



Practising

BY WENDY HILL

The Macquarie Dictionary defines the word *practise*: ‘to carry out, perform, do habitually, observe, do repeatedly in order to acquire skill or proficiency; train, drill.’

Strong’s Concordance goes further to say that *practice* originally came from the Hebrew *asah* (pronounced ‘aw-saw’). This means ‘to do, make, accomplish, advance, become, bring forth, be busy, commit, exercise, be industrious, labour, maintain, observe, perform, prepare, work and yield’.

ATTITUDES TO PRACTISING

We can see from the above word origins that practising has a deeper meaning than just playing pieces over and over. It is important to return to the roots of the word because unfortunately attitudes can cloud the real meaning. Some see practising as hard work with negative connotations. After the novelty of the first few lessons wears off, practice sometimes becomes synonymous with dull repetition.

Perhaps our sinful nature causes us to dislike and rebel against what is good for us. Playing piano is not a natural act. It takes effort to keep the forearms horizontal and train finger independence.

Students love to play but not to practise. People love to live life to the full but do not always make the effort to do so successfully. People still try to imagine what it was like in the Garden of Eden before the Fall and what heaven is like. Many seek an easy life.

It is very easy to become discouraged in learning an instrument when we realise the effort, work and discipline required. Students who become very negative about practising are said to have *misodockleiditis*, a condition describing those who dislike practising a keyboard instrument (Greek *mis* hatred, *dokime* rehearsal, *ta kleidia* keyboard). It is better to have *philodockleiditis*.

If teachers and students are not careful in their approach to practice, then the joy of learning something new dissipates. Human logic takes over—learn this, then this, then the next thing according to the book. Newness and freshness turn stale as routine drills in technique and mechanical repetition of old pieces take over. Drills and pieces need to be balanced with new pieces and creativity.

Attitude toward work is the main issue. If attitudes towards God are generally healthy and obedience is willing, then attitudes towards work and practice improve. The satisfaction of having completed the task is rewarding. If no practising were needed, then students could instantly play well. Rewards would be immediate but with no sense of achievement. Without work, useful skills are not developed for God or others.

God created music and gave us dominion over it, entrusting it to our care (Psalm 8:6, 1 Timothy 6:20). He made us stewards of His soundwaves. Therefore it is the musician's responsibility to care for the music made. Musicians are accountable to God for their music making. In practising, students are learning to be accountable for their actions. They will come to enjoy practising as work was originally intended. God gave Adam the work of naming the animals (Genesis 2:19–20). He also gave the ability and intelligence to complete the task. Adam willingly carried out his work and did not complain. Music students need to use their God-given intelligence when learning music, to care for the sounds they make and practise with a willing heart.

Practice should not be boring, dull repetition but an opportunity to learn about God and His creation. If anyone claims something is dull, boring, old, unsatisfying and not worth doing, then he should read God's words to Jeremiah and find out God's view:

Call to me and I will answer you and tell
you great and unsearchable things you do
not know.

Jeremiah 3:33

People nowadays want to discover new things, obtain new material possessions and have new ideas all the time. God is the answer to this materialistic self gratification. He gives wisdom and new knowledge. God is interested in

everything we do. He wants to be involved in all of our lives, including practices.

A little understanding of how we are created can help our understanding of practice. Although we are made in God's image and reflect God's creativity, it is impossible to play a piece perfectly the first time because of human weakness. Only God can create perfectly first time as demonstrated in Creation.

Perhaps practice is part of the work curse on man. After Adam and Eve sinned, God said:

Cursed is the ground because of you;
through painful toil you will eat of it all
the days of your life. It will produce
thorns and thistles for you... By the sweat
of your brow you will eat your food until
you return to the ground.

Genesis 3:17–19

To succeed and prosper, man has to work hard. The achievements of a great musician do not come easily but through years of effort and devotion. When professional musicians play brilliantly, sweat can often be seen on their brows.

Practice means repetition of good habits. In a good productive practice, more things have been repeated correctly than incorrectly. It has been said that the difference between a professional and an amateur musician is that an amateur practises until he gets it right. A professional practises until he cannot get it wrong.

Even though a student may never play the instrument perfectly, he learns from the experience of practice. Paul says:

We also rejoice in our suffering because we know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance, character, and character, hope.

Romans 5:3

James wrote:

Consider it pure joy whenever you face trials of many kinds because you know that testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete.

James 1:2

These two scriptures describe a life's journey as shown below. Practising starts as a:

1. **testing of faith** (a challenge of musical difficulties) which leads to
2. **suffering** (overcoming difficult parts) which leads to
3. **perseverance** (involving time, work, maturing, persistence) then
4. **character** (improvement in playing) and finally a
5. **hope for the future** (beautiful playing and more motivation to learn more pieces and use skills for God's purposes).

Paul's description of the work to be done by the Thessalonians can also apply to good practising habits:

Work produced by faith, labour prompted by love, endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Thessalonians 1:3

- **Work produced by faith** (not seeing the final playing of a piece but believing it will be achieved)
- **Labour prompted by love** (motivated practising)
- **Endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ** (perseverance and the hope of playing well for the Lord)

Some more scriptures helpful for practising include:

Whatever you do [including practising], work at it with all your heart as though working for the Lord and not for men.

Colossians 3:23

Sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.

Colossians 3:6

Musicians are stewards of God's creation (soundwaves) and should show gratitude for it.

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

Romans 12:2

Musicians can step outside the boundaries of exams, eisteddfods and traditional teaching methods.

For we are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works.

Ephesians 2:10

Whatever your hands find to do, do it with all your might.

Ecclesiastes 9:10

3 STAGES IN LEARNING A NEW PIECE

Practising a new piece involves the student's whole being in three stages.

1. *Head Stage*

This involves the soul with its will, mind, memory and emotions. The student may hear a piece and his feelings are stirred so that they decide in their will to learn it. This involves obedience, motivation, a willingness to learn, following the teacher's instructions, focusing attention on the task and the mental discipline to repeat good habits (ie practising). Once the student has mentally decided to learn the piece, they move on to the next stage.

2. *Head-hand stage*

The brain issues instructions to the body (ears, eyes, skin muscles, nerves and bones) to start developing the necessary physical and technical skills required by the music. This is a visible, tangible, physical stage of learning. The student can read the notes, see what his fingers are doing, feel the muscles and hear the sounds. This stage involves the brain, thinking, analysing sounds, and deciding how to play and remember.

The memory has been described as a type of muscle needing exercise. Use it or lose it. Learning is not just a matter of putting information in. It also involves the process of retrieving and application. This mental

exercise of 'putting in and taking out' takes time as physical skills are gradually mastered.

A new skill should be mastered in the week between lessons. Day one is lesson day where the skill is taught and the teacher ensures it is understood. Days two to three are crucial because the information is retrieved and carefully practised following instructions without the teacher. In days four to six the skill should be easier, more fluent, faster and well on the way to becoming a good habit requiring less conscious effort. By the time the next lesson arrives the skill should be automatic and ready to show the teacher.

practising a new piece involves the student's whole being

Small daily improvements gradually make a huge difference over a week. Don't be like the student who did 100 repetitions of a skill in the second day then, forgot next lesson what the skill was. When eating, we don't eat a week's food in the first day and eat nothing for six days. Likewise in practising, we do a little each day.

The head-hand stage is a time of repetition and training. Once the brain has trained the body, the student moves on to the last stage.

3. *Heart Stage*

This is where the spirit, personality and individuality shine. The ‘real you’ shows through the playing and brings individuality, beauty and musicianship to the playing. Of course, the spirit is subconsciously present during the first two stages. It quietly provided the motivation and purpose to the soul and body. The learner’s spirit determines the state of the soul and the soul determines physical response. The body then determines how successfully the music is communicated to the listener. Music making really begins in the spirit and shows in expressiveness, musicality or heart-playing.

All parts of the student’s make-up function simultaneously. At different stages of the learning process, one part may be more prominent than others. Body, soul and spirit work together continuously in such an amazing way as only God can design.

Playing in the head-hand stage sounds a little mechanical, stilted and not very confident or fluent. By the heart stage, the body is well trained and fingers move fluently and automatically. The phrase, ‘playing by heart’ means playing without the printed music. The memory has been well exercised in the head-hand stage. The spirit and personality of the player can now be expressed through the music. Life is breathed from the heart into the soundwaves. The sounds are musical and expressive. The piece is ready to be given away as a beautiful, invisible gift to the listener.

PRACTICAL PRACTICE TIPS FOR PARENTS

1. Play the recording daily. Music cannot come out of the fingers unless it is already in the brain. MIMO means music in, music out. The more the recording is heard, the quicker the student progresses. The principle is the same as in learning a language. Children learn to speak their native language from hearing language around them. A good motto is ‘Only play the CD on the days you speak to your child.’ Listening to the recording teaches note sequences, pattern recognition, pitch, memory and expression of feelings in the same way that listening to language teaches word patterns, sentences, grammar, tone sensitivity and memory.
2. Practise when the child is fresh and not tired. Short, efficient, happy practices are more productive.
3. Follow instructions carefully.
4. Have the piano tuned once a year and ensure listening equipment for the CD is working.
5. Commit quality time five to six days per week for practising and ensure efficiency.
6. Practices are not negotiable. They are a daily habit like brushing teeth. Sunday can be a day off.

7. Remove distractions. Take the phone off the hook or put the answering machine on. Occupy siblings with activities.
8. Be well mannered in practices. Avoid interrupting. Wait till the end of a section before speaking. Avoid nagging.
9. Be happy. Smile and laugh often. Make practising a pleasant, enjoyable experience the child will want to repeat.
10. Practise communication skills—positive eye contact, physical contact and a gentle tone of voice.
11. Use a loving discipline. Proverbs 3:12 says ‘The Lord disciplines those He loves’.
12. Show genuine praise, interest and encouragement. Children can see through insincerity, falseness and manipulation.
13. If the child is sick or tired, play some old favourites and shorten the practice.
14. Draw up fun practice charts listing work to be covered. Tick each task as it is done.
15. Don’t assume that younger siblings also learning will always learn faster than the older and that, just because the older one has learned something, the younger already knows it. Each child follows the same learning steps and makes his own mistakes. The younger will learn things from the older which you do not expect.
16. Do not rely on older siblings to take the younger one’s practice. Attending practice is still the parent’s job.
17. Accept your children as God created them. God gives talents and abilities in different amounts to different people according to His grace. Some children are quicker than others. Some are early bloomers and some are late. Some learn better by listening, others by visual stimulation, some by touching and others by verbalising.
18. Look for the tiniest improvements and show surprise and joy.
19. Raise your eyebrows and open your mouth slightly when you smile. This makes a huge difference and is contagious.
20. Avoid huffs and puffs and looking at the clock. These are also contagious.
21. Show your child you are happy, relaxed and not worried, tired or pressured by time. One of a child’s greatest fears is his parent’s anger.
21. Do not worry. Jesus said several times, ‘Do not worry’. Worry means creating mental images of things you don’t want to happen.
22. Do not fear. FEAR means False Expectations Appearing Real.



Wendy Hill

42 Christa Ave, Burwood East, Vic 3151, Australia

Phone: +61 3 9802 6317 or +61 3 8802 7650

Email: wendy@thegiftofmusic.com.au

Website: www.thegiftofmusic.com.au



200 Florey Drive, Charnwood, ACT 2615, Australia

Phone: +61 2 6259 3944 Email: asklem@lem.com.au

Website: www.lem.com.au