

AN EXPLORATION OF VARIOUS APPROACHES TO PRACTICING THE PIANO

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Although practicing is an important process of our music learning, it has often been given little or no attention in research. In the past, researchers who chose to explore the topic of practicing (*a complete research list is included at the conclusion of this article*) did so mostly by employing various qualitative and quantitative methods of inquiry.

Many researchers decided to examine the topic through observations of various groups; namely, professional performers, serious students majoring in music or children. Others chose to write books thoroughly explaining their philosophies which had been formed after years of personal practicing and from instructing others in the art of practicing. Another somewhat rare examination of the topic was through A/r/tography in which personal experience in practicing was used as a method of inquiry.

I discovered that very few researchers had concentrated on interviewing music educators about their approaches to practicing following specific lines of inquiry. I decided to concentrate on this method when I set out to do my research project on piano practicing.

Besides being rarely used, this method of examining the qualitative nature of practicing seemed the most interesting because it did not limit the information I gathered with my research questions. It provided me with a wide range of answers from music educators with various orientations and philosophies towards practicing a musical instrument. And since each individual student learns differently, this approach did not concentrate on one kind of practicing that should be used by all, but rather informed the reader about different approaches that could be employed during practice sessions.

The interviewed educators were three accomplished professionals who have been teaching piano for at least five years and who have successful teaching careers. All three were asked nineteen, open-ended questions which explored their thoughts and experiences about practicing. As well, they were questioned about teaching their students to practice, specifically,

- the amount of class time they devote to teaching students to practice
- the first practicing strategy they teach and promote with their students
- the ways that they monitor whether their students use the suggested strategies
- the kinds of parental involvement they experience
- the common problems they encounter when teaching practicing
- the ways in which they accommodate the specific needs of each student
- the environment they believe is appropriate for practicing
- the use of the metronome
- the ways they instruct their students to memorize a piece of music, develop sight reading, practice technique and any other aspects they wished to mention.¹

Even though my intent was to construct open-ended questions so that the teachers could thoroughly explain their philosophies, the questions could not have been completely separated from my influence. They never are in these kinds of situations because there is

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no such thing as pure data (Kuhn, 1962). At the same time, it was challenging to construct open-ended questions which were not too broad for the participants to feel encouraged to answer and understand fully.

In the end, the data I collected showed a lot of similarities, as well as differences between the teachers' answers. They were presented in a creative way, through narrative ABER (arts based educational research), entitled *The Story of Teacher 1, 2 and 3*. (Arts based educational research is done in association with arts and humanities and in the past twenty years, inquiry approaches that are artistic in character have begun to be explored by many educational researchers.)

There are many aspects that could be discussed; however, I will just briefly list and explain the main themes. First and foremost, teachers expect their students to be self-reflective about their practicing and to constantly ask questions and listen to what they are playing. One of the teachers explained that she is concerned about quality rather than quantity of practice. The parental role of involvement and encouragement is crucial for the child's successful musical development and two of the teachers described how their success in piano playing is, to a certain extent, due to their family involvement. However, it should not be the parents' concern only. Teachers need to explain and discuss the importance of practicing to their students and should devote a certain amount of time in each class to teaching them to practice. So, the success and enjoyment of practicing is the combination of all the parties involved. The teachers often instructed parents that home environments should be free from distractions (but not too isolated), the piano in tune and the room at a comfortable temperature.

The teachers prefer not to use the metronome greatly because it can be distracting. They feel that the students' sense of timing has to come from within, otherwise it just doesn't work. One of the teachers had a student who had to turn on the metronome for the start of every piece in order to check the tempo. This teacher thinks that students should not completely rely on the metronome, but use it more specifically. The other teacher does not believe that the use of metronome with the youngest students is very beneficial, because they have a hard time working with the metronome and often get frustrated with it when practicing at home. Therefore, this teacher prefers to use other things, such as a shaker, when working with the younger students.

Two of the teachers like to teach technique through the 'circle of fifths'. They also like to use Czerny and sometimes Hanon exercises for practicing technique with their students. There was a suggestion that the students play exercises and scales in different rhythms, and in various combinations of staccato/legato and crescendo/diminuendo. Sometimes students who have problems with speeding up or unevenness of the hands can be helped by these ideas.

Since each student is different, it is important to organize the lessons based on the individual needs of each person. One of the teachers likes to know about her students' hobbies and activities because it helps her to better organize the lessons. It was also mentioned that being positive, kind and consistent with students goes a long way to encouraging regular practice.

The main difference between teaching children and adults is that children often do not question the teacher's instructions. Adults, on the other hand, constantly ask questions, are keen about learning music history, and often feel they should be progressing faster. Teachers often like to concentrate on ideas of music evolved over time

when they are teaching pieces from different musical periods. The teachers felt that children need to have fun, and one of the teachers, in order to create that, spends a lot of time on imagery in music.

The most common problem the teachers encounter is lack of time for practicing. Some of them blame it on the difference between today's life and the one they led as a child. One of the teachers feels that students have a shorter attention span and she prefers to use prizes as an incentive for students to practice. She also asks her students to tape their practicing on a cassette tape, which she later listens to. The main task, which another teacher discussed greatly, is to develop discipline, as we cannot expect that to come naturally from very young students. Therefore, this teacher instructs her students to begin practicing five times a week (ten minutes) in order to help start developing self-discipline. Then when they become comfortable with that kind of practicing, she suggests that they practice a certain song three times, while encouraging some parental assistance. Teachers also use practice charts to help their students organize their practice sessions.

Not all answers were, however, similar. The teachers talked about different ways of instructing students to memorize a piece of music. One of them explained that she instructs her students to divide pieces into segments and practice each part, while the other teacher talks about three different levels of memory: aural (in the ear), kinesthetic or physical (in the fingers), and intellectual (in the mind). The third teacher analyzes pieces with her students and asks them to play these with closed eyes, after which it is expected that they will be able to recall the music and play by memory. She says that it's all about the feeling.

Teaching a student how to sight read is approached differently with each of these teachers. One of them believes that guided sight reading is better than just sending the student home with a book. The other teacher, in addition to using Four Star publications, has a special way of teaching sight reading. She asks her students to tap the rhythm of the example they are sight reading -- with the RH tapping the notes of the example and the LH tapping the basic time signature. At the same time the children are saying their note names aloud. If there are eighth notes there, then she has them double their time. This teacher also has a variety of practice suggestions for her students, including flashcards for learning how to read notes.

This was an interesting research project as it enabled me to explore many interesting ideas and philosophies by not limiting the kinds of answers I would have received if I had decided to concentrate on one specific area of piano practicing. I think it would be interesting to explore more of the visual memory in addition to the others discussed. I think we can continue exploring this topic and perhaps concentrate on further investigation of how to intrinsically motivate students to practice for the enjoyment of practicing.

¹ The exact questions were: 1. What are your thoughts on practicing a musical instrument? 2. What has been your experience with practicing? Did your teachers place an importance on this aspect of your musical training? Why or why not? 3. How do you teach practicing or how do you explain practicing to your students? Why? 4. How much class time do you devote to explaining practicing to your students? Why? 5. What kinds of practice strategies do you promote? Please explain why these are important for you.

6. How do you monitor whether your students have used your suggested practice strategies? 7. What is the first practice strategy you teach your students? 8. What kinds of practice strategies have you found worked for children? Adults? Do you think there is a difference? 9. What kinds of parent involvement did you experience? Please provide specific examples. What do you suggest parents can do to help their children with practicing? 10. How do you accommodate practicing to the individual needs of each person? 11. What is the most common problem you have encountered when you teach practicing? 12. What, in your opinion, is the appropriate environment for practicing? 13. What do you think about the use of metronome for practicing? 14. How do you instruct your students to practice memorizing a piece of music? 15. How do you instruct your students to practice in order to develop sight-reading skills? 16. How do you instruct your students to practice the technique? Please provide a couple of examples. 17. How do you tell your students to practice contrasting repertoire works? Please provide a couple of examples. 18. Any other comments about practicing? 19. Do you know of any other practice resources available for students?

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