



Practising

by Melanie Spanswick

Without the Piano

Practising without an instrument. Just how helpful can this be? To some it might appear a rather curious concept, but as teachers, we know it's a universally popular practice tool, and for countless pianists, a very effective method of learning.

The masters have routinely praised this form of practice; Polish pianist Artur Schnabel famously declared he never practised at the keyboard for more than three hours per day, and, according to his memoirs, used much time learning and thinking about the music away from the instrument. French pianist Walter Gieseking could apparently learn a piece from scratch without even touching the piano, and stressed the importance of 'brainwork' and 'intense training of the ear' in *Piano Technique* (the publication he wrote in conjunction with his teacher, Karl Leimer). For the majority of pianists, teachers and students, working away from the piano, even in small but regular bursts, can be a fruitful way to test knowledge, memory, to consolidate learning, and it can even be used to sort out various technical issues, too.

Musical Analysis

There are a plethora of ways to benefit from thinking about your playing without actually touching the instrument, but one of the most helpful, certainly at the start of the learning process, is undoubtedly musical analysis. When we start to learn a piece, we generally peruse the score, searching for all the usual signposts: structure, key changes, tempo changes, texture, stylistic traits and so on. We analyse and scrutinise. Initially, this is our first point of contact.

Analysis can prove beneficial on so many levels, but at its most basic level, begin by observing everything on the page (it can help to write all observations down, too). Make sure nothing escapes your attention, and allow the mind to slowly but deliberately absorb the notes and patterns formed on the page. Observing provides copious information which will slowly sink into the mind and, eventually, the subconscious, paving the way for two other crucial mental modes of practising away from the keyboard: memory and visualisation.

When dissecting your score, start by observing the form (fugue, sonata form etc.) and its structure. It can be helpful to mark up various sections, noticing how and where they change. If it has an ABA form, identify the different segments and instances of new material – in a sense, mapping the piece, linking sections and noting where and how they differ. Once key signature changes are digested, look out for tempo variations and texture changes. It's vital to monitor how themes develop and metamorphose throughout a work. How does the phrasing expand or change? Or does it? These simple observations can continue

ad infinitum, and the more detailed, the more thoroughly a work will be mentally ingrained, even before 'practice' commences.

Marking fingering is another form of assimilation. It's easy to do this without the keyboard; by focusing carefully on where fingers will be placed, it feels that much simpler when they eventually touch the instrument. Articulation invites equal scrutiny, as do all musical markings, pedal indications (if there are any), and dynamic marks. These aid the mental learning process. Analysis can take many forms, but by focusing on the musical map, when it comes to working at the keyboard, you will be well prepared.

Memorisation

As learning commences at the instrument, another important facet comes into play: memorisation. Memorisation and practising away from the piano are synonymous and completely intertwined. Whether we intend to memorise a piece or not, using this method can be extremely valuable, particularly during sessions away from the piano. Many feel it's helpful to separate practising or 'learning the notes' from memory work, and to a certain extent this may well be true, but as with other aspects, deeper immersion in the music will add speed to the learning process, and generally proffer better results.

Here are a few ideas to assist practice away from the piano:

Mindfulness

It can help to practise mindfulness before beginning any kind of mental (or physical) piano practice. We often forget that impatience, irritation and stress can be the biggest negative factors in practising, particularly when working alone. It's too easy to exist only in our head in this respect, but by reminding ourselves to keep a positive, relaxed and (crucially) a happy mind set before practice commences, success will be that much quicker.

Posture

Good posture and relaxed breathing should be the first element in all practice sessions, whether at the instrument or away from it. Sit on a chair (or piano stool if you're at the keyboard) with your shoulders down (tension here can occur even away from the instrument!), breathing slowly and deliberately, fixating on the task in hand in a positive way. Remember, you are looking forward to memorising your piece and will do so with ease. Aim to repeat slow breathing at various intervals in practice sessions (I like to get up and walk around, too).

Think about how the piece makes you feel; its character, mood and atmosphere. Write down a few choice descriptions or words which sum up the work, and how it reveals itself to you. Some find it useful to listen to recordings at this point, but this should be done with caution, as there is a danger of 'learning' another performer's interpretation instead of cultivating your own.

Four types of memorisation dominate: auditory or aural (how the music sounds), visual (how it looks on the page), kinaesthetic or muscular (the physical sensation of playing), and intellectual memory (the analytical process). Aural and visual memorisation play a vital role in working away from the keyboard, as does the intellectual side of memorisation. It's possible to incorporate all three during the thinking process.

Take the score and focus on a line at a time (or bar by bar if you prefer *really* sectionalising), noting what happens in each hand, learn the fingering, shapes and patterns, leaps, chords etc., so you can play through each line in your mind, first by looking or reading the score, then eventually from memory. Also be aware of the movements required by each hand to truly master passagework; finger movement, wrist movement (either rotational or lateral), arm movement, power, arm-weight, and so on. These will act as hooks or signposts, and simplify the process of 'mastering' the piece. Once at the piano, you will already know how each line of music will 'sound', and your fingers will more or less instinctively fall into place.

Now sing the musical line in each hand (even the accompaniment material) in the first line of the piece. This will aid memory, sense of structure and awareness of musical patterns, shapes and key, too. Try it at slow speeds as well as up to tempo. Now imagine playing the line and singing it at the same time. This might need a few attempts! You could also sing the top line (right hand), whilst playing an imaginary bottom line (left hand), and then vice versa. Work through every line of the piece in this fashion, even repeated material. When feeling confident, take the score away, and test your memory (do this frequently).

As you work away from the keyboard, find some manuscript paper and write out your score, line by line. Whilst time-consuming, it's amazing just how much information can be ingested this way. It really strengthens knowledge and clarifies exactly what happens in either hand at any given time.

Another important element in mental work is the necessary emphasis of the left hand. This cannot be underestimated. If you can play the left-hand line through in your head, it can easily be transposed to the piano. Learn it via methods already suggested, listening to how it sounds mentally as well. Auditory memory is a powerful practice tool, and complete awareness of the left hand is a prerequisite in memorising.

After you have worked through a composition employing these simple processes, the piece will form a lasting imprint in your mind, and this will solidify interpretation. Some find working backwards can help; not literally playing the music backwards, but starting with the coda, running the left hand then the right hand, phrase by phrase, assimilating in chunks. I find this method particularly beneficial; for some reason it seems to really speed up the entire procedure.

Once thoroughly digested, begin to test your memory during practice sessions. Remembering every detail at this stage may prove challenging, but by repeatedly returning to the same phrases and passages over a period of time, the thought responses become stronger and clearer. It can be occasionally useful to record yourself playing a piece, or short section of a piece, and then listen to the playback carefully, followed by a replay of it in your mind, without the sound or score.

Visualisation

The final 'phase' of security when practising away from the instrument comes from visualisation technique. Some find this method more valuable than others, but it can become a core part of a practice session, and can be done anywhere, at any time. Visualisation can be a two-pronged approach: firstly, hearing the music in the mind; secondly, having a clear image of playing it.

One of the most powerful strategies when thinking about a piece, particularly one which has been routinely practised, is to be able to play it through in your head, away from the score and the instrument. The best way to do this is to find a quiet corner, far from distractions, sit still, and keep eyes firmly closed. It's necessary to achieve complete focus, because 'hearing' a piece from beginning to end takes a tremendous amount of discipline and concentration. The considerable effort and absorption required can come as quite a shock, but once accustomed to the relevant mind set needed, a calmness and stillness is acquired, and it becomes possible to 'think' through the music accurately.

Start by hearing a page at a time, and build up slowly. Set a suitable tempo and resist the urge to move your fingers, as this works best when the music flows through your thoughts without adherence to technical demands or issues. Never stray from your ideal speed, and note any 'difficult' passages which can't be easily recalled; you may want to revisit these later, separately (writing sections down, or writing them out on manuscript paper can further assist here). Once you have done this successfully and fluently, play it through again, but this time at half speed.

An invaluable part of the visualisation process is a powerful immersion into the music. Once free of having to actually play a piece, it's possible to decide how to interpret, colour and enrich with efficiency and ease. The act of thinking through any piano work will definitely change original perceptions of interpretation and it will also encourage far greater confidence.

Now visualise playing the piece, i.e. watch yourself play it at the keyboard as an image in your mind. As the music runs through your thoughts, observe your fingers, fingerings, movements, and everything your body must do in order to achieve a positive outcome and hence ultimately an exact account. Some like to envisage all details, imagining every finger playing in the centre of every key, whilst others prefer to 'see' a slightly less amplified or meticulous picture, merely viewing the whole persona at the piano as the music streams through the mind. The imagery involved with 'surveying' a performance in this way can have a dramatically positive effect on our minds, encouraging a logical, optimistic projection which will provide an affirmative outcome.

Whether your preference is to hear a work, or observe it being performed, it is crucial to 'think' rigorously and scrupulously, without ever losing concentration. It's probably true to assume if you can't 'hear' a piece through to the end, you don't yet know it well enough. Visualisation boosts and inspires a performance, enabling the performer to play securely and serenely from the heart; a work played from the heart will never be forgotten, and will lead to an honest, reliable interpretation.

Students and pupils can benefit profoundly from working at pieces in this way, whether they intend them to be played from memory or not, and if we can encourage these thought processes in their practice sessions, who knows what they might achieve.

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