

How To Get To Practice Heaven

Practising effectively is the most important thing you can do to ensure success in learning to play your instrument. I call this being in **Practice Heaven**.

Practising ineffectively is worse than not practising at all. After all, if you don't practise, at least you know *why* you can't play! If your practice is ineffective, however, you may not be aware that you are going nowhere, and you will become frustrated and disillusioned. That's when people give up. What a shame. If only they'd known the right way to practise....

So here it is!

Effective Practising Made Easy – Follow these Five Steps to Practice Heaven!

1. Read your teacher's notes and instructions (if you have a notebook or practice diary). If there's nothing written down, either you'll have to remember what you were told to do, or you should ask for written instructions from each lesson. A third option is to video the entire lesson each week, perhaps on an iPad, and replay it at home. What I'm trying to get at here, is that you *absolutely must* know what you're expected to achieve by your next lesson.
2. Focus on the targets you've identified in 1. above. Practise towards the goal of achieving those targets. So, for example, if your teacher has asked you to improve the articulation in particular bars, or to add dynamics to one of your pieces, or to work on your breathing or bowing or some other technique – then you must just pick out that passage or that piece, and work on that particular aspect in a systematic way.
3. Don't start from the top! Teachers seldom ask you to 'Practise your piece'. They almost always want particular things to improve, in particular places. If your last line is worse than the rest, just practise the last line. If your dynamics are weak in the middle section (perhaps because you've been concentrating on learning the notes), then just practise the middle section, and make sure you improve the dynamics. See how it goes? Focus, focus, focus on the parts/aspects/techniques that need the work, not on the parts/aspects/techniques

you're already good at!

4. My three Practice Techniques work *every single time*.

Here they are:

a) **Slow Tempo.** Slow the tempo down until you can do it. Then, gradually, take the tempo up. Always practise slowly at first. It's faster in the long run!

b) **Chunking.** You wouldn't eat a whole cake in one bite would you? I mean, a *really big* cake. You'd slice it into manageable chunks. Same with your practising! Divide your music into very small pieces and practise the chunks one at a time, gradually joining them together. Where will you chunk the music? Single bars? Phrases, or parts of phrases? It's much easier to work on one bar, then another bar, then both bars together, then add the next bar, and so on – than to try to tackle the whole thing in one go. Take small bites, don't choke yourself.

c) **Hands Separately.** There is always a way to break it down. For pianists and keyboardists, practising hands separately is *crucial*. When you decide to put hands together, remember to use the other two techniques along the way: Slow Tempo and Chunking.

You can use these three techniques separately or in combination. Other ideas are optional, but they can work well with the three Practice Techniques: for example, learn it off by heart. Then you really know it. Practise playing it with your eyes shut. We're not talking about a three-movement sonata here, *just the bit you need to work on*, probably a few bars at the most. Challenge yourself to play it faster than it should be, with different dynamics, with a swung instead of a straight rhythm, or the other way around. Get into the music!

5. And that's it. Decide on your focus. Concentrate on that and nothing else (*don't start from the top*). Apply one or more of the three Practice Techniques. Now you're in Practice Heaven!