

Practice Pointers

by Elaine Grover

The most telling success stories I hear about practice center on the music. A student must really get “hooked” on the music before serious practice occurs. Regardless of how many techniques we offer for learning the music, none really count until the student is excited to learn. Educators call this the “hook and hold” theory (Hanson and Silver, 1996). I have witnessed it over and over during my years of teaching.

So, how do we go about finding that important connection? There is no golden list of repertoire that will guarantee student interest. Students have many learning styles, different emotional personalities, and varied musical interests. Finding that right piece at the right time may be the only formula we have, but it is worth the search, for when you have found it, the student will “take off.” After that, you have a perfect entry to teach students how to practice.

Once the student is “hooked”, we must teach practicing. Very few students automatically know how to go about it for efficiency and success. Time spent in the practice room can be a creative adventure: fun, and satisfying while generating insights. There are several ways in which we can be of help. I suggest four main areas:

1. practicing slowly
2. breaking the piece down into small sections
3. discovering variety and creativity in practicing
4. using all of the senses while practicing

One may achieve the desired results as follows:

1. Encourage students to sit quietly at first to let the mind and body become still. Set the metronome at a s-l-o-w tempo and play a phrase at the time to become accustomed to this pace. The slow tempo allows mind, fingers, and feet to read and play what is on the page without anxiety, stuttering, or tensing. Students will soon learn how they can follow the music and learn it more quickly.
2. It can be overwhelming to take on the whole piece at once. Encourage students to study it first and break it down into short phrases or sections. In this way, learning the music feels manageable while its structure becomes apparent. Making progress with one or two sections gives students a sense of accomplishment and encourages them to continue.
3. Learning to be creative with practice methods can be fun. Practicing can otherwise be a long and lonely exercise. With a creative approach, students can become so engaged that they forget the time.

Some ideas:

- Practice quick-moving passages in a variety of rhythmic patterns to develop technical control, evenness, and accuracy. Try doing the rhythm with your feet, as in a dance pattern. When the whole body feels it, the result can be felt and heard at the keyboard.
- Sing the music! Singing forces you to listen in a different way. It helps students to understand where the music wants to breathe, where the musical line is going, and it makes the music more deeply ingrained in the whole person.

- Creating circles can help the student gain mastery over passages with difficult or new fingering and pedaling passages. A troublesome passage is isolated and then played forward-backward-forward-backward in perpetual motion. This technique yields the best results when a circle is practiced every day.
4. Linking several different practice techniques can give the eyes, ears, fingers, and feet constantly changing experiences of the same passage. Students will soon become creative in finding their own ways of involving all the senses. Practicing can then become an adventure, a journey full of discoveries that leads to a genuine sense of achievement.

One last thought: As teachers we must work to help students understand good practice skills, as well as teach the music. Just explaining or writing down notes about how to practice doesn't guarantee understanding and achievement. Taking a few minutes in the lesson to try out a new practice skill goes a long way toward helping students practice well. And lastly, nothing stimulates interest in practice like finding the right music at the right time for students. "Hook and Hold" is unbeatable!

For more tips on practice skills, see *Keyboard Practice Skills for the Student* by Elaine Grover. Wayne Leupold Editions, Inc., (WL800007).

Hanson, J.R. & Silver, H. (1996). *Learning styles and strategies*. Thoughtful Education Press. Woodbridge, NJ.

Elaine Grover teaches organ and church music at Marygrove College in Detroit, Michigan.