

PIANO PRACTICE

BY

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PREFACE



My inspiration came from a presentation on syllabus development by Hamish Tait, Director of the Riverina Conservatorium of Music in Wagga Wagga, NSW, Australia.

Hamish spoke to staff at the Murray Conservatorium Albury about how we might document our resources and teaching methods, developing within our respective departments material that would be unique to the Murray Con. and of immediate practical benefit to students.

As a pupil at Sydney Conservatorium in 1972, I had the great fortune to have been taught by Igor Hmelnitsky. His Russian approach included sets of block chords, arpeggios, broken chords and double scales, each built on a single tonic. To this sequence I added: augmented, minor 7th, minor 6th, and major 6th chords.

With the 2018 release of the AMEB Series 18 Technical Work books, I modified my work so that it could function as extension material for grade 7 & 8 students heading to tertiary studies.

The first part of this book is a guide to using these exercises. Notes on useful teaching or learning strategies that worked for myself and my students, plus insightful pedagogical hints and snippets of wisdom gleaned from books by concert pianists form the second part.

This is clearly not an exhaustive coverage of technical suggestions for pianists wanting to work beyond their examination requirements but it is, I think, a very good start.

*Gregory Lewis
Table Top, 2019*

BASIC TECHNIQUE



“Personally, I practise scales in preference to all other forms of technical exercises when I am preparing for a concert. Add to this arpeggios and Bach, and you have the basis upon which my technical work stands.”

—WILHELM BACKHAUS

Work Books

The AMEB Series 18 technical books include exercises and extension studies focusing on vital areas of piano technique. Scales are presented in a variety of styles including Russian versions with contrary sections.

Mastery of the AMEB technical books is an excellent first step towards building a secure technique. Search for performances of the compulsory exercises in all grades by Brenda Jones. She has also recorded much of the Series 18 exam repertoire.

Many common hand positions are included, although there are of course many others. Extras such as Major 7th, 9th, 11th and 13th chords, suspensions, half-diminished, and chords on seconds or fourths in all their inversions number in the thousands. Learn them in repertoire as you go along.

Play with musical intent

Decide on articulations and dynamics for each hand before you start. Imagine that those few bars exist within a masterpiece of the piano repertoire. How might you play them?

Is your imaginary music powerful, serene, delicate, agitated, wistful, *Pesante* or *Leggiero*, *Presto* or *Lento*?

BASIC TECHNIQUE

Playing every note with identical articulation, dynamics, tempo and style is a lost opportunity to stretch your musical imagination. Play technical exercises differently every time.

Stay relaxed

Do not keep your fingers stretched above notes already played. Keep your arms moving to stay behind your 4th fingers where possible. Allow your fingers to come together naturally to relax at every opportunity.

Play hands separately (HS) until you can play without tiring. At first, swap hands after every scale, arpeggio and broken chord.

Keep checking that your shoulders are relaxed. Unreleased physical tension can make arpeggios and broken chords quite tiring. Take time between repetitions to put your hands in your lap or hang them by your side.

Scales

Play major, harmonic minor, contrary and chromatic scales on the same white note tonic as the technical exercises of the day.

Keep scales two octaves apart and *staccato-pianissimo* until you learn the notes. Also practise scales descending first.

Play in groups of seven notes at 50 to 72 bpm for each octave. Examples of this method over two octaves are included.

When you have them under control, play with one hand staccato and the other legato. Decide on a volume or a crescendo and decrescendo sequence before you play.

Play with different articulations in each hand simultaneously.

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Basic chords with arpeggios

Use the sustain pedal to create a rich resonance. Move quickly to each hand position in advance and touch the keys before pressing down. Play arpeggios over two octaves until everything is 100% accurate, then extend to four octaves.

Play each block chord as written, then play it as an arpeggio. In major, minor and augmented arpeggios, play in groups of four to avoid thumb accents. When learning, swap hands regularly to avoid fatigue. Play hands together (HT) when you can play HS without tiring.

For Dominant 7th, Diminished 7th and 6th chords omit the 5th fingers in block chords. This is still the correct hand shape for arpeggios. Play block chords HS then arpeggios HT, adding the 5th fingers.

A quick method of establishing new hand positions for unfamiliar chord shapes and their inversions is to play stretching exercises before the arpeggio or broken chord. Some examples are shown at the end of this booklet. A few minutes will make even the most awkward chord feel familiar.

Play at every dynamic marking. It is not enough to memorise these chords as note patterns and hand positions. You must be able to use them musically at all volumes. Work at *pp* and *ff*.

Voice your chords, emphasising the top notes. This concept of playing the top note more loudly in chords must be automatic—it is a defining characteristic of all fine pianists. Later, work on individual notes within chords to highlight harmonic progressions or inner voices.

BASIC TECHNIQUE

Double scales

The fingering for 3^{rds} are generic patterns. In repertoire, short sections of 3^{rds} may need different fingers.

Learn these staccato at first. When playing legato, hold down at least one finger as you change pairs.

Use 1st and 5th fingers for staccato octaves. In repertoire, some slow legato passages may need 4th finger on black notes. Concentrate on playing with the least effort. If your wrists ache after a few octaves then you are doing it wrong.

There are many instances in concert repertoire where octaves need to go as fast as you can play them, so speed these up as soon as you can play without tension.

Broken chords

These are central to all piano literature. You need to recognise chords so well that your hands instantly make the correct shape before you play. Grabbing these note clusters confidently is a fundamental skill.

Play broken chords:

1. while looking only at the music.
2. while looking only at the keys.
3. with your eyes closed.

Learn new broken chords *staccato-pianissimo*. Keep your wrist mobile and your arm moving behind each note. Play the major, minor and augmented inversions as block chords first.

Resist the temptation to continue if you have missed a note. Identify the problem, do a stretch exercise, check your arm position if you are far from the centre of the keyboard, and repeat.

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Sample technical routine

Fundamental exercises such as these provide the basis of a daily routine. Try double dotted rhythms for unfamiliar patterns. Begin by playing with the long note first, then repeat with the long note second. A typical technical session would be:

Choose a black note tonic. For example, A \flat .

1. Similar motion A \flat & A \flat m in octaves, 3^{rds} and 6^{ths}.
2. Contrary motion A \flat & A \flat m, starting an octave apart.
3. Chromatics on A \flat in octaves and minor 3^{rds}.
4. Broken chords of A \flat & A \flat m with inversions.

Choose a white note tonic. For example, F.

1. Scales as for the examples above but in F & Fm.
2. Basic chords with arpeggios, double scales, and broken chords as written in the music section of this book.

Each day, choose a different black and white key for the routine. In this way you can cover all the extended white note exercises each week. With only five black keys to cover over seven days you can repeat those that need more work or use that day to cover all twelve major and minor scales.

Technique through repertoire

I never set Hanon or Czerny exercises. I feel that time could be better spent learning music by Bach or Scarlatti.

I prefer that students spend their technical sessions on scales and broken chords in all keys. I agree with Glenn Gould.

“What it all comes down to is that one does not play the piano with one’s fingers, one plays the piano with one’s mind. If you have a clear image of what you want to do, there’s no reason it should ever need reinforcement. If you don’t, all the fine Czerny studies and Hanon exercises in the world aren’t going to help you.”

BASIC TECHNIQUE

Heinrich Neuhaus, teacher of Radu Lupu, Emile Gilels and Sviatoslav Richter, set Bach preludes instead of exercises by Czerny and Clementi.

- Book 1: 2, 3, 5, 6, 10, 11, 14, 15, 17, 19, 20, 21.
- Book 2: 2, 5, 6, 8, 10, 15, 18, 21, 23.

The AMEB lists Scarlatti as alternatives to technical studies.

- Intermediate — K.63, K.95, K.391, K.455, K.35, K.85, K.3, K.239, K.484, K.342, K.427 and K.513.
- Advanced — K.63, K.95, K.391, K.455, K.35, K.85, K.3, K.239, K.484, K.342, K.427, K.513, K.28, K.96, K.140, K.141, K.366, K.335 and K.552.

Study of fugues by Bach, Shostakovich and Hindemith with close attention to independent articulation and phrasing of each voice is most beneficial for developing finger independence.

The great Concert Études by Moscheles, Moskowski, Chopin, Brahms, Liszt, Debussy, Godowski, Scriabin and Rachmaninov are well beyond the scope of this booklet.



BUILDING REPERTOIRE



*“Practice is passing the day at the piano
with patience and serenity”*

ARTUR SCHNABEL

Getting started

Practice is not mechanical finger wiggling. It is concentrated mind work with sustained bursts of intense mental activity.

Effective rehearsal is tiring, physically and mentally. Constant attention must be paid to every aspect of the score, combined with careful listening.

The cycle of imagination, performance, self-evaluation, problem solving and improvement can be sustained in sessions of no more than 30 to 40 minutes, followed by a 5 minute break. Your brain needs time to absorb what you just did. On your return, play something different.

Multiple sessions working on different music across a range of styles is effective. Play as many sessions as you can in a day, but no more than three in a row before a longer break. Playing when tired is ineffective.

Classical music often requires subtle *rubato*. Knowing where to push and pull the tempo is an art, not a science. Listening closely to master pianists helps you understand this sense of stretched rhythm – it is not on the page. Playing Haydn like Gershwin won't work!

Listen to professional recordings before beginning study. This helps avoid rhythm errors which are difficult to eradicate.

BUILDING REPERTOIRE

Keep key signatures in mind. Identify chord patterns. Always include articulations and expression. Look at the music, not at your hands.

Try to work three days in a row when starting a new piece. Your mind needs to know “this is important” so your subconscious can begin processing the material away from the piano. Some learning always occurs as you sleep.

Hearing the music in your mind

Piano technique is mostly in your head, not your fingers. Play with a precise aural image of the music as you ultimately wish to perform it. Listen critically to every phrase. Give your music a sense of rhythmic direction. Always be “going somewhere”.

Follow these steps for each phrase within sections:

1. Identify all the pitches and rhythms in advance.
2. Inwardly hear the musical phrasing you wish to produce.
3. Imagine how finger stretches and keys will feel.
4. Play the notes slowly and accurately. Do not guess.
5. Slightly accelerate each key to avoid an unreliable tone.
6. Evaluate your music, noting problem areas for attention.
7. Repeat until you have played correctly at least five times.

Direct your practice with purposeful intent until your playing matches your imagination. Think about music, not mechanical repetition.

PIANO PRACTICE

Minimising errors

After an error, never simply play the correct note then continue. This will have the alarming effect of permanently inserting the wrong note into the music — “*Practice Makes Permanent*”.

Restart the phrase, slow down and avoid the wrong note. If the problem within a chord or arpeggio then a stretching exercise will often solve the problem.

Try a bar at a time at near full speed, HS, to ensure that fingerings are effective. One or two bars at a time are enough. It is a huge time waster to redo fingerings later when you discover your initial choices only worked at slow speeds.

Memorise individual phrases from the start. Practice is about understanding the music, not exercising your fingers.

When playing many fast even-length notes put a small accent on the first note in each group.

Play *staccato-pianissimo* to establish complex finger patterns. Use small, precise, vertical finger movements for this style of staccato, not the “key wiping” action you might use for fast repeated notes.

Spend time purposely working only with the left hand in challenging music. Playing HT is easier when the left hand is confident and expressive. How would you play if the left hand part was the complete piece?

As your muscle memory develops, concentrate more on the sound, not your finger actions. Touch each key before you play. This is important in chords or when leaping large distances across the keyboard.

Press all the way down on each key, then relax immediately — do not keep pushing into the key bed.

BUILDING REPERTOIRE

Making a clear plan

Rehearsal marks, capital letters inside boxes, should be added at regular intervals throughout the music. Most composers build their music by combining short sections of six to twelve bars.

Your teacher can help you locate these sections. Sometimes composers indicate new sections with thin double bar lines.

Learn the final section first. If you start practice every day at the beginning, then ultimately the opening pages of your music will be more secure than the final pages. This is surely counter-productive.

If you have decided on rehearsal marks A, B, C, D for a piece or major sections of 30 to 40 bars then begin at letter D.

Follow on with C, B, A then finally from the top to letter A. Later, begin each day with a different section. Give difficult sections extra time.

It is not necessary to get through an entire work each day.

Putting it together

Join sections as soon as you can. Play HT at half speed with all musical aspects under control. Any slower and you risk never attaining a full performance tempo. If this takes more than two weeks then the music may be too difficult, or you may not have enough rehearsal time.

If you need the damper pedal then learn to play clearly without it first. Careless, inaccurate playing still sounds that way with the pedal down. Often in Classical music you can achieve a good music effect by holding fingers down instead of using the pedal.

If you have a grand piano or expect to play on one then learn to appreciate the different sound quality of the *una corda* pedal. It is not for playing softer, but to impart a gentler, more diffuse tone colour.

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One of Beethoven's pianos had five pedals — a damper and four effects pedals. It is fine to use *una corda* for artistic effects. Try it for entire slow movements.

Never play faster than you can manage accurately and musically. For fast music, alternate difficult sections between full and half speed, with all musical aspects clearly defined. Always end practice sessions of fast music at a much reduced tempo. Ensure that your final run each day is a note-perfect performance.

Using a metronome

A metronome is helpful for setting initial tempos or keeping you aware of the beat in music with many syncopations or cross rhythms, especially if the metre is five or seven beats per bar.

However, metronomes are not for keeping time — you must develop an internal pulse of your own through counting aloud and clapping.

A page of Art music entered into a software notation program then replayed at a constant tempo is unbearably ugly.

Jazz is another matter. Indeed there are many forms of jazz where strict timekeeping is a fundamental precept. Transcriptions based on syncopated rhythms and ties can benefit from a metronome. Pencil vertical lines where the metronome will click.

Working and performing

Note the difference between **work** and **performance**. When working, you imagine, play, evaluate, identify problems, devise solutions, then repeat until everything is running smoothly and musically. Work:

1. with the score only. Do not look at your hands.
2. from memory, even if it is just single phrases HS.
3. with eyes shut — “Use the Force!”

BUILDING REPERTOIRE

Performing means playing to an audience, or for yourself on a recording. How would you play with the composer in the room? What is he or she trying to communicate through the music?

Two or three consecutive rehearsal sections are enough to begin recording. As soon as you are under pressure to keep the music moving, new unexpected errors will appear, to be noted and remedied during your next work session.

Performances must be musical, while working concerns basics such as establishing new finger patterns or coordinating hands.

Video yourself and learn from your mistakes. Identify musical issues and devise personal études to remedy them. The correct solution is one that produces your interpretation of the composer's intentions with the most comfortable physical actions.

Monitor yourself constantly. Do not let wrong notes escape. Think about the error – accidental (pun intended), fingering, hand positions, dynamics, rhythm or voicing – before you repeat. You need to understand what went wrong before reworking the phrase.

Often a simple solution for wrong notes or playing “in the cracks” is to have the note name, volume, articulation and tone colour in mind before playing, rather than poking your fingers in the general direction and hitting the correct note by accident.

When the music is under control HT at $\frac{3}{4}$ speed with all the technical and expressive elements in place then leave it for a few weeks. You will learn faster the second time around and give a better performance.

The rhythmic flow and emotional projection of music is more important than hitting the right notes. If your audience is not thinking deeply about the music or feeling the hairs bristle on the back of their necks then your music lacks some essential ingredients.

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Developing a personal style

Good performances should share emotional and intellectual links between the composer, the performer, and the audience.

Great musicians put some of their own personality into their playing while giving their best interpretation of the scores. Haskil, Schnabel, Rubinstein, Larrocha, Backhaus, Hess, Arrau, Gilels, Richter, Kissin, Lympny, Lupu, Gulda, Zimerman, Pires, Fleisher, Schiff, Brendel, Ashkenazy, Perahia, Grimaud, Hamelin, Ax, Lisista, Thibaudet, Trifinov, Wang and Biss all play(ed) the same music differently. So should you.

Communicate your own concept of the music. Listen to great performances, study the score carefully, learn to play efficiently then use your imagination. Computers can play fast, complicated note patterns. From you, audiences need to hear Art.

Memorisation

Muscle memory is a vital basis (with a minimum of 100 repetitions) but you need more. Memorise phrases HT. This provides a good start when earnest memorisation begins.

Incorporate basic harmonic analysis in your learning. In tonal music, always know what key you are in and what chord you are playing. Ensure you can stop at any time and think, for example, “E major, B⁷ - dominant”.

You may need to play a phrase many times before you can recall the rhythm and chord progression easily. Pause between repetitions to evaluate what you just played and re-imagine the correct phrasing in your mind. Can you stop playing anywhere and sing the next note?

Mark sonata sections, variations, return of themes, modulations and switches — points where repeated melodies in the same key change direction partway through.

BUILDING REPERTOIRE

Establish restart points so you can say, for example, “Development” and instantly play from there. Draw a simple form map including the main sections and modulations.

Sometimes, play so slowly that you can’t rely on muscle memory. This way you must know the next note, perhaps by seeing or hearing the next interval in your mind, imagining the sound of the next harmony, or recalling a specific pattern and its starting finger.

If you can’t play a difficult passage the first time then you may have never done that particular arm, hand or finger movement before. Answers often involve slow practice, careful articulation, memorising that bar and playing HS and HT with closed eyes.

Spend time each week with the score but away from the piano. Play only in your mind, identifying notes, chords, fingers and rhythms. Some use of “air piano” can help you understand the music better.

Eventually you should extend this mental play to hearing entire pieces in your mind, away from the instrument. Run thought experiments and play freely with ideas that can later be tested at the keyboard.

Sight-Reading

Take every opportunity to learn short, relatively easy pieces. If the music is within your technical capabilities then playing HS at half speed ought to be achievable immediately.

Strong sight-reading is the most important skill you can have. Learn a new page each day. This could be a complete short piece or a section from a larger work. Experience will help you decide the length of pieces that you can play after a single sitting.

Try something new every day. Build a library of sheet music or fill folders, or a large iPad, with free online non-copyright music from <https://imslp.org>, or <https://www.pianostreet.com>.

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Sight-reading suggestions.

- Play technical work in tonic and dominant keys first.
- Count yourself in to establish the tempo. Don't stop!
- Read ahead. Don't look at notes you are already playing.
- Play rhythmically and musically, with all articulations.
- Play without looking at your fingers. Play by touch alone.

After reading through three times, slowly and **without stopping**, use the music as a quick study item. Aim to perform it with all musical aspects in place at the same practice session, even if this is at a much reduced tempo.

Quick-study suggestions.

- Play phrases HS at full speed and write in the fingerings.
- Put hands together at half speed, one phrase at a time.
- Do not repeat easy parts. Concentrate on new challenges.
- Play phrases with closed eyes to improve your memory.

Grade 8 candidates should read a page of grade 5 music each day as part of a daily routine. The AMEB Series 17 and 18 books have well-chosen music.

The Russian School of Piano Playing Book 2, books by Béla Bartók, Miriam Hyde, Dimitri Kabalevsky, Christopher Norton, Alexandre Tansman, Sonny Chua, Kieran Bailey and Elissa Milne are all excellent. Bach's *Little Preludes* are gems.

The British examinations board, the ABRSM, publishes graded sets of piano anthologies containing previous exam music.

Also seek out intermediate level arrangements of popular music, Broadway tunes and jazz transcriptions. Modern rhythms are usually more complex than in classical music. Learning syncopations or swing style is important.

BUILDING REPERTOIRE

Music for life

There is little point in learning any instrument for many years if, given reasonable notice, you can't actually sit down and play for your family and friends.

Music for personal enjoyment is of course a perfectly good reason to learn, but to deliberately avoid sharing your music with others seems to me a waste of a wonderful opportunity.

Challenge the flawed concept of “working for the exam”. This restricts learning anything easy and joyful for public performance in deference to complex pieces for an audience of one.

Performing only three or four difficult pieces once a year is bad enough, but relegating those hard-won recital items to the “never again for the rest of my life” basket is unjustifiable.

A rich source of recreational music for grade 6 and above are the collections of anime composer Joe Hisaishi. This is vibrant, intensely beautiful music that is a joy to play at any age.

Themes from favourite movies or games are also fun to play. Play-along books are available for popular movies and musicals. Add to your life experience in an optimistic and satisfying manner by sharing a little of what you enjoy.

From the earliest years you can easily build a repertoire list from music you have enjoyed. If a piece made your heart sing as a child embarking on new adventures at the piano then it may well continue to elicit a positive emotional response forever.

Your repertoire history can later become part of family music making or the basis of a piano teaching career.



QUOTES FROM THE MASTERS



Play the (difficult) passage backward; start on the last note, then play the last two notes, and so on, until you have worked through all the repetitions in their turn.

— Seymour Bernstein

I have to be honest. I hate practicing. I've always disliked it. But it is a necessity. I have to do it because I love to play.

— Jorge Bolet

Never allow a wrong or split note to pass. If you do, it may become a habit, and you will not realise how many wrong notes you play. You will have a vague idea at the back of your mind "That's all right, I'll see to that next time." The habit will grow.

— Hetty Bolton

When I start to work on a piece it is important for me to work out everything — the suitable fingerings and the proper physical movement — in the real tempo in order to give the piece the right character.

— Alfred Brendel

(On playing five-finger exercises) It's like learning, for example, to walk on one's hands in order to go for a stroll. Eventually one is no longer able to walk properly on one's feet, and not very well on one's hands either. It doesn't teach us how to play the music itself — and the type of difficulty we are practicing is not the difficulty encountered in good music, the music of the great masters. It's an abstract difficulty, a new genre of acrobatics.

— Frédéric Chopin

QUOTES FROM THE MASTERS

The indiscriminate giving of technical exercises may impede progress rather than advance the pupil... Your own difficulty is the difficulty which you should practise most. Why waste time in practicing passages which you can play perfectly well?

— James Cooke

If the passage is being practised wrongly, every repetition will only make it worse instead of better.

— Clifford Curzon

I'll always start and end the day playing it slowly without pedal and very carefully listening to each note, every voice, knowing exactly where everything is going. No cheating.

— Janina Fialkowska

Successful practising depends on the clarity of our mental conception of a musical purpose, on the ability to concentrate attention and direct energy towards the attainment of this goal.

— George Kochevitsky

In the (Russian) conservatory examinations the student is examined first upon technique. If he fails to pass the technical examination he is not even asked to perform his pieces.

— Josef Lhevinne

The best teacher is one who creates a self teaching pupil and self developing artist.

— Vitaly Margulis

The improvement of dexterity requires the subtraction of unnecessary tension, not the addition of muscular facility.

— Vitaly Margulis

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We have to develop in our students not finger dexterity but mind dexterity.

— Oscar Raif

Practice:

- 1. with the music at the piano*
- 2. without the music at the piano*
- 3. with the music not at the piano*
- 4. without the music not at the piano*

— Heinrich Neuhaus

How much more important it is for a good pianist to have good parents than good teachers.

— Heinrich Neuhaus

A bad plan is better than no plan.

— Ignacy Paderewski

However, I do not practise exercises. I just don't do that.

— Ivo Pogorelich

However difficult it may be, there isn't a passage that doesn't become easy if practised 100 times.

— Sviatoslav Richter

Scales should never be dry. If you are not interested in them, work with them until you become interested in them.

— Nicholas Rubinstein

Endeavour to play easy pieces well and with elegance; that is better than to play difficult pieces badly.

— Robert Schumann

QUOTES FROM THE MASTERS

Do not seek the footsteps of the wise. Seek what they sought.

— Matsuo Bashō



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