

# Deliberate Practicing

## How to Retain Your Efforts (Part I)

by Gloria Chu

Practicing is a common human expertise. When we want to learn to excel in a certain skill, the first instinct for many of us is to practice the skill. Practicing by itself may not produce the highest level of mastery. Yet without engaging in a skill for an extended period of time a high level of competence may not be established. Studies have found that for a serious chess player it takes 10 years of sustained practicing to reach international competitive levels. So practicing is serious business.

The two most common questions I get from students relating to practicing is how much should I practice? How long should I practice?

### How much should I practice?

The natural instinct for me as a teacher is to say “as often as possible.” The research shows frequent periodic practicing is best. A study on typing skills showed that practicing one hour every day was more effective than practicing several hours in a day, then taking breaks on other days; hence it is the attitude of disciplined deliberate focus we need to pass to our students. The intention of practicing a large quantity of hours before the lesson or a performance serves no positive gain towards the performance. The patience of acquiring the ability to quickly retrieve the coordinated sequence of information for each musical task requires time and dedication.

So translated for our students, practicing for 7 hours just before a lesson is not the same as practicing 1 hour each day. Without getting into deep analysis of the brain and how it works, the main reason is that there is a limited amount of learning that can occur during one practice session.

Thus, practice sessions that are spread out and appropriate to the amount of learning that can occur is the most effective practice strategy.

### How long should I practice?

In answering how long should each practice session be, we can turn to the ‘Fitts Model’ of how learning happens.

1. *Understanding* of the knowledge needing to be acquired
2. Followed by an *associative* stage which includes processes that retrieve the correct knowledge
3. Ending with the *autonomous* stage where the performance requires minimal conscious processing and can be conducted automatically

Take for instance the ear training component of intervals in the voice level 1 exam. Students are required to sing a major or minor third.

- Step 1, *understanding* the knowledge may include demonstration by the teacher, and the student being able to hear and identify the difference between the two intervals.
- Step 2, the *associative* stage, could be the student singing the interval after given the first pitch.
- Through practice, Step 3, the *autonomous* stage can include the student singing the intervals with accuracy & ease within their repertoire.

The three steps of Fitts’ model seem apparent and simple, yet why are there situations when a student cannot perform a certain task a few years later after having learned the skill? Why does

singing a major third become a problem at intermediate levels?

Ralf Thomas Krampe has found it is essential to *maintain* the skills after the acquisition stage. In his research, practicing after the skill as been acquired is truly where a musician's time and effort lies. Deliberate practice is an essential part of maintaining excellence in a skill, because without continually working on the task, motor skills can be forgotten after one month – that's only 3 lessons away for many of us who see our students weekly.

To answer the question of how long a practice session should be: "as much as required for the above process to happen." But let's be realistic, not all of our students have the energy and time to practice and maintain all the skills we as teachers would love them to have. So let's explore some practice strategies.

I'm very fond of Aaron Williamon's writing in his book *Musical Excellence: Strategies & Techniques to Enhance Performance*. He describes students' thoughts and behaviours during practicing. For example, the *plan* to practice is a thought, *increasing tempo* is a behaviour strategy.

Williamon categorizes practice strategies in 3 stages:

1. Plan and Prepare
2. Execute (*do it!*)
3. Observe & Evaluate (self-reflection)

### **Plan and Prepare**

Setting goals is a priority for my students, as simple as using an appropriate finger pattern for a C Major scale. During lessons we brainstorm strategies and steps to achieve the learning objective and how to apply the learning goals throughout the week. This provides guidance on the practice steps for the session, particularly on things to listen for. A goal doesn't mean we ignore the possibility of exploration or deprive students the opportunity to be messy and try things out. Choose goals that are flexible to encourage exploring and opportunities to decipher their own solution to a learning objective.

The balance between playing versus non playing time is important. There are tons of research championing mental imagery. Horowitz practiced

mentally prior to performances to avoid the feedback of the piano other than his desired mental tone. Rubinstein practiced mentally to improve efficiency. Scientific evidence shows even though there were no physical activities conducted, the muscles showed contraction. Hence there is evidence neural mechanisms are involved during mental practices. And the best part of mental practicing is that it can be done anywhere – on the bus, or sitting in the waiting room during your sibling's lesson.

Another point in the planning stage is to prepare: decide how to tackle a challenging spot in the repertoire.

1. Transfer of learning: Use exercises and etudes to learn the pedagogical reason for the challenge, then transfer it into the repertoire.

2. Repetition: Isolation and repetition of the challenge specific to the piece.

### **Transfer of learning**

I love how this teaches the student, not only the repertoire. After learning an etude on appropriate balance of melody and accompaniment between the hands, I am confident the student has learned this skill. It becomes something I can reference again in any repertoire. The disadvantage is that it takes much more time, effort and patience. Perhaps not to be used on every single skill I intend to teach or we may never get to anything but etudes and exercises.

### **Repetition**

Repetition strategy of an isolated passage is great at tackling the specific repertoire. There is no need to deal with transferring the knowledge of the skill. To avoid a mindless task of simply repeating the passage 1000 times, I invite students to incorporate challenges into these passages – change fingering, play only the blocked harmonies, sing in a different key, rhythmic variations, and I love asking my students to play or sing the passage backwards, or switch the hands. All these challenges engage students to focus on either the harmonic structure, rhythm, intervallic relationships. This helps brings awareness, allowing the brain to wrap around all these musical elements of the difficult passage. So when it is done in context, there is no problem.



Our role as teachers includes devising solutions to problems — one of the central features of learning. And what are these solutions? Apply strategies of deliberate practicing, begin with a plan and prepare before practicing. This will be the start the of a meaningful, deliberate practice experience.



Gloria Chu is a dedicated piano, violin and vocal pedagogue, RCM examiner, festival adjudicator, composer, and performer. In addition, she is a Chartered Professional Accountant. She has been recognized by Steinway & Sons with a Top Teacher Award for her instruction and leadership in piano education.

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