

A Better Way to Practice Piano (or Any Instrument)

One of the most common ways to practice music hurts long-term learning
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Every musician knows it: When you practice, you have to break a piece of music down, find the hard parts, and practice them. Over and over. And over. A [new study](#) confirms that prolonged focus on one passage is the fastest way to help yourself today. The only problem is, it's the worst way to help yourself if you want to know the piece a few days from now.

Branden Abushanab and Anthony J. Bishara recruited skilled musicians with 1-17 years of formal training in piano (and 3.5-18 years of formal training on all instruments combined). They asked the participants to learn eight melodies, each with 12 notes and a unique timing, on a piano.

Four of the melodies were presented in the standard way, with participants working through one at a time (I'll call this the massed condition). The other four were practiced in random order. For example:

- Massed: A A A A B B B B C C C C D D D D
- Random: A C D A B D C B C D A A C B D B

As the participants learned, it became clear that performance was better in the massed condition. The key measure was how long it took participants to perform the melodies, and they performed faster in the massed condition. Students who learned in the random condition had better retention two days later.

The moral of the story: be methodical and orderly at first, and then vary your practice for greater success!