31 Days

To Better Practicing

by Dr. Chris Foley

Author of The Collaborative Piano Blog

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Dedicated to my students, who have taught me more than any program, class or textbook ever could have.

About Chris Foley

Among the most pleasurable things about making a living in the musical field is the fact that my musical activities are so incredibly diverse, and I always have the privilege of working with a fascinating group of students and professionals. I currently teach at my home studio in Oakville, as well as at The Royal Conservatory in Toronto. I'm an examiner with The Royal Conservatory's Certificate Program in Canada and in the United States. At Tapestry New Opera, I have coached and performed in many newly commissioned operatic works on a regular basis. Every year, I adjudicate in at least 3-4 music festivals and competitions, as well as give lectures and workshops on a variety of topics.

Many of you already know me from The Collaborative Piano Blog, a venture I started in 2005, which has grown to become the top classical music blog in Canada and one of the top classical music blogs in the world. A few years back, I also appeared as the primary pianist in seasons 1 and 2 of Bathroom Divas, a Bravo!Canada reality show about opera singers.

If you enjoy this book and would like to either work with me or keep in touch, here are some ways you can do it:

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How To Read This Book

31 Days to Better Practicing began in late 2007 as a month-long series on the Collaborative Piano Blog about ways to make one's practice time more enjoyable, efficient, and diversified. The original series consisted of articles, links, anecdotes, thoughts, and videos of different artists performing. Since then, I've been honored to have received many letters from students and teachers that have found the series to be a great help in their work. Much of this input has led me, four years later, to rewrite the series as an ebook.

However, I was completely unprepared for a question a new student at the Royal Conservatory asked me in a lesson a while back: What is the best way to read *31 Days*? Day by day? All at once? When I wrote the series, I was only thinking of putting my thoughts in order for the current article and deciding where to go for the next one. It's only with some distance from the writing process that I realize the importance of finding entry points to the series as a way of influencing how people utilize it.

So without further ado, here are some possibilities on how to read *31 Days to Better Practicing* and incorporate it into your practice routine.

1. **Start at the beginning and read one article every day.** I wanted to write the 31 articles with a clear beginning, middle and end. The first few articles discuss how to set aside time for regular practice, move on to warming up, and goal setting, then move on to different ways of practicing, and end with techniques for putting everything together. There's so much information in the articles, links (with even more information), and food for thought in the video selections that it might be useful to incorporate some of the techniques over a longer period of time.

2. **Read the entire series in one sitting.** Many of us (including myself) enjoy information overload. Read the entire series in one sitting, then figure out what's useful to you in your practicing.

3. **Start with the articles with the information that you find the most useful to you.** I'm all in favor of getting down to business. Don't bother with techniques you don't feel have any value to you, but cut to the chase and utilize what you need now.

4. **Read the last article first.** “Find Your Muse, Find Your Process” takes the series in an entirely different direction, and ends with the importance of the artistic journey that underlies the entire process. When I finished the final article (which originally included

an embedded Linkin Park video that both inspired and confused many people), I had a horrible feeling that perhaps I should have *started* the entire series with FYMFYP as an introduction and had everything follow from the premise of the artist's journey. If this is the reading you prefer, by all means start with the ending and move on from there.

Day 1: Building a Regular Practice Schedule Part 1

If you're learning an instrument and you want to improve your playing, learn music, or get more enjoyment out of playing, the one thing you need to do above all else is practice. This means setting aside some time nearly every day for quality work on honing your craft. Many of the things I would like to impart in this book deal with fun ways to make your time spent in the practice room more enjoyable.

However, the one thing that must already be in place before any nifty practice techniques will actually work is a regular practice schedule. In fact, today's theme is probably more important than anything else I'll be talking about this month, and if you get nothing else out of this series, this is the concept that will yield the most growth in your playing:

The most important element of practice is that it becomes a disciplined, engaging, and fulfilling time spent with your instrument on as regular a schedule as possible.

Showing up is half the battle.

Here are some ways that people of different ages and schedules can fit practice time into a regular schedule.

Students 12 and Under

One of the most valuable things that parents can impart to their children in musical study is a sense of schedule and structure in day-to-day musical life, and that the time be rewarding and fun. I see too many young students fall by the wayside simply because their parents don't want to have any kind of engagement in their kids' musical activities.

Parents: here are some optimal practice times in a young student's daily routine:

1. **First thing in the morning before school.** They'll need to get up earlier to do this, but work it into their schedule and you'll have kids bursting with mental energy as they head off to school.

2. **First thing after school.** As soon as they come home in the afternoon, getting them into the habit of practicing will also fit nicely into a regular schedule without taking significant time away from homework or other activities.

3. **Right before dinner.** An okay time, but not optimal because of obvious hunger issues and susceptibility to interruption.

4. **Immediately after dinner**. Also a useful time..

5. **Mid-evening.** Another very good time, but takes planning to fit in homework. Beware of the seductive nature of television and computer games at this time.

6. **Right before bed**. A possible time, but not optimal unless there is no other time to fit in the practice session because of other activities. Some kids that have a lot of energy at this time of day might actually benefit from practice before bed. Although mixing and matching practice times will work, for younger students it is probably better in the long run to stick with one or two regular times of day.

High School-Age Students

As students go through high school, their hold on a regular practice schedule can be tenuous, with competition from homework, sports and other activities, social time, internet time, and computer games.

Here are some optimal times, bearing in mind that more practice time will be needed for advanced students:

1. **Before school at home.** Getting up a half hour early as a teenager can be a chore, but worth the effort.

2. **Before school at school.** Many schools have practice facilities, and teachers gladly let responsible students use them. This is a great time, because they are at school, can usually concentrate if they have privacy, and have a chance to get away from parental supervision (very important).

3. **During free periods at school.** Again, it takes discipline, but this can be a profitable time.

4. **Right after school upon arriving home.** An excellent time of day to practice as long as there are no conflicting activities.

5. **Mid evening.** Another useful time, but faces stiff competition from games and social networks.

6. **Late evening.** This starts to be an excellent practice time for teenagers once they get into the zone, especially for those who will eventually become night-owls. Warning: can distract siblings.

Finally, I would like to talk about two things I notice with students that can seriously get in the way of regular work:

Not enough parental engagement at an early age. I can't stress how important this is. Music teachers are not babysitters, and parents often don't realize how much of a positive model they can be through taking an active interest in their son or daughter's musical life.

Extreme overbooking. The opposite problem. I see numerous students who are involved in way too many extra-curricular activities for their own good. Kids participating in too many activities often have difficulty developing consistency working on any one activity because they are always being shuttled to the next one.

For the parent, it is good to develop a sense of balance, remaining engaged in getting their kids practicing and thinking about music, but with the ultimate goal of letting them do it by themselves without the prodding. Proud indeed is the parent whose son or daughter works hard at their instrument, has fun at it, and feels the satisfaction that they did it for themselves.

Day 2: Build a Regular Practice Schedule Part 2

Yesterday we looked at ways to build a regular practice routine into the day of a moderately busy young student anywhere from ages 5 to 18. Today we will be looking at possible practice schedules of college age students and adults.

University Music Majors

When a student enters a university, college, or conservatory as a music student, a certain amount of commitment is already expected given the amount of time and money needed to obtain a Bachelor's degree in music. Here are some optimal practice time allocations for the college student:

1. **Early morning before classes start.** Let's face it - looking for practice time in a school of music sucks. Everyone wants a room, and not many are available at peak times of the day. A great strategy is to arrive at school first thing in the morning and start practicing before anyone else arrives and before classes start. That way, you can take advantage of optimal early-morning concentration and go to classes with a fair amount of work already done.

2. **Between classes.** If you go to a school that schedules regular practice room times, you can take advantage of holes in your schedule to book practice time at the beginning of the year and plan practice time just like you would any other academic commitment. This is a bit more difficult if you attend a school that has first-come-first-served unbooked practice rooms, which sometimes require the creation of secret practice room societies in order to actually acquire a room.

3. **Weekends.** The weekly prime practice time, especially if you don't have to go to work. Show up in the morning and practice until you drop.

4. **Late nights.** For college students, often the best practice work gets done in the evening, as students adjust to their night-owl schedule. Arrive at your room right after dinner and keep on practicing until you and your buddies decide to go to the pub. Works every time.

Adults

One of the largest groups of people learning how to play an instrument or sing these days consists of adults, some of whom come back to it after years of hiatus. What

makes matters harder for many adults is how to fit in child care with fitting in a practice schedule. This is a big issue with many of my semi-professional advanced students. Morning for parents and working adults can be sheer madness and practicing tends not to be an option unless you are retired. Here are some ways to make a grown-up practice routine happen:

1. **Practice for short durations when the kids are sleeping or involved in independent activities.** For parents of babies and toddlers, the mid-afternoon nap is a great time to have some quality time to sit down and get some work done.

2. **Practice when the kids are at school.** Drop'em off and get to work.

3. **Practice in the evening.** Early bedtimes are useful for this if you have younger kids. I recently received a query regarding how "super-busy" music teachers can schedule practice time. Here is my response:

If you're a music teacher, one of the best times to schedule quality practice time is an hour or so before a block of students. Practicing beforehand will not only warm up your playing mechanism, but get your mind going as to how you can better impart ideas. Practicing after teaching is another okay time to get work done, although you might not want to think of anything music-related once your last student leaves. It's important to remember that every successful music teacher must still move forward artistically and regular practice is the place to do that.

Above all, learning to find practice times as an adult requires advance planning and a clever balancing act.

Day 3: Warming Up

Just as an athlete needs to warm up properly before more serious exertion, a musician needs to warm up before playing or singing all-out. Players of different instruments utilize different types of warm-ups and can learn a great deal from the way they are structured. For example:

- String players tend to play scales (often at a very slow tempo) at the beginning of a practice session not only to build technique, but to build intonation and the process of deep listening that will improve quality of sound.
- Unlike instrumentalists, singers need to build their own instrument inside their own body, and their warm-ups tend to emphasize breath management and tone production, which help to guide the breath mechanism and its component parts into a workable whole over time.
- Pianists need to develop a great deal of fluency and play more notes per musical work than any other instrument. For this reason, traditional piano technique consists of scales, chords, and arpeggios played in all keys in a variety of ways, not to mention finger dexterity exercises in order to build finger strength and independence.

I've always felt that changing up the types of warm-ups you use when beginning your practice time can greatly improve your approach to the rest of the practice session, since it's the mind that is being warmed up in addition to the playing mechanism. Here are some suggestions for interesting warm-up routines:

1. **Play standard technique before playing repertoire.** This is by far the most common warm-up. Play a wide variety of scales, chords, and arpeggios appropriate to your instrument and level, repeating them not mechanically, but really listening for accuracy, quality of sound, intonation (if you're playing an intonation-sensitive instrument). The goal of technical exercises is awareness as much as dexterity.

2. **Play technical exercises or studies before playing repertoire.** I've always been a fan of Hanon exercises (especially the first 20) and there are a limitless number of ways you can practice them, such as with various articulations, in all 12 keys, or with rhythms. I like the sense of contact with the instrument that I discover when warming up with Hanon exercises, as well as the fact that they exercise my fifth fingers, unlike traditional piano technique where the fifth finger hits rarely, if at all.

3. **Do a physical warm-up such as yoga or tai chi.** Many teachers have talked about

the benefits of stretching exercises before practice and if you can incorporate them into your routine, you can drastically cut down on the chance of physical injury from playing.

4. **Problem solving time.** Jump to the most problematic areas of your current repertoire and fix the spots that are giving you the most grief. Take them apart and practice them in new and interesting ways.

5. **Play something entirely enjoyable with the most beautiful sound you are capable of.** Then launch into your regular work. The legendary violinist Itzhak Perlman is said to start his practice sessions in this manner.

6. **Sight read as a warm-up.** Done over the course of weeks or months, you can improve your reading skills to an incredible extent by setting aside time to sight read every day. And what better time to do it than at the beginning of your session.

7. **Slow practice.** Just as athletes take it slow at the beginning of a training session, so should we. Work on a short section of a piece, whether problematic or not. Practicing slowly can allow you to be in total command of your instrument and develop greater awareness of what there is in the music and your approach to it.

8. **Change things from time to time.** There are some musicians who boast that they have a set warm-up that they have been following for years. What a dull way to start your practice day. The more interesting you can make your first minutes at the instrument, the better off you'll be later on.

9. **No warm-up.** If none of the above resonate with you, it might be worthwhile to reconsider the validity of warming up at all. Why be burdened by the need to do a fixed activity at the beginning of a practice session when it feels better to jump right in and get work done?

What's your method of warming up?

Day 4: Short-Term Goals

One of the best ways to jump-start a practice routine is by working towards something, and there is nothing like setting a deadline in order to get work done. Today we will be looking at short-term goals and how they can focus your practice.

Here are some examples of common short-term goals:

- Learn the Exposition of a sonata movement
- Master the ornaments in a Baroque piece
- Play all the individual voices of a fugue
- Go back to a slow practice tempo in a performance-ready work
- Sort out the left hand of a tricky piece
- Play a piece with solid rhythm at a slow tempo
- Increase the tempo of a piece by several metronome markings
- Master a difficult passage once and for all
- Learn that darned F minor formula pattern
- Play 4-note chords and cadences in all 12 minor keys
- Memorize the first movement of a sonata
- Fit in regular practice times all week
- Sight read every day for a week

Not life-changing goals, but goals nonetheless that move along your playing and take you to the next step. In Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity, author David Allen talks about the importance of immediately identifying next actions and completing them as a way to increased productivity. Setting a few short-term goals can very quickly put you on the road to getting out of a rut and improving steadily. Teacher's remarks in lesson notebooks are classic examples of this - students ignore their teacher's concise weekly assignments at their peril...

What are your short-term practice goals?

Day 5: Medium-Term Goals

Yesterday we looked at ways of keeping your eyes on short-term goals in order to have your eyes on the next action on the road to performing excellence. Having your eyes on a prize that requires working over a slightly longer period of time can also generate the desire to keep on practicing regularly.

What are some goals that you can work towards satisfying a longer time line, say, three to six months?

1. **Exams.** One of the best ways to measure progress is by taking standardized examinations for an accredited organization such as RCM Examinations (known as Carnegie Hall Royal Conservatory Achievement Program in the US). Preparing for these types of examinations requires you to play several pieces from different styles, studies, and technical exercises, as well as take ear training and sight reading tests. The effort required to build the skills to pass each level can provide a very real challenge, and can provide benchmarks for beginning, intermediate, and advanced students.

2. Festivals and competitions. Playing in classes specific to age and level at festivals sponsored by MTNA, NATS, Kiwanis, and Rotary clubs can equip you with the challenge of competing against other musicians and receiving an adjudication from an authority in the field. This second opinion can often give you the reinforcement (or kick in the rump) to keep you moving along to the next level. And what can compare to the thrill of winning a class against stiff competition? Even if you don't win, the work you did in preparing for competing will have a lasting effect on your quality of playing.

3. Recitals. If you don't like competitive playing, I highly recommend playing in recitals. These include formal recitals organized by schools, teachers, and organizations, in addition to impromptu occasions for family, friends, etc. In my own studio recitals, I break up my students by age, so younger students play for each other at the beginning of the concert and adults play for each other in the second half (as they tend to be more comfortable around those their own age). If you're learning an instrument, why not share your love of playing with others?

4. Auditions. If you're doing well, why not take it up a notch? Opportunities abound for honor bands, orchestra summer festivals, operas, and musicals. Prestigious programs such as the RCM's Young Artists Performance Academy or Juilliard's Pre-College Division are tough to get into, but offer a rewarding education for those able to pass the

tough audition.

5. Personal achievement milestones. Learning all the Grade 10-level technique, playing your first Beethoven Sonata, getting through your graduate recital from memory a month before the concert, hitting that high C with a solid vibrato, or playing through the concerto in public are all goals that depend not on other's acclamation, but on beating your own personal demons. Claude Debussy once said that "In art, one has more often to fight against oneself, and the victories one wins are perhaps the most beautiful." Above all, create the challenge and chances are you just might find the way to fulfill it.

6. Process milestones. Many adult students don't feel comfortable with playing in exams, festivals, or recitals. Instead, they would rather learn their instrument non-competitively for the sheer joy and pride of being able to play it, as well as the discovery of the musical learning process. Students of this type still need goals, so it can be worthwhile to give them achievable process-oriented goals such as practicing every day for a month, going to a set number of concerts, or learning a corner of the repertoire that they are interested in.

What are your medium-term practice goals? Are they congruent with your short-term goals?

Day 6: Long-Term Goals

In the last two days we've looked at ways to set viable practice goals for the short and medium term. What are some goals that we can set for the long term, ie. one year or more in the future? This is an important stage of the goal-setting process, but one that is fraught with danger, as one has to walk a fine line between valid outcomes and self-delusion.

Generally, the more ambitious the goal (performing at the Met, Carnegie Hall, signing a Deutsche Grammophon contract), the more it needs to be broken down into many, many more smaller, digestible goals in order for the final outcome to come to pass.

Let's take an entirely manageable ambition for many students - getting accepted into a university music program. Here are some ways that you could break a big goal into a long-term project comprised of smaller achievable goals:

- Research universities on the internet
- Send away for information
- Find which teachers might be appropriate
- Contact possible teachers for a pre-audition lesson
- Figure out the application process
- Fill out application forms
- Get letters of reference
- Write cheques for application fees
- Learn correct repertoire for each audition
- Fill out financial aid forms
- Make pre-screening audition tape (quite common these days)
- Send out applications well before the deadline process
- Schedule audition once called by university
- Get cheapest flights to college destinations
- Book hotels at college destinations
- Do auditions
- Once accepted, send in acceptance letter with deposit
- Look for more financial aid
- Apply for government or private grants after acceptance
- Raise tuition money from potential donors after acceptance
- Go to college program

I'm tired already after writing that list and glad that I'm finished with my college

education. But looking at that large list, you discover that one big dream can be easily managed if it is broken up into a bunch of smaller, manageable tasks.

I can't emphasize how important it is to be realistic when setting long-term goals. Here are some examples that depend on individual initiative and can be realized with determination and hard work:

- Learn a concerto
- Learn the arias for a role that is a bit too large for one's voice, but which one will grow into in the future
- Learn how to make kick-ass oboe reeds
- Learn the whole Well-Tempered Clavier
- Play the violin with deadly accurate intonation
- Develop into a professional-level singer
- Develop a stylistic breadth of experience in multiple percussion instruments from many cultures.

However, when our goals depend on the actions of others, it is much easier to experience serious disappointments. Here are some goals that have the possibility of setting oneself up for disappointment:

- Getting into that world-famous school of music
- Getting that elusive tenure-track college position
- Getting a high-paid position in an orchestra
- Having a concert career
- Getting a top agent

Nevertheless, if we never have goals like these, we will never have the drive to succeed.

I am noticing that this post is quickly turning into an article on musical life goals rather than just getting something out of practicing. But I feel that the urge to improve your playing through practicing often parallels the urge to develop oneself, to make a mark, experience satisfaction, and live a fully realized life. Therefore, I'm going to end this post with another long-term goal, one which I feel has no higher calling:

To be able to play one's instrument at a high level, giving pleasure to oneself and others, and with a healthy technique that will last into old age.

At its core, the art of playing an instrument depends on the level of enjoyment one has

in playing both great music and the process of playing the instrument itself. At this level, the degree of professional success one has is immaterial. From Rueckert's poem "Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen", so beautifully set to music by Gustav Mahler:

> Ich bin gestorben dem Weltgetümmel,
> Und ruh' in einem stillen Gebiet!
> Ich leb' allein in meinem Himmel,
> In meinem Lieben, in meinem Lied!

(I am dead to the world's commotion, And I rest in a quiet place. I live alone in my heaven, In my love, in my song.)

Day 7: Find Your Repertoire

So many of us learn and play musical works not because it's the stuff we love, but because we're told to do it and it's supposed to be good for us. Of course, there is nothing like a wide variety of musical experiences and it's good to play Bach, as well as Beethoven, Chopin, and Debussy. However, there are those of us who will only find our muse if we look farther afield.

I'm a firm believer that one doesn't really come into their own on an instrument unless they find the right repertoire that will propel them to that place. Speaking from my own experience, I got seriously bogged down in my teenage years learning music that I didn't enjoy playing very much. Then I discovered contemporary music. Much to the consternation of my parents, teachers, and friends, I developed a serious liking for listening to and playing the music of our time that has continued up to the present. If I had never discovered this, there is almost no chance I would have developed my skills to the level where I can play and teach for a living.

Most of the professionals that I know have similar stories about falling in love with a certain corner of the repertoire and developing their skills to the level where they can actually play it. Here are some possible repertoire and style niches:

Piano

- Learning historical performance practices, especially as they relate to playing the precursors of the modern piano such as harsichord, clavichord, and fortepiano.
- Learning music from countries not in the mainstream of musical creation, but whose composers nevertheless produce music of the hightest caliber: Canada, The Netherlands, Spain, Portugal, Brazil, Cuba, Scotland, or Japan have all produced composers who have written some fine piano music.
- Learning jazz and popular styles alongside classical playing. Includes ragtime, novelty, swing, bebop, free jazz, smooth jazz, Cuban jazz, Brazilian Bossa, gospel, popular, R&B, anime, and video game music.
- Learning contemporary music, working with living composers, discovering music for electronics and piano, and commissioning new work for the piano.

Voice

- Learning historical vocal practice in order to effectively perform music written prior to the mid-eighteenth century.

- Learn vocal music in a language that genuinely inspires you: French, German, Italian, Spanish, Portugese, Russian, Czech, Polish, Hungarian, Ukrainian, and English are all languages that have sizable art song and operatic traditions.
- Learn a vocal style that is at the periphery of Western art music. Fado, Ladino, Persian, and Yiddish styles are a few of many distinct possibilities for exploration.
- Work with composers and librettists to create the operatic repertoire of today. Companies such as Tapestry New Opera Works and Queen of Puddings Music Theatre in Toronto specialize in this niche and are always on the lookout for singers who have the skills to workshop and perform new works for the opera stage. Exploration and discovery are the name of the game for many successful performers, and boundary-pushing rather than conformity can be the path to artistic discovery for many young musicians.

With the rapid explosion of information on the internet, it is much easier than it was 20 years ago to find information about your favorite genre or time period. Where do your interests lie?

Day 8: First Steps - Getting New Repertoire on its Feet

Some of the most difficult practicing happens when you're learning a brand new piece and trying to work it into your fingers. Some of the dangers include overexertion, boredom, frustration at lack of progress, giving up, as well as the ever-present possibility of learning things wrong that will need to be undone later.

For my piano students, one of the most effective ways of getting to the heart of a new work on the first day of practice is not through dividing it up into digestible chunks, but by reading through the work in its entirety right off the bat, problems and all. That way, I engage with the work's challenges right away, and after collapsing from exhaustion at the end of the reading session I can very quickly arrive at an order of battle when properly learning the work.

This approach parallels what happens in many readings of new works that I participate in through various companies and ensembles. The first rehearsal always starts with a full stumble-through, mistakes and all, so everyone has a clear idea of what to expect. Then the work of finely crafting and polishing the performance begins.

This approach presupposes a certain level of advancement of both playing and reading ability. Younger students might find this approach difficult. Yet, even at early levels, students can with a little goading and encouragement, read all the way through a new work. My older students do the initial read-through at home, and it definitely shows in a reduction of time needed to learn a work without spoon-feeding. Most of them are actually impressed at their own ability to bite the bullet and avoid note-learning procrastination.

Some questions to help you organize your learning process

- Will you start learning from the beginning, the middle, or end?
- What parts of the work are duplicated note-for-note?
- What parts of the work are similar?
- Should you learn the work hands separately or hands together?
- Where are the easiest places?
- Where are the most difficult places?
- What is your timeline on learning the work?
- What is your timeline on having the work performable?
- How much will you learn every day?

- Every week?
- Where in the learning process will you feel confident with memorization?

More thoughts on initial learning

- Listen to recordings of the work before playing it. Not just one, but several performances are best to hear in order to not imitate styles and mannerisms of certain performers.
- Watch performances on YouTube. The performance levels of different performers will differ wildly on YouTube, but there are some wonderful gems that have only come to light since video sharing took off a few years ago.
- Singers should spend time on translating the text before they sing a new song or aria. See my 2005 post on Some Ideas on How to Learn a Song or Aria for more information.
- String players might want to have bowings and fingerings already copied into their part before learning the music. Many teachers have a fixed set of preferred bowings and fingerings in their own part that they lend to students. Some of these fingerings have been handed down from famous teachers such as Heifetz or Galamian.

Day 9: Slow Practicing

One of the single most effective practice techniques is that of slowing down what you are playing in order to develop greater awareness and solve problems efficiently. While you're practicing at a slower tempo, I can't emphasize enough how important it is to 1) play with a solid sense of pulse, albeit slower, and 2) play with the same articulations (ie. slur, staccato, legato) and character that you would at full tempo.

One of the main reasons that slow practicing is so effective is that it allows us to hear things with a greater depth than what we would usually hear at full tempo. Passages that are difficult to put together can often slide into place when slowed down. Our hearing of detail can be boosted considerably, and we can hear things that eluded us before.

Another element that I emphasize during slow practice is to suspend judgment regarding our personal opinions of our playing. Take yourself out of the picture. Give yourself permission to fail and proceed with a sense of gentleness and objectivity. It's okay if you can't play a certain passage yet - something isn't in place and the slow approach is a great way to find it.

Mildred Portney Chase in Just Being at the Piano (my all-time favorite book on piano playing) wrote a wonderful 4-page chapter on the journey of slow practicing. Here are two noteworthy quotes:

> By practicing a small segment a few times, you may realize greater improvement than in many repetitions of the whole phrase. It is possible to jam the mind's programming by presenting it with more than one problem at a time. One inch on the page may require more difficult adjustments than twelve inches somewhere else. It is important to know how much you are really understanding. However much time your mind needs to absorb the material, that is how much time to allow yourself. Show yourself the same kind of patience that you would a good friend who could not move through the material as fast as you would wish...
>
> ...Slow practice allows your knowledge to be integrated with your playing, allowing thoughts to become feeling. It removes the interference that comes from trying to think movements into place. I like to think that all knowledge should float freely into place, finally settling as though it were a mantle of snowflakes, so light as to fit into the nooks and crannies of oneself. Slow practice is a setting in which this can take place.

One final thought - what keeps people coming back to the joys and tribulations of practice year after year is that "Aha!" moment, where our understanding of our instrument, our body, or the music suddenly springs into focus and we get that inner feedback that moves us onward to the next challenge. Slow practice is one of the tools that can get you there.

Day 10: Silent Practicing

Whoever said that we need to actually be at the instrument when practicing? Since much of the work of practicing is entirely mental, we can separate ourselves from the instrument in order to really think through a passage in order that we can work much more effectively once we're back in the practice room.

Singers can be our role model in this regard. Since the voice is part of one's own body, it must be treated with care and can't stand up to the hours of work that pianists and violinists put in. In fact, many professional singers can't practice more than 60-90 minutes (including warmup) without suffering wear and tear on the voice.

What do professional singers do? They spend long hours translating texts, practicing the diction of a passage, plunking their notes out at the piano, studying the piano or orchestral score, and making interpretive decisions away from the voice, so that when they do sing full-out, their work will be more conscious, and they won't be wasting time busting their voices learning their notes. Instead, they've already done the nuts and bolts in their preparatory time, so that their singing time (whether practicing, coaching, or rehearsing) is taken up with the finer details of interpretation, ensemble, technical development, and artistry. .

Here's a technique I often recommend to instrumentalists for use when when stuck on a passage:

1. **Hear the passage mentally, the way you would ideally like to play it**.

2. **Play the passage**.

3. **Repeat the process, alternating mental playback of your ideal sound for the passage with your playing of it**. See how the two inform each other.

You can even memorize music by studying the score away from the instrument (see Days 13-15)!

Day 11: Work Backwards

One thing I continually notice when adjudicating or examining is that many performances tend to start out well, decline somewhat in the middle, and barely avoid disaster at the end. This is a sure sign that performers haven't been working on endings and second halves of works, and today I'll look at how we can put that into practice.

Most of us tend to start our practice session at the beginning of a work. However, that approach means that a well though-out beginning can mask a poorly thought-out conclusion, since our attention naturally starts to wane midway through a practice session.

So whoever said we always had to start at the beginning when practicing? Try starting at the end first. Craft a satisfying conclusion to the piece, and then start to work backwards, phrase by phrase, section by section. You may find that you start to notice things that went by previously in the work's second half. Keep on working and you just might get to the beginning of the work.

Try this approach for a few weeks in combination with working from beginning to end. You will start to notice a sense of command and comfort in the second half of the piece, and you'll have enough reps of the ending under your belt that your performance won't fail when it comes down to the crunch.

It doesn’t matter where you start when working on a piece. One of the capabilities of the human brain is that it can put together disparate parts of a whole and view the entire thing as a complete entity. That way the work you do learning the parts will come together much more organically than if you only work in a linear fashion.

Day 12: Take Your Performance for a Test Drive Every Day

One of the comments I often give my students is some sort of variation on "Make sure you don't lose sight of the forest for the trees". In the detail-oriented world of learning to play an instrument, we are constantly learning to integrate things such as rhythm, pitch, phrasing, coordination, physical movement, style, and pedaling, to name only a few. It is all too easy to get bogged down in the details and completely lose sight of the final product, and musicians of all instruments, ages, and levels are susceptible.

Which is why I recommend that students, once they have a certain proficiency at playing a certain work, might want to consider running the entire piece *twice* per session. Here's how it works:

1. **Run the piece, making mental note of where the problems are**.

2. **Take the piece apart, remembering to spend some time on the parts that didn't go well in the initial run**.

3. **Run the piece again**.

What can be frustrating about this method is that often the second run won't show any noticeable improvement over the first. After storming around your practice studio for a few moments, just take note of what didn't go well and work on those details at the next practice session when you use the same approach. Over the course of weeks and months, the piece will show improvement and you will feel much greater comfort in performance (where you only get one chance), since running the piece will have been already internalized.

Day 13: Why Memorization Is Important

A few years ago I wrote a post entitled 30+1 Ways to Memorize Music Flawlessly, which has gone on to become one of the most popular articles on the Collaborative Piano Blog. Memorization is no small feat, and obviously people are finding it challenging, since I find so many memorization-oriented search terms as the entry points to my blog.

Today I'll be looking at why memorization is so important in the learning process. I like to emphasize that the earlier that performers memorize, the better. That leap of faith from the printed page to playing from memory is a significant one and carries with it the promise of musical integration and inspiration. Here are some reasons why this is so:

1. **Make the music a part of you**. I heard a fascinating comment back in the Napster days of the 1990's when Lars Ulrich and Metallica were testifying before Congress. A distraught Metallica fan was interviewed as to why he was protesting his favorite band. His response was that "It's our music too". A fascinating statement, and obviously false from a legal perspective, since a listener has no legal right to call his favorite music his own. But on an inner level, this poor Metallica fan had internalized their music to the extent that he considered it his own. *That's what performers need to do*. Work on the music to the extent that it gets in your bones and seems to flow naturally from yourself. Memorization is one of the tools to take it to that level.

2. **I can only look at one thing at a time!** One of the limitations of human sight is that (unlike hearing, with its 360-degree awareness) you can only visually focus on one thing at a time. Knowing where to look can be a dicey situation when playing the piano, as we sometimes need to choose between staring at the music, looking at our right hand, or looking at our left hand, and risk either missing notes or losing our place. Memorize the music and that problem goes away. Professional percussionists playing several instruments at a time often need to memorize music just to be able to play their parts in orchestra and ensemble music, with its rapid changes of instrument and body orientation. Once the music is committed to memory, we can scan the keyboard, fingerboard, or instrument array, and plan exactly what we need to do physically, freed from the fetters of needing to stare at the score all the time.

3. **Tell your own story**. Singers have the roughest time of all musicians. They need to learn how to create their own instrument inside their body, learn the music, learn languages to the level of a native speaker, and learn to act, to name a few. There comes a time when they are preparing music when they *must* take that leap of faith and get the music off the page so that they can be convincing in recreating a recitative, aria,

ensemble, or art song. Memorization is the golden road to getting to that place. Instrumentalists also need to realize how important this metaphor is for them in telling their own story through their instruments and repertoire.

4. **Find your limitations and transcend them**. Let's face it - memorization is difficult. Getting a work memorized carries with it the danger of failure and disappointment. However, all is not lost. Everyone comes at memorization a different way and needs to build on their strengths while working on their weaknesses. To put it simply, memorization is a combination of sight, sound, feeling, and thinking, and the process is almost like finding your own 4-digit PIN that allows you access to creating memorized music. The rewards of challenging yourself are worth the investment of time.

5. **Stop playing/singing like a student**. What is the magical moment when a musician stops being a student and suddenly becomes an artist? Graduation? The first gig? The hundredth gig? All wrong - the precise moment that a performer becomes an artist is at the moment of their own choosing, when they stop thinking that their development is subject to the whim of a teacher and they learn to trust their own instincts. It is obviously somewhat more difficult to do this when you are still staring at the page looking at note after note. Get to the memorization level and it is considerably easier to stop thinking like a student and start playing more like a performing artist.

Day 14: Memorization as an Emotional Place

Joshua Foer's Secrets of a Mind-Gamer in the New York Times of February 15, 2011 looks at the secrets of memory champions and how someone with an only average memory is able to achieve transhuman mnemonic feats at the World Memory Championships. Foer's secret lay in the memory palace technique:

> The answer lies in a discovery supposedly made by the poet Simonides of Ceos in the fifth century B.C. After a tragic banquet-hall collapse, of which he was the sole survivor, Simonides was asked to give an account of who was buried in the debris. When the poet closed his eyes and reconstructed the crumbled building in his imagination, he had an extraordinary realization: he remembered where each of the guests at the ill-fated dinner had been sitting. Even though he made no conscious effort to memorize the layout of the room, it nonetheless left a durable impression. From that simple observation, Simonides reportedly invented a technique that would form the basis of what came to be known as the art of memory. He realized that if there hadn't been guests sitting at a banquet table but, say, every great Greek dramatist seated in order of birth — or each of the words of one of his poems or every item he needed to accomplish that day — he would have remembered that instead. He reasoned that just about anything could be imprinted upon our memories, and kept in good order, simply by constructing a building in the imagination and filling it with imagery of what needed to be recalled. This imagined edifice could then be walked through at any time in the future. Such a building would later come to be called a memory palace.

Since reading the article, I've been fascinated by how this type of memory process might be applied to music. Much of the pedagogical thinking on musical memory these days relies on an individual confluence of different sense modalities, ie. visual, aural, tactile/kinesthetic, and intellectual. I once heard one teacher explain the method of finding one's correct pathway to musical memorization by comparing it to setting your PIN at the bank - find your own individual combination of these four modalities that you need to be able to retrieve at will. I agree with this metaphor and use it in my own teaching.

Yet the way mnemonic athletes like Joshua Foer are able to remember massive amounts of information in a short period of time relies on more of a three-dimensional model of memory than a linear one. The experience of walking through an imaginary edifice with encoded images is what triggers the memories. Can this be applied to

musical memorization? Should we think of a musical work as a building?

Maybe.

What I find missing in the traditional modality method of musical memory is any sort of emotional component. Perhaps thinking through more actor-related concepts of memory can help us construct a more emotionally engaged pathway through a work:

- Where does the work start emotionally?
- Does it have a physical place?
- Is there a protagonist?
- What do they do through the work?
- How do they change through the work?
- What is the work's emotional journey?
- Where does it end?
- What are your favorite parts?
- What is the emotional high point of the work?

These questions might be familiar to those who have taken acting courses or have worked with a theater director (take a look at Rena Sharon's basic song-interpretation questions featured in the post Some Ideas on How to Learn a Song or Aria - many singers and pianists use lists such as these when learning vocal music). If we have an emotional pathway through a work of music, our route can be one of the modalities that we memorize. Emotions, be they pleasant or painful, tend to reside in the body. If these emotions are mapped out through the learning process, they can be recalled just like any other sense-related modality, much like retracing steps through a familiar building. Furthermore, this type of memorization can be valid for any instrument and at any level.

Are there any particular techniques you use when memorizing music? How do you teach memorization in your studio?

Day 15: 20 Ways to Help You Memorize Music Flawlessly

As performance dates approach, one of the things that worries many musicians is the process of committing the work they have already done to memory. While the traditional way to memorize music is to practice a piece until you're blue in the face and then hope and pray it translates to memory, there are a number of musical preparation techniques that can help your memorized performance survive and even excel as you take the stage. These ideas are mostly intended for pianists (with a small section for singers), but can be used by players of all instruments.

1. **Learn the music properly first**. Pay attention to all the elements including notes, rhythm, dynamics, fingerings, and phrasing and let the score be your guide to the interpretation of the piece.

2. **Run the piece from memory, mistakes and all, keeping track of all the slips**. Then go back and play the music with the score, correcting the mistakes. Now play the piece through again and repeat the process.

3. **Work on the memorization trouble spots**. Forget running the piece for the time being, but work only on the passages that give you grief.

Visual Work

4. **When playing from memory, try to remember the way the music looks on the page**. This is the most common method of memorizing for many pianists and one that can get you into trouble when used to the exclusion of all else.

5. **Be aware of when you need to look at your hands when playing the work**. Is this a crutch to compensate for tension, incorrect learning, or unsure gauging of distances? When playing from memory, decide if you can get around the need to look at your hands or if it is something that is necessary.

Auditory Work

6. **Listen to every single sound you make**. If you make a mistake, go over the passage again and listen for what you missed. This is perhaps the single most important advice about memorization. (Aside: David Burge once mentioned to me in a

lesson that if one were to really listen to every single last detail of the piece in great detail, one would never make a single mistake from memory! A difficult ideal, but a noble one.)

7. **Hear the work away from the instrument.** Can you hear the work the way you want to play it?

Kinesthetic Work

8. **Turn the lights out and play the piece in the dark.** Can you get through? Consider the scene in Stars Wars Episode IV where Obi-Wan made Luke Skywalker track the probes in his lightsaber training with the helmet over his face, not being able to see them. Why did Obi-Wan do this? To teach Luke to trust his instincts and his physicality rather than vision alone. Use the force. Trust your instincts.

9. **Play from memory with only one hand.** Then switch.

Intellectual Work

10. **Analyze the piece.** Take apart its harmonic, melodic, and formal structure and really get a sense of how the work is put together.

11. **Memorize the dynamics.** It's not just about playing the notes, but about the musical colors that go along with them. A good start in this direction is dynamic detail.

12. **Memorize the articulations.** Another good way to create colouristic delineation is knowing where staccato, legato, and everything in between are located in the score and how to create them. Again, pick up on visual, auditory, and kinesthetic cues to think, hear, and feel the colors the articulations can create.

13. **Memorize the work away from the piano.** Who ever said you needed to actually play when doing your musical preparation? Unlock your creative ideas by visualizing the music, unfettered by your need to play it all the time.

Ideas for Singers

In addition to memorizing music, singers also need to memorize a song or aria's text, often in a language other than English.

14. **Memorize the text away from the music.** For texts not in English, this includes

knowing the text in the original language and its English translation.

15. **On a blank piece of paper, write out the text including all repetitions of phrases and words.** It's difficult, but if you can do this you'll really have a solid grasp of your material.

16. **On staff paper, write out the vocal line from memory.** Even trickier, but very useful.

17. **Memorize the interludes in the piano or orchestra.** In addition to memorizing the bars and beats between singing entries, put in thoughts that go in the rests so that they will be imbued with meaning and motivation, and give you further security in performance.

Putting it all Together

18. **Perfect the beginning of the piece so that if you suffer from nerves, you can rely on rock-solid preparation for the opening.** Working on the beginning of the piece includes your approach to the instrument on stage, your preparation for the opening passage, as well as working on what you will think or visualize in the last few seconds before your performance is underway.

19. **Perfect the ending of the piece--it's what the audience will walk away with.** See Days 11 and 20 for more information on this subject.

20. **Do enough preparation so that you can trust your abilities and the work you have put into the piece, regardless of what anyone in the audience might think**. As an artist, there comes a time when you have to take the attitude that other people can be damned if they don't enjoy what you have to say as a performer. Worrying about what other people think or trying to live up to their expectations is a recipe for eventual failure. As a notable Jedi master once said: "Do or do not. There is no try."

And finally...

Make the piece your own. Play with the conviction that comes from a deep knowledge of the music and meticulous preparation. Only then will you be able to say that you are making music from a place of deep confidence and artistic integrity.

Day 16: Things to Remember About Fingerings

One of the most common reasons that pianists have problems with musical passages is bad fingering. Too many times I see pianists young and old glossing over fingerings in the early stages of learning, and then wonder why they have troubles getting a passage up to speed a few weeks later.

Today's article will not be a treatise on what constitutes good fingering, which I consider a highly personal art (science?). However, here are some ideas on how to find the right fingers to play the right notes:

1. **When you learn the notes and rhythms, learn the fingerings too.** Playing a passage with correct fingering will lessen the amount of time spent learning the piece. The earlier you start, the more efficient the learning process will be.

2. **When the printed fingerings don't cover all the notes you need in order to properly learn a passage, add them in pencil.** This will take a small amount of elementary reasoning and a couple of tough decisions, but will pay dividends in the long run. Of course, it is somewhat redundant to have a finger number over every single note, but try to have the critical musical corners fingered as much as you need.

3. **Once the passage is learned with the right fingerings, repeat with the exact same fingerings during practice.** Repetition with the right hand shapes and finger crossings can make the process of working up a piece a relatively quick one. On the contrary, use sloppy fingerings and you'll have work to undo later on (see #5).

4. **If you need to change a fingering, realize that you are giving up something in order to get something else.** Take repeated single notes, for example. Most editions print changing fingerings. However, not all pianists agree. Deciding if you are a finger repeater or finger changer can be a matter of taste - just realize what each fingering type accomplishes and listen for the sound you want.

5. **The longer you wait to change fingerings, the longer it takes to undo.** Correcting mistakes that go back to the initial learning process take an awful amount of time, practice time that could be spent in other productive ways. There may be moments when you realize that the original fingerings you used no longer make musical sense. If you need to make this decision, remember #4--giving up something to get something else is fine, as long as it is for an ultimately musical reason.

So take out those sharpened pencils and get to work fingering your way to pianistic, violinistic, or cellistic excellence without the hassle of relearning.

Day 17: Interludes - Some Thoughts on Teaching and Learning

A teacher is not a miracle worker. Well, sometimes they can be, but for the most part the greater responsibility for development lies with the student and their responsibility to return to their instrument day after day, to give in to the fun of the process in order to have a good enough musical product that the teacher can indeed work their magic on. The important thing for the teacher to do is make the practicing as fun as it can be.

One of the things I feel most strongly about as a teacher is the importance of teaching students to think for themselves, to cultivate independence in them. With many of my professional or near-professional students, they often need that reassurance that they do indeed have the toolbox to uncover and fix their own mistakes and discern which is the right way to go in their practicing and development. In short, they need to give themselves the validation that they are indeed artists. The goal of independent musical thought is an important one, and the earlier students are encouraged in this direction, the more they will perform not as a teacher's automatons, but as young individuals, each with something genuine to share.

Every student seems to need a slightly different personality from me in their lessons. Some need a guide, others a cheerleader. One needs a soft-spoken teacher, another a loudmouth. Older students often need to connect with a teacher before they learn. Other students require an emotional distance from their teacher. Some need a champion; others an opponent. The important thing is to strive to really know each student so that they can respond to the appropriate persona you project in the studio.

Achievement can take many forms. It isn’t just about winning prizes and beating the competition. It’s about hitting the milestones on your own journey according to your own abilities and challenges. An autistic student I teach recently had a major breakthrough - he discovered how to play from the tip of his finger without assistance. A 70-year-old student of mine scored an 86 on a piano exam on which she expected to score poorly. Other students drop piano only to go on to great success in other fields. As a music educator, I’ve always felt that it is our job to teach students both discovery and

achievement, in whatever guise it may appear.

There is constant growth and development in my studio and it requires me to find new and interesting ways to propel my students forward. It is fascinating to see their musical, intellectual, and personal growth over the course of months and years.

The most important thing I've learned since I started teaching in 1993 is that every single student is unique, with their own strengths, weaknesses, contributions, and promise. Therefore, I need to adjust my attitudes, priorities, and methods very slightly (or sometimes radically) for every student.

Day 18: Practicing in Detail - A Quick Method to Getting Started

If you're a developing pianist, it's important to learn how to practice. When I mean practicing, I mean not just running through pieces a few times, but really looking into musical details, discovering problems, correcting them, and repeating the solutions over and over en route to a viable performance. As I explain the art of daily practicing to my students, I'm always on the lookout for an easy-to-understand process that can be tailored to any student at any level. Here's a quick method for getting your musical preparation to run more efficiently:

1. **Pick a few bars**. Four to eight bars is a good number at first.

2. **Practice the right hand**.

3. **Practice the left hand**. The left hand is usually overlooked in listening and practicing, and most of us have left hands that are weaker and less coordinated than the right. To compensate, you might want to spend more time on the left than the right, especially when working on technique.

4. **Practice hands together**.

5. **Repeat as needed**.

6. **Are you satisfied with how you play the passage?** If not, go back to step 2. If yes, then pick the next passage and repeat from step 2.

7. **Once you have a few passages learned in this way, you can work on putting two or more of these segments together**. If things fall apart, then once again pick smaller units (especially transitions at this stage) and repeat the process. Continue working in this manner until eventually you can play the entire piece fluently.

The above method looks simple, but applying it can take anywhere from 15 minutes to several hours depending on the length of piece you're working on and how much detail you want to go into.

As a starting point to the absorbing activity that practicing can become, I'm emphasizing an initially simple step-by-step process. Use this method over the course of an entire work and the its applications will get more complex. However, working in this way will

help you realize things that you hadn’t noticed in the music and your playing. My reasoning behind this approach is to get students away from merely playing through their pieces (even advanced students can fall prey to this habit) and discovering a way to work on the smaller stuff with a view towards achieving much larger goals of performance, discovery, and musical evolution.

Day 19: Build Sight Reading Into Your Practice Session

I continually get the sense that people realize the importance of sight reading, but are having trouble finding interesting ways of doing it on a regular basis. Today I'm going to talk about why sight-reading is important and how you can incorporate it into your daily practice regimen.

What sight-reading can do for you

- Drastically cut down on the time spent learning notes in a new work.
- Develop your pitch-reading skills in a moderate pressure-cooker situation.
- Develop your rhythmic skills in the same way.
- Develop your listening skills.
- Allow you to integrate rhythm and pitch reading, stylistic thought, and physicality in a way not always utilized in traditional note-learning.
- Allow you to play and enjoy large amounts of music you might not otherwise find.

How to develop your skills

You won't develop into a great sight-reader by only doing it at lessons and exams. Regular practice for only a few minutes a day is the best way to progress in a relatively pain-free environment.

The publication I recommend above all others is the Four Star Sight Reading and Ear Tests series by Boris Berlin and Andrew Markow. Divided into levels corresponding to RCM grade levels, the books are divided into weekly units (around 10 per book) with one daily sight-reading and rhythmic example, as well as daily ear-training examples for each week. The amount of work involved per day is actually quite minimal, since it is the cumulative effect of the reading practice that improves skills. Working daily through 10 units per volume, it should take approximately 10 weeks to get through a book. The short length of time it takes to complete a book also ensures that a student not up to par on his or her reading skills can easily do two or even three levels a year before taking an exam. The trick is not to cram these books but to work at (savor!) them as part of a daily practice routine.
Here are some more ideas, techniques, and projects that can help you with sight reading:

1. **Practice in the dark.** Piano playing isn't just an intellectual exercise but a physical

activity as well. You can teach the body to trust its instincts, so that when sight reading the eyes can stay focused on the music while the rest of the body does its thing with confidence and grace.

2. **Read through a pile of music that really interests you**. If you like one or two pieces in a certain genre or by a certain composer, get a book of works and read through the entire thing. There is no better way to indulge your fascination with your favorite corners of the repertoire and learn reading skills concurrently.

3. **Read through songs and arias with a singer, sonatas with an instrumentalist, or duets with another pianist.** Sight reading isn't just forced labor. The process of reading through repertoire with a singer/instrumentalist can be extremely satisfying, deepen the level of partnership, help to build skills, and be fun.

4. **Work as a pianist in the studio of a voice teacher.** A voice teacher can put you to work learning a wide variety of music from the art song, opera, oratorio, and music theatre genres without a lot of lead time to learn music properly. The more you do, the broader your knowledge and skills will be, and the better you will get.

5. **Read about Chunking Theory [wiki] and try to figure out how you can group musical elements into perceptual groups.** Reading music, like reading text, is a process of finding perceptual groups. When you read from a book, you perceive not just letters but words, phrases, and clauses. Music is no different.

6. **Improvise in the style of a particular composer or genre.** It's not just about notes and rhythms, but the totality of musical elements, including style. The more you are able to re-create the style of a particular time and place in musical history, the more your sight reading will sound like the real thing.

7. **Play at the same level sight reading as you would in a well-prepared recital.** Okay, this is impossible, but having it as a goal will propel you to the next level.

Day 20: Making Endings Work

A common area for improvement in performances are the endings of works. Too often I see a great deal of effort expended on working up the beginning and middle of a piece, with the ending viewed as an afterthought. However, endings are some of the most memorable parts of a performance, since they highly influence the quality of the applause (polite vs. boisterous) and the audience's memory of the performance.

To put it bluntly, you really need to work on endings of works in order to become an effective performer. Here are some things to consider:

- Does the ending extend the overall mood of the piece or does it make a sudden break with it?
- Are there any particularly difficult technical demands on the performer at the end of the work? Often composers will put their nastiest technical writing just before the ending so the work can end with a bang.
- Is there a particular choreography to the ending that will make it more effective? Could you benefit from fluorishes and showmanship or economy of movement and stillness?
- Singers: Is there a postlude following the last vocal line? How does it relate to the end of the work? If there is a postlude following the end of your singing, don't forget to remain facially engaged, as *the audience is still looking at you*. Therefore you must still look connected to the song while the piano or orchestra plays the postlude.

The ending of a work shouldn't always be the last part of the piece you learn. Putting the ending further ahead in the order of battle for music learning will ensure that it is a priority and not an afterthought.

Day 21: Organize Your Practice Time Like a Stage Director

In the last few years, I've played for quite a number of operatic productions. In each of them, one of the first things I notice is the deadline of opening night that looms over the entire rehearsal process (and often has hundreds of thousands of dollars riding upon its success). Everything that happens is geared towards preparing for the opening. So when I arrive on the first day of rehearsal, I nearly always receive a detailed production schedule of the entire show from the first musical rehearsal to closing night.

After several years of working with this type of schedule in the theatre, I've grown to admire the way that stage directors work. Both project managers and inspirational coaches, directors need to envision, plan, and execute the entire rehearsal process. In rehearsal, they need to demonstrate a great amount of personal energy and dynamism at all times. Watching these amazing professionals, I began to think - what if one were to schedule practice time in this way?

Here is a step-by-step, top-down process of how you could schedule your practice time just like a stage director might. In the real world, performers have a large number of rotating works and performances to prepare for but for this list we will include only one program for performance (oh, the luxury).

1. **Determine all the performance dates for the program**. These are the written-in-stone deadlines that will determine everything that happens before. These can include exams, festivals, auditions, recordings, and recitals.

2. **One week before the first performance of the program will be designated "tech week", in which the finishing touches will be applied, remaining problems fixed, and you play the dress rehearsal**. This is your last chance to take things apart and work through problems in the run-up to the performance. In this process, you're going to plan for tech week, in which you're already going to have the work completely performable before the final technical review and run-throughs. In many theatre productions, there is also a preview process - you can do this by performing the program for a casual audience at least once to test out the program before the real thing. When I was at Eastman, Jean Barr insisted on not one, but *three* dress rehearsals before each doctoral student's lecture recital. Sure enough, her students excelled.

3. **Determine how long a time period you will need in order to learn and rehearse**

the entire program. In professional productions, rehearsals usually start 2-4 weeks before tech week, depending on the level of company and their operating budget. For your program, you should be thinking of starting to learn the music *4-12 months ahead of the first performance* in order to adequately prepare.

4. **Write up a schedule for the steps in the process**. Once you have the performance times and final rehearsals in place, determine where all the steps need to be on your time-line, ie. memorize 1 month before concert, all pieces learned 3 months before, music chosen 6 months before.

5. **Immerse yourself in the process**. Once you have all the steps planned out, you can allow yourself time to go about the business of learning, discovery and exploration that are essential to moving forward artistically in addition to climbing the steps of the recital mountain.

In other words, the quality of the process is as important as the final product - having the steps mapped out can ensure your enjoyment of both getting to the final destination and enjoying the ride there.

Once you're an advanced student or professional, you'll need to be able to map out this type of process dozens of times in a season, with a multitude of overlapping concert dates both for yourself and your students.

Day 22: Non-Structured Practice Time

Everyone seems to think that practicing is all about work, work, work. We get new pieces and slave away at them, play them for our teacher, who proceeds to tear apart our performance and gives us a recipe for further improvement and we go home and then work, work, work until the next lesson.

So where did all the discovery, exploration, and fun go?

Teachers and parents walk a fine line when asking students to practice daily. Of course you can't learn to play an instrument without regular and committed practice, but finding an equal mix of work and fun in the practice room can be a noble goal to work toward.

For this reason, I recommend for musicians of all ages at least some unstructured time at their instrument every week. By unstructured, I mean working without a clear goal, trying out new pieces, figuring out your favorite song by ear, playing old pieces just for the fun of it, and improvising.

Younger students are the best at utilizing this type of activity without inhibitions. Mildred Portney Chase writes in Improvisation: Music From The Inside Out:

> The two-year old child who goes to the piano for the first time will begin improvising because that is the only thing he can do. He has not yet been taught, therefore he has no preconceived standards or expectations to inhibit his explorations. The two-year-old child at the piano acts most intuitively, his mind not distracted from its natural ways. The older person is more involved in mental processes since even without training through formal lessons he will have acquired many impressions and developed many skills. Out of these, we build our own unique vocabularies.

And this is how composers are born!

Having time to fool around at the piano or other instrument can give us a sense of comfort and ease when we play. The fact that we "play" an instrument and not "work" it is no coincidence. The act of playing an instrument is very close indeed to a child's sense of play. Having no agenda for at least part of your time spent practicing can open up a world of possibilities and re-energize the working parts of the practice session. Here are four things that teachers and parents can do to help students utilize non-structured practice time:

1. **Wean students away from constant parental involvement**. The creative impulse often requires silence and solitude. From time to time, leaving a young student to their own devices at their instrument is an excellent idea. What they lose in the achievement of daily practice tasks they may gain in understanding, exploration, and fun. If they enjoy this time spent privately at their instrument, it might just pay big dividends down the road when they eventually play at an advanced level, enjoying the rich rewards of both trusting the responses of one's own body and the practice process.

2. **Encourage students to play rather than work at the instrument.** It's no accident that the English word for "operating a musical instrument" just happens to be "play". The notion of practice as play is all too often forgotten, and rediscovering it will help to animate one's creative self.

3. **Enable students to learn new repertoire and new styles.** Several of my students have an interest in playing ragtime, jazz, and gospel music, and since they have the time over the summer to pursue these styles, I'm more than willing to oblige. Of course, there's a lot of self-interest on my part in encouraging this exploration. My students' discovery becomes a prime opportunity for me to uncover a lot of new and interesting music that will be beneficial to my entire studio over the long run.

4. **Encourage students to improvise.** In spite of the rich compositional legacy of the European, jazz, and popular traditions, very few teachers ever encourage or teach their students how to improvise at their instrument. Of course, any six-year-old can make up songs without any encouragement, and free time spent at their instrument will increase the chances of creating their own musical works.

Day 23: Record Yourself

Our ears often lie to us. Problems go undetected, we let ourselves get away with sloppy work, and we don't fully hear our sound while making it.

We need a second set of ears, and recording ourselves practicing can do the trick. Recording technology is ubiquitous these days, so all you need to get started is a cell phone with voice recording software.

Here is one way you can incorporate recording into your practice session:

1. **Record yourself playing either a section of a work, the entire work, or the entire practice session.**

2. **Listen to what you recorded.**

3. **Play through the same musical passage, incorporating what you learned from the recording**.

4. **Go back to step 1 and hear if you've improved**.

Listening to a playback of a practice session can be quite disheartening at times. The way we sound when we're playing often differs from what shows up on a recording, with the benefit of a little distance from the source. We also tend to have a certain objectivity listening to others play that we don't always have in our own playing. Listening to ourselves on recording forces us to listen with that same audio-specific, objective set of ears. It can open the door to new insight and help lay the foundation for our next step in the practice room.

Day 24: Add To Your Skills by Learning Theory

Another sure-fire way to improve everything you do at whatever instrument you play is by learning music theory. Knowing about the building blocks of music can greatly improve your comprehension skills, lessen the amount of time spent learning a piece, and improve your musicianship. Some of these basic materials include knowledge of accidentals, different scale types, intervals, rhythm, chords, cadences, transposition, analysis, and musical terms. At more advanced levels, concepts covered will include harmony, counterpoint, and analysis.

If you're doing Royal Conservatory practical exams, each grade level comes with specific pre-requisites or co-requisites, and for the advanced levels, several theory and history exams are needed to receive the full certificate.

If you're in a university program, you will invariably be required to take theory courses as part of the curriculum. If you're studying privately, there are several choices available:

1. **Self-study**. Recommended for adult independent learners, although it can be a challenge at times..

2. **Study with your main instrumental/voice teacher**. Possible, although it can take a chunk out of your lesson time better spent learning your instrument.

3. **Study with a dedicated theory teacher**. Teachers who specialize in teaching theory, whether in the private or class format, generally have a much greater knowledge of how to teach these concepts and know what the proper standards are at all levels.

I cannot emphasize enough that students of all ages will be rewarded many times over by taking the time to integrate music theory instruction into their musical education. What you learn from music theory will go straight into what you do at the instrument and will drastically shorten the amount of time needed to learn music.

Day 25: 5 Ways to Add Length To Your Practice Session

Sooner or later in nearly everyone's musical education, their teacher will sit them down and give them “The Talk”. This usually happens at a moment when the current amount of practice time is not sufficient to progress further.

So you go home and, having super-sized your practice time from half an hour to an hour (or from one hour to three) per day, and try to figure out what to practice in order to add the extra time.

Here's what to do:

1. **Warm up properly**. Consult with your teacher as to how you should warm up every day. A proper warm-up can take time, and with a longer practice session, you can have the time to put it into practice.

2. **Work in more detail**. With the added luxury of time on your side, now you can take apart each phrase and discover what you need to do in order to make it fit into the whole. Once you've finished working on one phrase to your satisfaction, go on to the next one.

3. **Repetition**. Once you've got a passage worked out, repeat it several times to solidify it in your playing. Having longer practice sessions can accomplish this very nicely. Bear in mind that this doesn't mean running whole pieces several times and calling it a practice session unless the detail work is already in place.

4. **Come back to each piece you're working on every day**. Day-by-day repetition is what can add tremendous reliability to your performance. That passage that almost worked in the first session of the week can usually be played with ease if attended to daily. There's something about working hard on a passage, setting it aside, and then returning to it the next day that builds confidence and command to what seemed initially unplayable.

5. **Add more diverse activities to your daily practice session**. Changing gears several times can lessen any chance of boredom when you practice. Activities such as technical exercises, sight reading, transposition, reviewing old pieces, playing in a different musical style, and improvising can make your time spent at the piano more rewarding.

Engage in these types of practice techniques and you'll find that time will fly by. Remember to take breaks, as it will both refresh your mind and help to prevent repetitive stress injury. Many people have trouble concentrating for extremely long periods of time and that's okay. A good rule of thumb is that for every hour of playing you should take at least a 10-minute break to rest both arms and mind. Some people (such as myself) need breaks every half hour. Take a short break and you'll find yourself coming back to the practice room energized and ready to work again.

Day 26: 15 Ways to Add 10-Minute Practice Blocks To Your Routine

A LifeDev article about getting work done in 10-minute increments got me thinking - can we pianists utilize a quick 10-minute practice session to get things done as well? From the article:

> Oh, but 10 minutes… now that's a tasty number. Not only will ten get you started, you'll probably be finished too, if you focus. And focus is practically required with 10 minutes. It's a small, focused amount of time.
>
> And if you've got five blocks of 10 minutes lying around in your day, that's 50 minutes of highly-focused time. Compare that to a larger chunk of 50 minutes. That's right, more time for procrastination. Small, focused, manageable bursts of productivity are much more effective than those flabby blocks of time.

Here are some ideas I brainstormed on how you can integrate 10-minute windows into your practice and rehearsal day.

1. **Warm up with technical exercises**. Hanon, Dohnanyi, scales, arpeggios, chords, etc.

2. **Warm up by jumping right to that passage that is making your life miserable**. Why beat around the bush? Start with the trickiest passage. You can always review later.

3. **Warm up by playing some piece or passage with the most beautiful sound you can summon**. I also mentioned this in Day 3.

4. **Sight read.** Separating your sight reading time from the rest of your practice session will help you work with even more focus on your pieces.

5. **Review memorization for a piece or passage**. I've found that reviewing memory in short bursts is a great way to review what I work on in longer practice sessions. The more times you review memorization throughout the day, even for short periods, the better retention you'll have in performance.

6. **Review by ultra slow practicing a difficult passage.** Hearing difficult passages

through the extremely focused lens of slow practicing might just be what you need to finally figure out what you need to do in longer sessions.

7. **Play a difficult passage in as many different ways interpretively as you can imagine**. The next few suggestions deal with ways to break apart difficult sections of a piece in ways that will help you discover what's not working and how to fix it. Trying radically different interpretations will open your mind to what works and what doesn't, as well as how your interpretation of a passage can influence how you deal with it technically.

8. **Play a difficult passage with the left hand only**. Pianists' left hands are generally weaker and sloppier than right hands, so it is always worthwhile to set aside dedicated left hand practice time.

9. **Play a difficult passage with the right hand only**.

10. **Play a difficult passage in one hand with the other hand shadowing its part on your knee**. This is a technique said to be used by Evgeny Kissin. It takes a great deal of effort but helps to figure out the relationship between coordination, rhythm, and pitches.

11. **Visualize a short passage, then play. Repeat.** This is a Mildred Portney Chase exercise. If you can hear the passage the way you want it, you can play the passage the way you want it.

12. **Visualize a longer passage without doing any playing**. It's a mental game...

13. **Play something in a completely different style from the rest of your repertoire**. Known to restore sanity at difficult times of the year.

14. **Play through repertoire related to what you're playing**. For example, if you're playing Beethoven's Waldstein Sonata, play through the Andante Favori (the original second movement). If you're playing Beethoven's Op. 31 #3 Sonata, play through #1 and 2 as well.

15. **Do a cool-down**. Everyone emphasizes the importance of warming up, but cooling down is important too. Both our mind and muscles can benefit from a bit of slow technique, easy sight-reading, or a favorite passage.

A few caveats

While I don't recommend practicing for only 10 minutes a day or for that matter in chunks of only 10 minutes, these types of power practice blocks can be very useful when used in conjunction with larger units, ie. 10 minutes + 1 hour + 45 minutes + 10 minutes.

And do not under any circumstances use the absolute worst practice system ever, in which practice is only accomplished during the commercials of a hockey game!

Day 27: Run the Program

One of the most important things to do when preparing for a recital, Royal Conservatory exam, competition, festival, or audition is to run your program before performing it. Most of us spend our practice time working on sections of a work and practicing the difficult bits over and over again. But as we get closer to the performance, it is necessary to put things back together and get a sense of what it is like to perform everything on the program, in order, and as close as we can get to full battle conditions.

Works that seemed easy in the practice room often are more difficult when placed in the program, especially when they are near the end where fatigue sets in. Here is a possible road map for running works and programs in the lead-up to a full recital:

1. **Run each piece regularly**. I've already written about how to take your performance for a test drive (see Day 12) on individual works within the recital. Doing this will give you a good head start for recital preparation.

2. **Around two months to six weeks before the recital, be able to perform multi-movement works (or song groups for singers)**. Practicing transitions between songs and movements is also an important element of preparation. Do you take a long time? A short time? Attacca? Can you already visualize the emotional journey of the work through several movements or songs?

3. **One month before the recital, be prepared to do a dry run of the entire program**. Being able to run a program a full month before the real thing will alert you to further development that is needed in order to integrate each work into the whole. Skip this step and you might find yourself at the dress rehearsal a few nights before the show unable to get through the program because you didn't work on developing enough stamina. Once you've run the program this far in advance, you can then work on fine-tuning for a full month and feel the confidence that comes with detailed musical preparation done well ahead of schedule.

Once recital night comes around, there is no substitute for walking on stage feeling fully prepared and in command of the program.

Day 28: Developing An Artistic Sensibility

Whether we wish to become a performing artist, a well-rounded musician, or even just a dabbler in all things musical, our activities don't stop at practicing our instrument, showing up for weekly lessons, and playing in the odd recital or competition. Music is but one part in the larger world of arts and culture, and if we want to reap the benefits of participation in the artistic process, it is not merely healthy, but necessary to experience what the rest of the arts have to offer. For those seeking a career in music, the intersection of different forms of art is what can nourish us, and often questions we have about one discipline can be answered by what we find in another.

Here are some activities that can give you a solid grounding in the arts:

- Going to concerts and operas
- Listening to recordings
- Watching great performances on YouTube
- Going to art galleries and other venues featuring the visual arts
- Going to the theatre
- Seeing ballet and modern dance
- Experiencing works featuring new media
- Seeing important works of architecture, both old and new
- Interacting with other musicians
- Interacting with artists in related fields
- Reading great novels
- Developing a taste for poetry

With the massive advances in technology over the past few decades, there are many more ways to observe and participate in the creative process than there have been in the past. Why not broaden your horizons? Follow your muse and you can start to feel the connection between your work in the practice room and the larger world of arts and culture.

Day 29: Add Collaboration To Your Activities

Learning an instrument can be such a lonely business. You practice your instrument all week, alone. You meet your teacher and the focus is on you alone to improve. Then you go back to the practice room and work some more, alone. And finally you go on stage to perform, alone.

Why is it that collaboration is a valued enterprise nearly everywhere but in piano playing? Collaborative pianists (also still called accompanists in some places) are often perceived as failed pianists, and many people assume that only the pianistic cream of the crop get to perform alone on stage, without the tarnish of any other musician spoiling their perfection, except the occasional orchestra backing them up. But guess what? The reality of this false image of the piano soloist doesn't measure up to how things really work in the music world. Nowadays, it is the collaborative pianist that has the fast track to a playing career, with more performances, more doors that can open, and more opportunities for earning income.

Pianists in their teens often fall by the wayside at the same time that their friends who play other instruments find camaraderie in orchestras. Often adding a bit of collaborative work to the diet of a young pianist is precisely what they need to keep going, and I speak from my own experience regarding this. In my last two years of high school, I had the great luck and privilege of being asked to play for the rehearsals and performances of the school's musicals. My experiences as the pianist for these shows were what motivated me to keep up my piano playing and eventually make a career as a collaborative pianist.

Here are some of the places that non-pianists traditionally make music in groups:

- Orchestras
- Bands
- Choirs
- Glee Clubs (all the rage at the present)
- Opera
- Musical Theatre
- Rock bands
- DJing

Pianists do not need to cut themselves off from this wonderful world of music-making with others. Here are some roles and genres that pianists can easily fit into in order to

take their playing into the collaborative realm:

- Duets
- Piano duos
- Playing with instrumentalists
- Playing with singers
- Playing for choirs
- Becoming a dance repetiteur
- Becoming an opera repetiteur
- Playing for music theatre productions
- Music therapy
- Playing jazz (much more group-oriented than classical)
- Pianist/keyboardist in a band
- Composing for ensembles
- Becoming a conductor

Collaborative playing can be introduced at an early stage through duets, working with singers of the same age, choral accompanying, and chamber music for the intermediate pianist. There are numerous collections of works for this purpose, and the list is growing regularly. In addition to introducing collaboration to a pianist's musical diet, you are introducing a social energy to their playing that can completely re-inspire pianists to redouble their practice efforts.

Day 30: Taking Stock of Your Accomplishments

There is so much work involved in learning an instrument. When we're working hard it is often difficult to notice that we are making progress at all. We need some items in the win column.

It’s always worthwhile to take a look back at the work you've done in the last while, either with your teacher or by yourself. Here are some milestones to measure your progress:

- Pieces learned to a fluent level. Extra marks for pieces memorized and/or played in public. It’s useful to keep a repertoire list for this purpose.
- Successful recitals, festivals, or competitions (and I mean successful in the level of performance relative to your expectations. Winning outcomes are a bonus but not the true barometer of a performance).
- An increase in the time spent at the instrument.
- An increase in skill level, and being able to do things that seemed difficult or impossible previously.
- An increase in the satisfaction you feel in playing the instrument. Improving your playing should make you feel proud of setting the bar for yourself and then jumping over it.

If you’re planning on building a repertoire over the course of many years, it’s necessary to keep a running list of the works you’ve learned, which can come in extremely handy if you’re applying for graduate programs or academic positions. Gone or the days of writing your repertoire in a spiral notebook, as they can often get lost. With the myriad of solutions available through technology, here are just a few ways to keep track of accomplishments effectively and at minimal cost:

- If you use Microsoft Office, create an Excel document for your repertoire. You can create columns for composers, titles of works, works memorized, and works performed.
- If you use Google services, create a Google Docs spreadsheet in much the same manner.
- Evernote is another excellent way to store information over a long period of time (using a myriad of different devices), and you can keep ample track of works by creating a notebook for rep and adding notes to it whenever you finish a work.

The most important thing to remember is that once you have a system going, keep that

same system over time and update it whenever you finish a new work. That way, when you finally need that rep list, it will be at your fingertips and ready to go.

What are some of your greatest accomplishments in your playing or singing lately?

Day 31: Find Your Muse, Find Your Process

Forget everything you've read about in this series for the last month.

I've talked about scheduling time to practice, setting goals, discovering interesting practice techniques, incorporating music theory, sight reading, and adding collaborative playing into your schedule. I've talked about building repertoire, keeping track of it, working backwards, practicing slowly, as well as practicing silently.

But what I haven't talked about is that primal impulse that tells us that we must make music, we must learn an instrument, sing, or discover a musical tradition. That primal creative impulse is what drives us as musicians, and what drives people the world over to dedicate their lives to art.

I can't help you find your muse. Only you can.

Art isn't about things you "would" or "should" do. It isn't about placing yourself in a mould, nor is it about following in anyone else's footsteps. It's not about conforming to the prevailing style, nor is it about recreating the past.

Often creating art means distancing yourself from others, disappointing others, finding new ways, viewing the past on your own terms, knowing what to keep and what to throw out.

I recall being told by a well-known composer that I would never have a career in new music because I paid too much attention to creating a beautiful sound at the piano. He was wrong. I also recall being told by a major piano teacher that I would never have a career if I didn't have a perfectly aligned hand position. She was wrong.

I know several operatic singers that have absolutely no interest in performing music written before 1900. I also have several friends who turned their back on classical music to find success in other musical genres. I have also worked with some who abandoned successful careers in more lucrative professions in order to fulfill their dreams of learning how to play or sing classical music at a high level.

There comes a time when musicians need to find the music that genuinely speaks to them, a creative process that is congruent with their way of being, and a method that works for them and them alone.

It is important to create and fulfill goals. Create a toolkit of techniques that work, bearing in mind that many of them may need to be set aside until they are needed.

Above all, be true to yourself. Your goals need to be your own. Your voice as an artist needs to be genuine.

Everyone that learns a musical instrument embarks on an artistic journey. May yours be filled with lifelong growth and discovery.

Afterword

It's been a pleasure writing, editing, and compiling this book, which started as a month-long series back in 2007 and has grown into a full ebook nearly four years later. Feel free to photocopy and/or distribute this book to anyone you feel will benefit from it. If you live near Toronto or Oakville in southern Ontario, I'm currently accepting new students, at my Oakville home studio. I'm also available to give workshops and lectures about the many things I've discovered as a professional in the music business.

I encourage you to contact me with any questions or comments you may have. All you need to do is email me at collaborativepiano [at] gmail dot com. I look forward to hearing from you.