

Enjoying Ultra-Slow Practice

By Graham Fitch

If you're serious about playing the piano, there's no getting away from slow practice. It is a cornerstone of our work from the beginner stages right through to the advanced level, and a practice tool also used by professional pianists and seasoned virtuosos all the time. In this post, I aim to help you not only realise the importance of careful, accurate slow work but also to enjoy it fully!

I have noticed some folk think they should be beyond slow practice – that's only something beginners do. Far from it! In Abram Chasins' wonderful book [Speaking of Pianists](#), the author describes a time he showed up for a lesson with Rachmaninov and overheard him practising – but so slowly that he didn't recognise the piece at first. I know I have used this quotation before, but I am going to use it again because it speaks volumes about how a **great** pianist used ultra-slow practice for a work he was **maintaining** (not learning) to keep it spick and span:

*Rachmaninov was a dedicated and driven perfectionist. He worked incessantly, with infinite patience. Once I had an appointment to spend an afternoon with him in Hollywood. Arriving at the designated hour of twelve, I heard an occasional piano sound as I approached the cottage. I stood outside the door, unable to believe my ears. Rachmaninov was practising Chopin's etude in thirds, but at such a snail's pace that it took me a while to recognise it because so much time elapsed between one finger stroke and the next. Fascinated, I clocked this remarkable exhibition: twenty seconds per bar was his pace for almost an hour while I waited riveted to the spot, quite unable to ring the bell. Perhaps this way of developing and maintaining an unerring mechanism accounted for his bitter sarcasm toward colleagues who practised their programmes 'once over lightly' between concerts. (Chasins, Abram. 1967. *Speaking of Pianists*. New York: Knopf, 44.)*

6. **Allegro.** ♩ = 69.

sotto voce

p

p

(Chopin: Etude in G sharp minor, op. 25 no. 6)

This sort of ultra-slow work is actually rather hard to do, it takes quite a bit of patience and discipline. We have an aural image of how the music ought to sound at the proper speed, and we are impatient to get to this. If we practise just slightly slower than the tempo (assuming it is a fast or fastish piece), we are likely to find ourselves getting gradually faster, influenced by a magnetic pull back up to the tempo.

Instead of a tempo that is just under speed, let's choose one that is **way** slower. Each note will expand from font size 12 to size 48. When we do this, we need to remember that it is **only the tempo** (the distance in time between one note and the next) that is slow. Our reflexes and thoughts are fast, firing on all cylinders. If we have to make a jump across the keyboard, we will do this fast. If the thumb needs to pass under the hand, we can prepare this movement ahead. The speed we put down and release each key can also be fast, even though the tempo is slow.

Uses

So when do we use this sort of ultra-slow practice?

- Use it when learning new pieces, in order for the brain to move faster than the fingers.
- Use it for passages requiring fine motor skills that are uneven or that lack control.
- Use it for places that sound dull and mechanical, exaggerating the dynamics, hairpins and balances.
- Use it to maintain accuracy and finesse in pieces you already know.
- Use it to command control of every single note, inflection, dynamic and expression mark, and pedal.
- Use it for memory work (if you can play ultra slowly from memory, you know every atom and molecule of the musical structure).
- **Don't use it** when you are forming the reflexes for fast playing after the initial learning stages. Let's say you've spent some time learning a fast piece slowly and you want to get it up to speed. Now is the time to lay off the slow practice for a while, even though it will feel very comfortable to go back to it each day. Resist this, and make a plan to do little bits fast.

Little Bits Fast

The intelligent pianist will recognise the need for this type of practice, to string notes together so that one impulse takes in a group of notes. If slow practice is deliberately looking at letters and syllables, then 'little bits fast' enables us to think in words, sentences and paragraphs. Take a few notes and play them up to speed (or faster!) but in one impulse, one gesture. After a few repetitions (nobody ever formed a habit by doing something just once) we can add a few more notes, and then practise starting from a different place. After you have completed this stage of the work, you can use slow practice and fast practice in alternation.

Musical – Not Mechanical

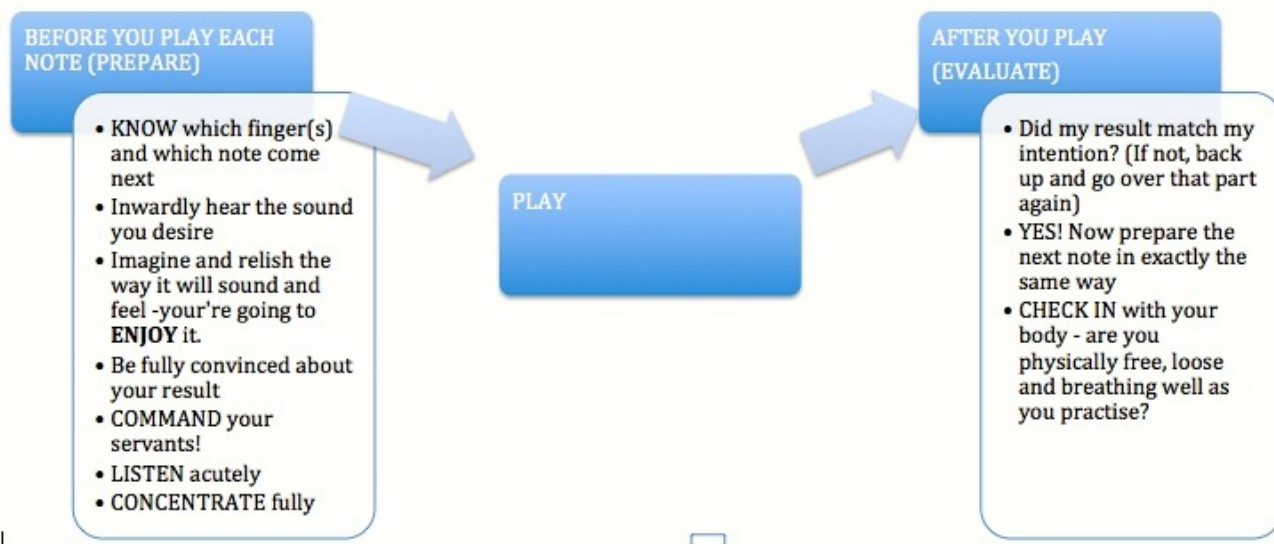
There is nothing more boring than dry, mechanical practice. Our finger movements need to be connected in our mind and body to a musical or artistic goal, and insisting on and listening for quality of tone keeps us fully engaged. Good sound is **always** important in **all** that we do, no less so in the slow practice.

What is going on in our head when we practise slowly?

Here is the process:

- Decide on the slowness of your tempo before you start and feel this in your body. While the tempo will be very slow, it is going to sound and feel convincing to you – you need to own it. Even though you might not agree with some of Glenn Gould's slow tempos, they always sound convincing because **he** believed in them!
- As you prepare to play the first note (and every note thereafter) **KNOW** which finger(s) and which note come next. If you are certain about each and every footstep (fingerstep) you need never play a wrong note! Aim for ultimate precision here.
- Inwardly hear the sound you desire.
- Imagine and relish the way it will sound and feel – your're going to **ENJOY** it. Enjoyment of the sound **and** of the physical process of playing is paramount. Treat it like a meditation where each finger stroke equates to a breath in and out.
- Be fully convinced about your result – know in advance that you are going to produce what you intend.
- **COMMAND** your servants! Never forget your fingers (and your feet) are your servants. Tell them exactly what you require them to do ([click here](#)).

- **LISTEN** acutely to the results you are producing.
- **CONCENTRATE** fully as you practise.
- After each note, evaluate your result. Did it match your intention? If it did, carry on with the next note by repeating the process in the same way. If it did not, then back up a bit. Make sure to check in with your body – you need to stay physically loose and free. If the playing involved effort make sure to release the effort immediately, the body returning to a place of stasis and balance the microsecond after you have played. Remember to breathe easily and to maintain an attitude of mental calm and self control.



Sure, a metronome can help and many people swear by this. I don't want to get into the pros and cons of metronome use here because I have discussed it before ([click here](#)), but I don't think it is always the best solution. I prefer to retain the natural timings, rubatos and breathing spaces when I practise slowly. A metronome is the ultimate party pooper – it kills all this and takes the fun out of slow practising. But each to their own – if you are a fan of the metronome, by all means use it.