I feel is most appropriate at that time.

Many people have commented on my ability to play songs on request without music. Most of them seem to think that I have a photographic memory or perfect pitch.

In fact, I have neither.

What I *do* have is the ability to hear the music in my head and realize it through the connection from my brain to my fingers and on to the piano

This ability has taken my entire life, from about age six, to develop.

I'm *still* developing it!

But if I hadn't *practiced* every day, I would never have reached a level at which my God-given ability could have been put to use.

I know this to be true, incidentally, because although I have played guitar since age 11, I am nowhere near as good a guitarist as I am a pianist.

I just have never spent the time *practicing* guitar. I've always thought that my ability on piano would magically transfer to the guitar.

It hasn't.

If I really wanted to achieve parity, I'd have to start a regimen of *practicing* my guitar.

So what's the bottom line? Do you have the ability to become a good player?

If you want it bad enough and are willing to practice then the answer is an emphatic "Yes!"

Of course, you might wonder if some people have more natural ability than others.

Sure they do. But this isn't tennis or golf.

You don't play *at* the piano.

What you do is to train your fingers to do what you want them to do and then use them to make music.

The initial period during which you work to control these appendages, which at first seem to have a mind of their own, can be very frustrating to say the least.

And yes, some students seem to get results quicker than others (perhaps they have longer, slimmer fingers for example) but I think that generally it's a level playing field.

The student that progresses at a more rapid pace may simply be putting in more hours practicing.

Here are some simple guidelines to practicing:

Your brain is a computer

When you're learning a new skill, your brain tends to accept each of your actions as a possible template for that skill.

If, for example, you work through a new piece of music for the first time, making mistakes as you go, and then at the end, quit and go on to something else, your brain dutifully records the whole thing as the way that piece goes – mistakes and all!

However, if you work in small sections and practice until you get it right, the brain files the correct rendition and overwrites the failed attempts.

Small meals frequently

This is good advice if you're dieting but it applies equally well to practicing.

Sometimes we don't have the time to allocate to our instrument. The tendency, of course is to say, "Never mind, I'll practice two hours on Friday!"

It's always better to practice a little bit (even 15 minutes) every day rather than all at once at the end of the week.

Anyone who's ever crammed the night before a test kind of wishes they'd just read the textbook a chapter at a time over the last three months. Sound familiar?

Split the hands

If I'm playing a piece for the first time, I'll try to play it through with both hands beginning to end regardless of mistakes.

Then I'll start over, a section at a time, often playing the right hand alone, then the left, then together.

This gives you a sense of what each hand is supposed to be doing if, and only if, you follow rule one and play each part correctly.

Practice s l o w l y

Any piece of music, no matter how difficult it may appear at first sight, can be broken down into small chunks and played slowly.

Don't think that because the tempo reads *allegro vivace*, you have to start that way.

It's easy to get up to speed once you're familiar with the piece.

Before you start

1. Ask yourself what key it's in.
2. Play the scale of that key (both hands) a few times to familiarize yourself with the sharps and flats you'll encounter.
3. Ask yourself what time signature it's in. If it's 3/4 but you haven't noticed and are trying to play it in 4/4, it's never going to sound right.
4. Check to see if the right hand remains in the treble clef and the left hand in the bass clef.

At any point in the first run-through, if something doesn't sound quite right, go back to steps 1. and 2.

Good luck,

John

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74-818 Velie Way, #5, Palm Desert, CA 92260 760-776-1115