

How to practise

Playing a piece through from the top is not practice — it is a performance you are giving to nobody. Practice means finding the smallest thing that is wrong and fixing only that. Half an hour done this way beats two hours of running the piece.

A THIRTY-MINUTE SESSION

Warm up · 5	Technique · 5	Hard passages · 14	Run · 4	Note · 2
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Most of the time goes to the few bars that do not work. Scale the blocks, not the order: an hour is the same shape doubled, ten minutes is warm up, one passage, and a note to yourself.

SIX WAYS TO FIX A PASSAGE

METHOD	HOW	USE IT WHEN
Slow it down	Halve the tempo. If you can't play it perfectly, halve again.	Anything. This is the first thing to try and usually the last thing needed.
Shrink the unit	Two notes, then three, then the beat, then the bar.	One spot collapses every time you reach it.
Hands apart	Each hand alone until it is automatic, then together slowly.	The hands work separately but not at the same time.
Rhythm swap	Play the run long-short, then short-long, then even.	Fast even passages come out lumpy.
Backwards chaining	Learn the last bar, then add the bar before it, and so on.	The end of a piece is always weaker than the start.
Away from the instrument	Read the passage and hear it; finger it silently.	You are tired, or you keep repeating the same mistake.

THE LOOP THAT MAKES IT STICK

- 1 Name the problem in words — not "bar 12 is bad" but "the third finger is late".
- 2 Choose one method from the table. One, not three.
- 3 Play it correctly five times in a row. A mistake resets the count to zero.
- 4 Put it back in context — one bar before, one bar after.
- 5 Write down what you fixed. Tomorrow starts here, not at the beginning.

Practising as a composer

Same principle, different material: fifteen minutes of writing every day, one exercise with a limit — eight bars, one motif, three chords. Copy out a page of a score you admire by hand. Finish things badly rather than starting things well.

METRONOME, HONESTLY

Set it to the speed of your worst bar, not your best. If the passage is right at 60 and wrong at 72, work at 63.

Play with it, then without it, then with it again to check you haven't drifted. Never leave it on for a whole session — it teaches obedience, not time.

For rubato passages use it to learn the notes, then switch it off entirely and let the phrase breathe.

Signs you are wasting time

You start at bar 1 every session. You stop to correct a mistake and immediately play on. You cannot say what you improved today. Your hands hurt. Any of these means stop, take a break, and change method.

SLOW IS NOT THE SAME AS CAREFUL

Slow practice only works if every detail is right — fingering, dynamics, tone. Slow and sloppy just learns the mistake at a lower speed.

SLEEP DOES THE LAST PART

A passage learnt today plays better tomorrow without touching it. Spread the same total time across more days.

RECORD YOURSELF WEEKLY

You hear things on a recording you cannot hear while playing. It is uncomfortable, and it is the fastest feedback you have.