

**“Effective Practicing”
by Ryan Fogg**

All of us have heard the old adage, “Practice makes perfect.” I shudder to think how many poor souls have bought into that piece of fiction. Years ago I had a basketball coach who slightly altered that statement but significantly changed its meaning: “Practice makes permanent.” The new slogan may appear less catchy, but it is much more representative of the truth. A student can practice a particular musical passage incorrectly for weeks, and the end result is certainly not perfection. Consequently, the student will have a very hard time undoing the bad habits that have settled. Why? Because the lack of tonal variety, the incorrect fingerings, or the unsteady tempos have become permanent through consistent, but incorrect, practice. The solution to such dilemmas is to know how to practice effectively in the first place so that the *good habits* become permanent and subsequently contribute to a secure musical performance.

I studied the piano for years before I learned how to practice. In my mind, practice was equivalent to mere repetition. I would practice the length of time for the week required by my teacher, then she would “fix” any mistakes or incorrect habits that had developed. The vicious cycle continued until I finally realized that I could get much more accomplished if my practice time consisted of not only repetition, but evaluation as well. As I learned how to correct my own mistakes before they became habits, I began to enjoy my practicing more and more. Practicing was no longer a chore to me; it was now a tool that enabled me to extend the limits of my playing to a level far beyond what I had ever imagined.

As I have been teaching over the past few years, I have learned that some deficiencies students may have in their playing are due in large part not to a lack of understanding of the concepts or even a lack of technical facility, but to a fundamental problem of not knowing how to practice. In these cases, I spend the majority of the lesson time showing the student exactly how to practice a particular passage; not surprisingly, these lessons turn out to be very productive. After practicing *correctly* for the week, the student returns with marked improvement and with the encouragement that his or her hard work has reaped substantial benefits.

Many teachers advocate practicing a specified number of hours per day. For intermediate and advanced students, this number is usually anywhere from one to four hours. While such structure is often helpful to establish a practice regimen for students, quality must be emphasized more than quantity. One student may accomplish in an hour of efficient (but thorough) practice what another may do in two hours at minimum. The time must be spent wisely so that any potential problems are isolated, corrected, and no longer repeated. The key to such efficient practicing is to have a plan in advance. Before students sit down on the bench, they should know exactly what their goals are for that practice session. Without a plan, students will likely play through all of their pieces repeatedly without truly “practicing.”

The following ten guidelines are useful in developing a practice plan. They are general, non-specific reminders that can be applied to a variety of repertoire. Some of these guidelines are supported by quotations of various pianists and composers cited in Reginald Gerig’s *Famous*

Pianists & Their Technique. This is not an exhaustive list by any means; rather, it is my intent that these guidelines may be adapted as a starting point for those looking to increase the effectiveness of their practicing.

Guidelines for Effective Practicing

1. Set a specific goal to achieve in each practice session. For example, rather than, “I will practice Beethoven today,” consider, “I will memorize the first theme of the exposition of my Beethoven today,” or “I will work on making all trills in the Beethoven light and continuous.”
2. Listen to recordings of your piece, not to imitate, but to become more aware of interpretive possibilities.
3. Analyze the overall structure and significant chord progressions. A clear understanding of the form and harmony will not only help in the memorization process (see #8 below), but it will also influence your interpretive decisions.
4. Consider the following three questions regarding sound quality:
What should my piece *sound* like?
How does my playing differ from the desired sound?
What can I change so that my playing matches the desired sound?
(When students become more aware of their own sound, a more musical result is inevitable.)
5. When deciding on fingering, be sure to test it at a faster tempo – it may not work!
“Awkward fingering interferes with gracefulness in the hand, without which beauty of tone and phrasing are impossible.” – Marguerite Long¹
6. Be disciplined with regard to rhythm and tempo – these elements are foundational.
“When you think you are practicing very slowly...slow down some more. You spoil everything if you want to cut corners. Nature itself works quietly. Do likewise. Take it easy. If conducted wisely, your efforts will be crowned with success. If you hurry, they will be wasted and you will fail.” – Franz Liszt²
7. Avoid doing too many run-throughs; focus on smaller sections. For example, if you have a 10-minute piece but have only 30 minutes to practice, practice efficiently by emphasizing one particular section in detail or by working only the “trouble spots,” rather than by playing through the entire piece 3 times.
8. Memorize as you go – it is a part of the learning process, not something that happens later. Once a piece is memorized, continue to use the music – you may find something you missed the first time around!
9. Avoid mindless repetition – your practice should consist of focused listening and adjustment. (The student must learn to listen more carefully while he plays because in the practice room, he becomes his own teacher.)
“Always play as though a master were present.” – Robert Schumann³

10. Know your limits. While it is important that you practice regularly and thoroughly each day, be sure that you're never practicing with excessive tension and that you take multiple breaks. If you cannot concentrate anymore, stop practicing. If you're hurting physically, stop practicing.

"Through intelligent practice it is easy to achieve that which can never be attained by excessive straining of the muscles." – C. P. E. Bach⁴

So how can one know whether he or she has practiced sufficiently? When is it enough? Well, as many musicians would say, you can never practice enough, and you can always find more ways to improve. But I believe one of the surest ways to tell if your students are ready to move from the practice room to the recital hall is the level of mental and physical relaxation at which they execute their playing. Although concentration must always be present, there must also be a point of release in which the performer becomes part of the audience and is able to enjoy the music effortlessly. Of course, a performance such as this is ideal but at the same time very rare. I have found that some of my better performances have occurred when I stopped trying to make everything work and was able to let go and enjoy the music again. Performing in front of a live audience can be one of the most grueling experiences in life, but it does not have to be. The goal of one's performance should match one's original impetus and inspiration for playing: musical enjoyment rather than note-perfect accuracy, personal expression rather than a pedantic adherence to the score, and pursuing artistic endeavors rather than seeking to win the approval of others. Practicing more effectively will ensure that such an inspired performance is within the student's reach.

Notes

1. Reginald Gerig, *Famous Pianists & Their Technique* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 321.
2. Gerig, 184.
3. Gerig, 206.
4. Gerig, 29.