



Lesson 2: Practicing Technique

Featuring: Leo Blanco, Professor at Berklee College of Music

So now that you know what effective practice means, how to set up goals, and how to progress your work towards them. Let's talk actually about what our practice session looks like. So you may think that preparing for a practice session may be boring or unimportant, but it's actually the only secret to having an effective practice session.

Okay so let's talk about techniques, improving your techniques is improving your toolbox or your chops to become a better performer. It's like a basketball player practicing to dunk the ball; they have to do it many times to get better at it. So the first thing we want to do when we sit at the piano to practice technique is to warm-up, which is very important, just like any professional athlete. Let's say a 100 meter runner cannot jump onto the track and run as fast as possible; they need to warm up their muscles otherwise it can produce some injury, a musician is no different. Remember music is also physical activity and we need to prepare our body for it. Now practicing techniques does not mean only playing scales and arpeggios. For example, I always tell my students while practicing their scales and arpeggios to use some different techniques and articulation, such as staccato and legato. Also they should implement different rhythms, that way it's much more fun.

One of the things we're going to do in our practice planning is to set up a goal for tempo. I always recommend to practice with the metronome, which here we have a metronome built in with the Casio Grand Hybrid. Set-up a comfortable tempo that you can play without any mistakes, write it down in your journal, and progressively start making it a little faster until you achieve your goal tempo. I always recommend starting with a comfortable tempo assuring you don't play any mistakes.

Let's talk about speed limit. What is speed limit? In music, every time you practice in any technique exercise or play any piece of music and you find too many mistakes that probably means you're playing faster than you should, and that's your speed limit. Take that tempo down and make sure that you can play the music without any mistakes, then write it down in our journal. You should have control over what you play, remember if you're disciplined, everything you play slow, you can play faster. We're going to start with an F major scale at 120 BPM (beats per minute) as our long-term goal, for my short-term goal I'm gonna start it at 60 BPM. We set up the built in metronome at 60 and we're gonna play eighth notes.

[Plays scale]

Right, there was no problem with that, now let's increase the tempo to 120 BPM.

[Plays scale]

Alright, so obviously there was a problem with that, the tempo was not constant and there was some stumble in the middle. So that means I'm not ready to play an F major scale at 120 BPM, so I decrease the tempo to 90 BPM and if I play satisfactory I'll write it down in my journal, and that's where I'm going to jump off next practice session.

Now let's implement some of the techniques I talked about before. Let's do the F major scale, but now using staccato articulation. Let's take it from 90 BPM, which is where we left it last session and play 8th notes, but for this we're going to use the Vienna Grand Piano, which sounds brighter and better for staccato, and set up the metronome at 90, and here we go with 8th notes.

[Plays scale]

Now besides playing different articulations, let's now play dynamics too. I'm going to play the F major scale at the same tempo, but now playing from pianissimo to fortissimo, and we are going to use the Berlin Grand Piano sound.

Alright, so no problem with that, so what I do next is I take my journal and I write down the tempo I played, and that it was satisfactory and then our next session we start from there and then move on. So now, let's add some more fun into this, let's play the same scale, but now I'm going to play it in different rhythms, which is a way to practice rhythms and tempo but at the same time have some fun.

We're going to use the metronome again and now I'm going to use [ta-ta pattern] as my rhythmic pattern. You can use many other rhythms that you want to use, write them down in your journal so you don't repeat the same ones.

[Plays scale]

In this video we explored how to practice technique. Technique should take about a quarter to a third of your total practice time. In the next video we will explore repertoire and how to practice using different tools that will help you to improve your experience-practicing repertoire.