

# **The Foundation of Effective Practicing**

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**By Peter Jancewicz**

There are countless books devoted to the art and science of playing the piano, many of them excellent. Some advocate slow practice, some advocate fast. Some suggest putting your elbow in, and others suggest putting your elbow out. Some even recommend doing the hokey-pokey and turning all around. In fact, there is so much advice out there, often conflicting, that it becomes difficult if not impossible to sort the wheat from the chaff. I find that whatever practice techniques are used, they must rest securely on a foundation composed of four basic ingredients. These ingredients are awareness, concentration, effort and attitude. Without an effective balance of these elements, practice sessions become lifeless mechanical exercises and very little is accomplished.

The first ingredient is awareness. Simply put, the pianist must be wide awake, present, and aware of as much as possible while practicing. This specifically includes thoughts, physical sensations, and sound. It is essential that the pianist detects mental tension and ineffective ways of thinking as soon as possible as these affect the way they move and therefore the way they play. Mental tensions include lack of confidence about a passage, not knowing the notes properly, and in fact, any little signs of fear about an upcoming passage. How many of us have fretted about a tough passage during a performance, only to work ourselves up into such a frenzy of agitated nerves that by the time the offending passage comes along, we are so tense that there is no way we can play it well? Here's the train of thought (and consequent derailment): "here comes that passage... it's only really worked well once in the past week... how lucky do I feel?... ooo, that's uncomfortable.... that sounds awful... the audience must think I'm an idiot... I'm gonna screw up... come on, pull yourself together, loser... here it comes... oh, no.... gaaaah!... SPLAT!". And then, of course, we spend the rest of the piece berating ourselves for adding to our already lengthy list of shortcomings. Notice that we are not paying attention to the music, let alone enjoying it. This particular variety of train wreck often stems from a lack of awareness during practicing.

Awareness of physical tension includes developing the sensitivity to detect unnecessary strain that impedes the natural flow of artistic playing. My own means of identifying it is to notice any discomfort in various areas of my body while practicing – hands, wrists, arms, neck, shoulders, waist, legs, anywhere - and any consequent difficulty moving in an effortless, flowing manner. This includes any jerks, twitches, or spasms that indicate that I have just forced myself through an area of physical tension. I may have gotten through the passage this time, but it is exactly this type of tension that causes my train of thought to derail on stage when the stakes are higher. The pianist also needs to be aware of the sensation of the keys themselves, particularly the way that the key travels to the keybed. A great deal of the player's control depends on being able to accurately sense what the piano needs to produce the desired sound. This can be very effectively accomplished by using a delicate and responsive sense of touch in conjunction with listening to the sound.

Then there is awareness of sound, what we teachers call listening. It is very difficult to listen clearly through the various thunder and lightning storms of mental and physical tension. This distress is a very clear warning signal, and is difficult to ignore once noticed. But once the distress is cleared away, the ears become much more sensitive. Any unevenness, any imbalance between the hands, any sloppiness of pedaling becomes very easy to hear and correct. Listening is essentially the “feedback” part of the cycle. The thought comes first, followed by the movement, and then the sound. Awareness of sound combined with awareness of thought and movement teaches the student how to control the sound.

The second fundamental ingredient is concentration. Awareness is a panoramic sense of everything that occurs while playing – thoughts, physical sensations, sound, etc. Concentration provides focus, a spotlight that illuminates one specific area. It allows the pianist to zero in on and solve a specific problem. Awareness will alert the pianist that, for example, the hand is uncomfortable during a scale passage. Concentration will allow the pianist to narrow down the possible culprits by focussing on several areas in turn and determining where the tension or discomfort lies. The tension is usually a symptom, not a cause. It is a compensation for some other part of the pianist's body that is out of position, and the tension is a result of inappropriate muscles trying to brace in order to

get the key down. Simply relaxing the offending area will cause other problems, and the unsuspecting pianist will end up chasing tension around as though it were the last pea on a plate. I find that tension in my own playing is almost always a result of faulty positioning: posture, hand position, raised shoulders, etc. Concentration can also help pinpoint problems in sound or thought. If the student listens specifically for blurry pedal, for example, it becomes a simple matter to figure out when to lift the foot and avoid the mud. If the student has a mental block about clear pedaling, then that has to be uncovered and examined.

The third ingredient is effort. Once the cause of a problem has been identified, it takes effort to fix it. If the problem is a wrong note, the student must make an effort to play the right note every time they play the passage. This must continue until the correct note is a matter of habit and does not require any conscious thought. I have noticed that to actually correct a note takes very little effort. But to remember to correct the note often seems to be a major undertaking for students. It often happens that a student will play the same wrong note immediately after I have pointed it out. It's as though the finger takes over and controls the student – a prime example of the tail wagging the dog. When this happens, it points directly to a lack of awareness and concentration. Both of these require enormous mental effort if the student is not accustomed to it.

It actually takes very little physical effort to play the piano. The average grand piano key requires about 50 grams of pressure, hardly anything at all! And yet I see so many students pouring a great deal of physical effort into every move they make at the piano, sweating and straining as though they were trying to lift an elephant. This is deadly for music. I often joke with my students: “Stop working so hard. I’m getting tired just watching you!” I tell them that the physical part of piano technique consists of making the right movement with the right amount of effort (always less than they think) at the right time, and relaxing immediately. In effect, when I insist that my students work harder, it is not physical strain that I want. I want them to discover how to think and move with the least amount of strain possible, and paradoxically, that search takes a great deal of effort. It requires changing habits and patterns of thought with relentless determination. Once effective habits begin to take over, students can witness for themselves through their own personal experience how much unnecessary strain they have been using in the past. As their playing gets more physically and psychologically comfortable, they

take pleasure in the good and graceful movements as well as the beautiful sounds that they create.

The fourth ingredient is attitude. Other labels for this ingredient are self-confidence, faith in one's self, and so on. I have found that the overwhelming majority of my students, particularly the teenagers, suffer from a deep underlying layer of pessimism that colors their every moment at the piano. It doesn't matter how aware, concentrated, and willing to work the student is if they are convinced that their efforts will meet with failure. They then approach every practice session with a debilitating sense of futility, which sucks the joy of playing right out of them. No wonder so many students hate practicing! A forgiving attitude towards their inevitable mistakes is also necessary. Everyone makes mistakes. (Note to my students – that includes me!) But the emotional uproar and ensuing tension caused by upbraiding one's self about every minor slip effectively cripples the students' intelligence. It provides more reason for students to lack confidence when they have difficulty solving even an easy problem. My solution to this epidemic of self-destructive attitude is to help them take "baby steps", to give them small goals that are attainable, and build from there. I once read, in *Clavier I believe*, that the famous teacher Nadia Boulanger said that to teach children, one must take them by the hand and gently show them what to do. I try to make this a foundation of my teaching, and have found that it works. The payoff for the teacher is happy, optimistic students who love music and play well. What more could we ask for?

So far, I have been writing about solving problems using four fundamental ingredients of effective practicing. But practicing is not only about correcting mistakes. To continue the process, it is necessary to know what the ultimate goal is, and that is independence. Using the four ingredients as stepping stones, I want my students to have the tools to remove any obstacle that stands between them and the music. Every shred of tension, fear, anxiety that is pared away through good practicing brings them one step closer, and it is my goal to guide them to the point where they are prepared and eager to take the final step by themselves. Once they discover their independence, it doesn't matter if they put their elbow in, put their elbow out, or even do the hokey pokey. They can now stay on the rails no matter what happens and enter that wonderful world where it is possible for them to freely explore the music.

Peter Jancewicz is a pianist, composer, writer and teacher. He holds a Masters Degree in piano performance from McGill University and a Doctor of Music Degree from the University of Alberta. Teachers have included Kenneth Woodman, Charles Reiner, Charles Foreman and Helmut Brauss. As a result of an injury to his hands, he was forced to stop performing in 1997. During his recovery, he turned to composing and writing on musical topics. His piano music, including the "Notebook for Saint Nicholas", is published by the Alfred Publishing Company. His most recent publication is a recital suite of intermediate piano music about Canada called "Sketches of Canada". He is a regular contributor to Clavier, and his articles have appeared in various newsletters across Canada. His CD, "Oh Evergreens", includes performances of his own piano compositions in collaboration with Alberta poet Elly van Mourik. He is currently on faculty at Mount Royal College Conservatory in Calgary, Alberta.