

EFFECTIVE PIANO PRACTICE

by Mark Mercury

Introduction

When practicing the piano, there is a simple and logical way to handle difficult sections that yields fast results. Apparently, it does not come naturally to most students, so it must be taught.

The secret to mastering difficult sections is knowing how to break them down into manageable, "bite-size" chunks. This article will show you how. Advice on finger technique, exercises, and proper repertoire is not covered here.

The Wrong Way to Practice

It is helpful to first look at how *not* to practice. The wrong routine that most students naturally fall into when they are told to practice is:

- They start playing a piece.
- They come across a difficult section and fail to play it correctly.
- They stop, try again to play the difficult section, and once again fail.
- They slow it down and try again. After a few times they somehow manage to play the difficult section through, but do so slowly and poorly.

- They then move through the entire piece in this fashion, glossing over the difficulties.

How to Master a Difficult Section

The essence of mastering a difficult section is breaking it down into tiny, manageable units of difficulty and then mastering each unit. Doing so will allow you to learn the piece of music in front of you and will improve your general piano-playing skill too.

The step-by-step procedure below is simple in concept, even if it does take a lot of words to explain.

1. Pick a difficult section.

I am referring here to a section the length of a measure or two or part of a measure. I am not talking about "an eight-bar section," for example. Pick one thing about the piece that is hard for you to play.

2. Within that section, precisely locate the first moment of difficulty.

This is a crucial step. You must examine the section closely and pinpoint the moment when you begin to have difficulty. Start from just before the difficult section, and move forward note by note until you identify the first moment of difficulty.

Here's an example. For several weeks, a student of mine was having a problem playing Measure 2 of the following section (see Figure 1):



Fig. 1

I had the student run through the two measures several times until I could spot exactly where the difficulty lay. I observed that the transition from the last eighth note of Measure 1 into the first quarter note of Measure 2 was the culprit. The change of hand position from the end of Measure 1 to the beginning of Measure 2 was unfamiliar and uncomfortable because it was a transition from an all-white-keys position to an all-black-keys position.

3. Take a tiny, manageable part of the first moment of difficulty and make it into an exercise.

Continuing with our example, imagine a vertical line in the music that separates the end of the easy part from the first moment of difficulty (see Figure 2).



Fig. 2

The "A" in the right hand along with the "D" in the left hand (which is still holding by the time we play that "A" in the right hand) is the end of the easy part, and playing just these two notes together, by themselves, is easy. The first moment of difficulty is crossing the line into the first quarter note of Measure 2.

The practice exercise I made for the student was based on crossing that line (see Figure 3).



Fig. 3

This was repeated maybe ten or twelve times. Then, magically, the two bars could be played very nicely.

Your task is to find a similar point in your music and make up the simplest of exercises to conquer that first moment of difficulty.

4. **Practice your exercise until you can do it comfortably. Practice it slowly, hands separately if needed, then with hands together. Once it feels under your control, speed it up a little, then a little more, until you can play it comfortably.**
5. **Memorize your exercise and play it two ways: 1) while looking at the music, and 2) while looking at your hands.**

6. Extend the range of your exercise by starting a few notes earlier.

Add one earlier note to your exercise, then another and another, until you can comfortably play up to and into the original first moment of difficulty.

The shaded gray area in Figure 4 below shows one combination of notes.

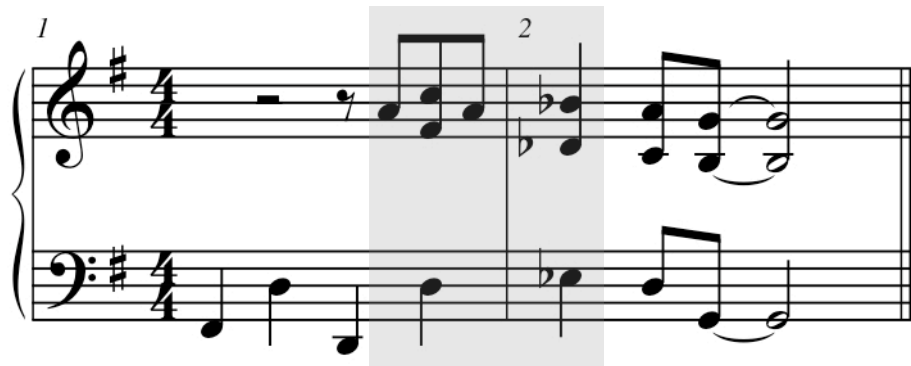


Fig. 4

7. If the difficult section you picked in Step 1 still has difficult parts to it, go to the next moment of difficulty and apply the same practice principles to it until the entire section is able to be played comfortably.

General Practice Tips

How long and how often to practice

You will often not be able to master anything in one sitting. A short practice session each day for a week will yield better results than one or

two long sessions on one or two days out of an entire week.

There is also the "three-steps-forward, one-step-back" factor. On one day, you can improve a section after a twenty-minute practice session. The next day, however, you may find that you have slipped back a little in your ability to play that section. Practicing again for another twenty minutes will take you further ahead. The next day you may sag again, though less. With daily practice, you will eventually master the section.

If your fingers, hands, or arms become tired, stop practicing for a few minutes or for that day. It is possible to temporarily injure yourself if you play too strenuously.

Looking at your hands

There's nothing wrong with looking at your hands (and not the music) while you're playing. Good pianists can play while keeping their eyes on the music, but they attained that ability by looking at their hands a lot during their years of training. It would be very difficult to develop an intimate familiarization with the keyboard without ever looking at one's hands. Playing while keeping your eyes on the music does provide some benefits, but it is important mainly if you want to sightread well.