



Lesson 1: Planning for an Effective Practice Routine

Featuring: Leo Blanco, Professor at Berklee College of Music

You probably didn't get into music because you love practicing, but rather because you love making music and the feeling, the experience of making it by having the keys at the end of your fingertips, right? But soon enough, as you continue into music, you will discover the urge to get better and better every time, and for this there is no other way but practicing. In this video you're going to explore the benefits of practicing vs. just playing for fun, and how to organize your practicing by notating and organizing your session through a journal.

Okay, let's talk about goals. In every serious task you engage to we need to set up some goals. It could, for example, be a part of an orchestra, be band member of your favorite rock band, or teach music later in life. But for this we need to set up two types of goals: long-term goals and short-term goals. The short-term goals are goals that you achieve in one or two practice sessions at the most, and will help you to succeed at achieving your long-term goals. On the other hand, long-term goal are achieved on a larger scale of time. It could vary from a week to one month, and it could be achieved by being disciplined in your short-term goals. For example, let's say that your long-terms is to learn all major and minor scales, 12 keys, by 90 bpm. Then your short terms should be learn two scales, every day, that's to say every practice session at 75 bpm. Another example of longer goals could be, for example, to learn a new classical piece, then your short-term goal should be to memorize 8 bars of this piece every time you sit down to practice. Also another long term goal could be to learn a jazz standard every week, then your short term goals should be every session you sit at the piano to learn just the harmony by memory, then separately just the melody, then the structure of the form.

A series of successful practice sessions is called effective practice. Now when is a practice session considered successful? When you achieve your short-term goals and your long-terms goals, on the other hand, an unsuccessful practice session is when you are unable to succeed on your short term goals, most likely this occurred by distraction. Checking your social media, checking your phone, getting up to get a snack, there are many reasons why you can get distracted in your practice session. Be smart by being disciplined because this will make you a better player in the long run. Although it is very tempting to just sit at the piano and play for fun, try to separate that part from just practicing and doing your warm up and sticking to the plan; that's the most important. One of the key points of not getting distracted during your practice session is having everything you need at the moment you sit down at the piano to practice. That is, very important, your music journal. Your music sheets right? Your phone if you need to use any app from it, but put it on airplane so you avoid any calls from distraction.

Remember, the habit you establish during your practice session will translate to your musicianship. As a pianist it is very important to me to practice all the time in an instrument that is as close as possible to the instrument I will perform on in the stage, a grand piano. A great example is the Casio Silvano Grand Hybrid. It has many elements of the grand piano. The touch, the feel of the keys, the sustain pedal, and many other features. Okay, so let's get back to the practice time, it is very important to set up at the frequency of your practice time and your length. More important than if you sit every day and practice randomly, you need to stick to the plan. If you are going to practice 1 hour every practice session, let's divide it into 20 minutes of technique including warm-up, 25 minutes of repertoire, where you'll learn every song, any song you're learning at the time, and 15 minutes of free playing. All these activities should support your short and long term goals, a practice journal is a very important tool of our practicing, it will keep us measuring our progress. It prevents you from wasting time, it helps to pick-up where we left in the last session, and it provides a plan where we can measure all the time. A practice journal can be of different shapes. It can be a notebook where you write down your progress, it can be something on any of your devices as your phone or your tablet, the important thing is you be consistent of what it is and you always keep it with you at the piano when you practice.

Here is a good example of a PULSE Practice Journal for one week, each practice session should include the following notes: date of your practice session, goals you are working to achieve, the techniques you work on, and all of the details, such as what scales and what tempo. The repertoire you work on including the list of songs and measures you work on in each session and your reflections, how you feel in each session and what things need to be improved and, very important, your accomplishments. So in this video we talk about the importance of practicing, how to organize it, and how it differs from just playing for fun or jamming, and we are just touching the surface we will continue with more of this in the future videos. One important resource I would recommend you is to use the Berklee PULSE page. There you can find a lot of resources, worksheets, play alongs, many techniques to improve your practice session and improve your performance. In the next video we're gonna start talking about the technique in a practice session, for example, practicing articulations, dynamics, etc., but we also gonna start playing for fun, but remember the most important thing here is you're going to stick to your plan and you will be amazed at how much you improve.