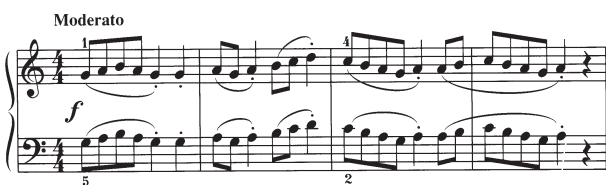




Strategies for Practising

"Practice makes perfect" runs the slogan. Why then is it so seldom true of our pupils' practice? The purpose of practice is to perfect a performance and if it doesn't achieve this aim then we must look at the practice itself. The most common reason is that the pupil is practising incorrectly and faulty practice, repeating wrong notes or wrong timing, will result in a faulty performance. Only perfect practice will result in a perfect performance, so teaching our pupils how to practise is perhaps the most important aspect of our work.

It is not enough to say "Play each exercise and each piece three times", because repetition without attention is useless. Nevertheless repetition is essential, so we must suggest strategies to give each repetition a particular focus. For example the three repetitions in *Song* by Bartok could be:



- a) RH louder than LH,
- b) LH louder than RH and
- c) quavers played in a dotted rhythm.

Close attention will be required and this concentration will help the pupil to perfect his performance.

"Slow practice is golden" said Schumann and Stephen Heller stated "Practise very slowly, progress very fast". As habits first learned are the ones that endure, it is vital for the pupil to start the learning of a new piece correctly, so he really needs to play it slowly. I often remind speeding players that learner drivers are not expected to drive fast! As the pupil progresses I suggest what I call the Metronome Method. When you can play the piece perfectly at say crotchet = 50, then move to 52 and when it is perfect at 52, try 54 and so on. Always drop down a notch or two if necessary. Accuracy is more important than speed.

Cortot, the great pianist and editor of Chopin's works, suggested another excellent strategy for practice when he said "Do not merely practise the difficult passage, practise the difficulty as such." For example in Attwood's Sonatina:



the first difficulty for most pupils will be to shape the left hand over the quavers of the Alberti bass. The strategy here is to play the left hand as two chords in each bar, ensuring that the hand is kept well over the keys so that the little finger is in a comfortable position. When this can be done with ease, then the difficulty of acquiring a good balance between the melody in the right hand and the quaver accompaniment can be tackled. The strategy now is to play the quavers silently at the same time as playing the melody aloud, because when this has been achieved the pupil will be able to balance his hands correctly.

The same two strategies can be applied in the Bartok piece



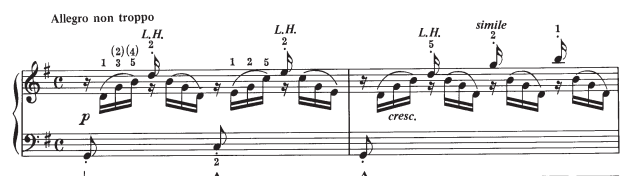
and the Kabalevsky Etude

In some pieces the silent practice must be applied to just some of the notes in one hand, for example the right hand quavers in Gurlitt's *In the Garden* in bars 12-16



and the left hand quavers in bars 18

and similar in Khachaturian's Andantino.



For difficulties in hand crossing as in Burgmüller's *The Swallow*



the most useful strategy is to "Move, Stop, Play" as the left hand moves over the right hand. This way of dealing with the difficulty ensures accuracy and can be applied to all large leaps.

In his excellent book "Practising the Piano" Frank Merrick advocates a strategy for practice consisting of "Plan, Play, Judge". "Plan" means hear the piece or the passage in your mind before you play it, then after you have played, judge whether your performance was as you intended. It is certainly vital for pupils to develop a critical ear which will detect much more than just noticing a wrong note. Was the balance between the hands correct? Was there a carefully graded diminuendo? Was the rallentando too sudden? Was the pedalling clean? We can help pupils to acquire such critical listening by playing their pieces to them and asking similar questions. I have often been surprised by how well young children can spot my deliberate errors and how much they enjoy telling me where I went wrong! It is also useful to record a pupil's performance in a lesson and, through discussion, find out whether he is hearing what he is actually playing or what he would like to be playing.

All strategies for practising have one aim, to give a perfect performance. Nevertheless, remember that however well you train your fingers, music is brought to life not by your fingers alone, but by your mind guiding and directing those fingers. Merely to play the notes requires practice, but to play the music behind the notes, to deliver the composer's message, requires even greater effort. Perfect practice involves the whole person, body, mind and spirit in the striving for perfection.

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