

Dr. Scott McBride Smith

The Power of Efficient Practice

Cures for the Boring-Practice Blues

Dr. Scott McBride Smith

“Practice doesn’t make perfect. Good practice makes better.”

Leo McCarthy, 1966
(Scott McBride Smith’s junior high band instructor)

“Fixing mistakes is good. Not making them is better.”

Scott McBride Smith

The use of the word “better” in both quotations is no coincidence, for *continuous improvement* is the goal of all good practice. Not instantaneous artistry, no polished performances on the first try—just steady, consistent development, both of fundamental skills and on mastery of individual pieces.

Continuous improvement requires on big commitment: from the teacher, from the student and from the family. It is no small feat to become a good pianist! Success does not necessarily go to the fleetest, but to those who work carefully, diligently and creatively, with determination and love.

Do you want to become a fine pianist? or the teacher, or parent of one? You will need to make some commitments before you even open the score.

- **Commitment to the process of growth**

Piano study is a long process, full of peaks and valleys. You won’t be able to choose to experience only the good stuff—there will also be moments of frustration. It’s all part of personal development and achievement. Make a commitment to enjoy the process wherever it leads you.

- **Commitment to asking “why?” and “how?”**

Your fulfillment will depend on your ability to make effective decisions, allocating time and energy (and sometimes money) in optimal ways. These two words will help. Why did the composer write this section in this way? How can I best express that in my performance? How will I practice it? How did it sound? Why is it better, or worse? How will I work for improvement?

Dr. Scott McBride Smith

- **Commitment to setting achievable goals**

Question: How do you eat an elephant? Answer: One bite at a time.

This hoary old joke contains an essential truth. Big tasks are just a lot of little tasks done in quick succession. Performing a big piece is a qualitatively different experience than playing a small one. But the process of learning is surprisingly similar: step-by-step. Keep a strong overview of the piece in mind, and master one skill area at a time.

“An ancient Roman philosopher once said, ‘to truly know something, you have to learn it in three different ways’. If he had been a piano teacher, he would have said 103!”

Adele Marcus

Miss Marcus was right. 103 different ways of knowing is not too many for a dedicated pianist. Below you will find some practical practice techniques, which will help you achieve your musical objectives. These count for a goodly portion of the 103.

Use them in small sections, with many repetitions. Set a specific goal for each part of your practice session. Tell yourself to play a section (or phrase, or even a measure) note-perfect for a set number of repetitions. Then focus on rhythm, or melodic projection, or tone quality—anything that your “how” and “why” questioning told you was an essential part of your successful performance.

There are other ways of knowing that take place away from the piano. Most interpretive decisions are best made when placed in a context. Stylistic conventions of harmony and form are one part of this. Another is the cultural milieu in which the piece was written, the composer’s goals in writing it and pertinent details of the composer’s personality and life experience.

Dr. Scott McBride Smith

- **Commitment to knowing oneself**

First, last and throughout the process comes self-knowledge. Remember that each one of your good points has a bad side that will require corrective action from you if you want to be truly effective.

Are you full of passion and fire? Be careful of overindulgence in the extremes of interpretation. Do you wait for others to lead before you will take a step? Remember that music requires boldness and a sense of risk. Are you overly aggressive, even driven? Your hard work will pay off, but the effect may be harsh and joyless.

What type of learner are you? Visual learners sometimes read well, but can get stuck in a score and have difficulty audiating, the all-important ability to “pre-hear” music before playing it. Aural learners can hear music, but are sometimes inattentive to the markings in the score which give crucial interpretive clues. Kinetic learners feel music in the depths of their being. Their attention to detail, though, can be spotty.

Long-term success in music will require you to take stock, enhancing the strong points of your personality and learning skills and training yourself (or seeking training) to rectify your weaknesses. Evaluate your personal and professional goals, too. Make sure that all your actions are in line with your values and objectives.

Dr. Scott McBride Smith

Before You Play

There are some times, and some pieces, for which the best strategy is to play through the piece several times, listening closely and asking yourself, why this? how did the composer accomplish that? what do I notice and why do I like it?

For younger students, or less accomplished readers, it's usually better to do some pre-study. Begin by looking for patterns.

- **Macro level**

Find the large sections. These may be demarcated by different thematic or pitch material, key change and modifications of texture. Ask yourself if their arrangement suggests any of the standard forms, such as ternary or sonata. Label them with capital letters (A,B,C) or words (Exposition, Episode) as appropriate.

- **Micro level**

Mark in phrases ("musical sentences"). I prefer to use small brackets, written above the staff, rather than slurs, whose meaning can be ambiguous. Not sure how to identify phrases?

1. Phrases often end on long notes, rests or notes of lower pitch.
2. Check the harmony. The presence of a standard cadence patterns may suggest a phrase ending.
3. New or varied motivic content often signifies the beginning a new phrase.

Study each phrase. Note clef changes, accidentals, and key changes. Decide how you are going to count. I ask students to identify the smallest note value in the piece and count it for the whole piece. A piece in which 8ths are the smallest note, for instance, would be counted "1&, 2&..." throughout. A work in which 16ths are the smallest would be counted "1E&A, 2E&A..."

Dr. Scott McBride Smith

- **On both levels**

Remember that repetition is the basis of form in all art. So look for ideas of all sorts that recur.

Melodic Look for returning patterns between measures and phrases, paying special attention to any small changes within the design.

Harmonic Chord changes are important, as is the rate at which they change (harmonic rhythm). One could mark in common voices, or do a harmonic analysis.

Textural Decide whether the piece is homophonic, chordal or polyphonic. If it is a mixture, note where each type of writing occurs. Identify any common accompaniment styles, such as Alberti or waltz bass.

Rhythmic Look for rhythmic motifs.

I have had success with students using colored pencils. Red could be used for repeated intervals, for instance, blue could be for chord changes or voices shared between chords, green for rhythmic patterns.

Instead of identifying the musical parameters that you see first, ask yourself: what is my worse problem in performance? Focus your investigation in that area. If you have problems with rhythm, for example, write in the counting in one color, circle recurring rhythms in another. Clap or tap the latter away from the keyboard while counting out loud.

- **Fingering**

This part of piano technique is so important that it deserves its own sub-heading. If you are an experienced pianist, you may not need to notate fingering at all. All the rest of us need to take care.

The first step is to purchase an edition that includes good fingering. If one is not available, write in your own fingering. Even a well-fingered edition will require some additions from you, since hand sizes vary. My rule for

Dr. Scott McBride Smith

students is: any mistake made in the same place more than once requires a fingering to be written in.

When you analyze a score in terms of fingering, you are looking primarily for hand position changes. There are three basic types.

1. crosses, over or under
2. expansions/contractions
3. leaps

Identify--get out those colored pencils!--and mark.

It's sometimes helpful to mark key fingers, no matter where they occur. The thumb is often a problem. Write "1" each time it comes, or mark the finger before or after the thumb.

At the Keyboard

- **Creative Exercises**

If, during your pre-study, you have identified some technical and interpretive problems, your playing will benefit if you devise some exercises based on them. Pieces from the Baroque era, for instance, are often performed with varied articulation. So practice your scales legato, staccato and portato. Then mix them up: RH legato, LH staccato, for example, and all other possible combinations. Tricky patterns can benefit by being turned into exercises, played 3 times in a row perfectly, and then transposed, using identical fingering for each key. A useful device here is called **chaining**. Play the exercise with the metronome. At first, give yourself two clicks of rest in which to move your hands to the new key. As you improve, cut the rest down to one beat and then none at all. Playing without a break builds stamina.

Solutions to interpretive questions can also be found in drill. Locate the climax of each phrase, for instance, and practice it in carefully graded dynamics, sometimes crescendo-ing to the highest energy point, sometimes diminuendo-ing. The climax can occur at any place, but many phrases are in an arc shape, with the peak coming right past the halfway point of the phrase. Things to look for include

Dr. Scott McBride Smith

1. note with highest pitch
2. chord with the most dissonance
3. long note
4. chord on strongest beat

You can also practice subtle tempo alterations, sometimes making a ritardando to the climax, sometimes making an agogic accent, sometimes making a slight accelerando. Your own good taste (and the guidance of your teacher) will tell you what works best.

- **Learning the Piece**

Yes, we finally made it! Here is my method: learn one phrase at a time.

1. LH-5 times perfectly, concentrating on fingering and accuracy
2. RH-5 times perfectly, concentrating on fingering and accuracy
3. hands together-5 times perfectly, concentrating on fingering and accuracy
4. hands together-5 times perfectly, counting out loud (see above).
The last 3 times should be "in a row"—if you make a mistake on the second or third repetition, you have to do all three over

Depending on the difficulty of the piece, you can learn several phrases a day or only one. Begin the next session's practice by reviewing what you have already learned.

- **Slow Practice-The Bedrock of Learning**

"Every note must speak its name."

Theodore Leschetizky

Studies of different types of finger movement have demonstrated that non-pianists can often move their fingers in all the ways and at the same

Dr. Scott McBride Smith

speed as trained pianists. If that is the case, why practice? Two words: timing and location.

There are certain situations in which only fast practice will do (see below). But for the purposes of basic learning, there is no such thing as too slow. How do you pick a learning tempo? Whatever speed you can play the piece with near-perfect accuracy and expression. You are training your brain to tell your fingers what motion to make at which place on the piano. At later stages of learning, these movements will become semi-automatic. But at the beginning, you will have to go slowly and consciously tell your fingers what to do. Many times!

There are several variations of slow motion practice [sometimes I have better luck with students describing this as slow-motion, rather than just plain slow!], once basic learning has taken place. Some of these methods also serve to plan and reinforce interpretive decisions. An effective performance always maintains an unbroken *mood-line*, free of slips and blemishes caused by technical lapses or memory problems. Notice that I do not state that the performance will be trouble-free. Sadly, that is beyond the reach of most mortals, most of the time. But the difficulties cannot disturb the emotional atmosphere.

- 1. Freeze Practice** Play slowly, and stop at certain pre-decided places (or ask sometime to call out *freeze* at unpredictable spots). Stop immediately on the notes you are playing, and plan the next note, finger or interpretive device. This is also useful for reflecting backwards on what just took place.

“Think 10 times, and play once.”

Theodore Leschetizky

- 2. Singing** Sing each phrase the way you would like it to sound, with all interpretive details in place. Then play it, matching what you sung. Ignore any ugly vocal effects that may be emitted by accident. Singing as you play helps, too, but be careful you don't follow Toscanini and Glenn Gould, who sang out-loud during performances. You have to be famous to get away with that!

Dr. Scott McBride Smith

“If you can tell when someone is playing that he is singing the music in his mind as he plays, it is a good performance; if you cannot, it is a bad performance.”

Theodore Leschetizky

- 3. Conducting** Conduct the melody as expressively as possible, then play, matching your conducting. You can also conduct with one hand while playing with the other.

As mastery grows, practice devices also become more sophisticated. These all serve to freshen one’s mental picture of the piece. Paradoxically, practicing problem sections differently than written serves to reinforce, if done with awareness.

- 1. One-finger practice** Play tricky passages with one finger, to check if you actually know all the notes, rather than depending on muscle memory. **Regrouping** passages serves the same purpose, playing a passage written in groups of four in groups of three, for instance.
- 2. Reverse articulation** Play all staccato notes legato, and vice versa. A variation of this is **thumb staccato**, in which all notes are articulated as written except for the thumb, which in this type of practice is always played with a gentle, relaxed finger staccato. This mode serves as a corrective to students who have no idea when their thumb is playing, or routinely thump it.
- 3. Practice on the surface of keys** I call this “ghosting” (for silent practice in which the fingers press the keys down so slowly that there is no sound) and “ectoplasmic” (when there is a slight sound). This is helpful for developing balance (play the melody as written, the accompaniment ghosted or ectoplasmic), as well as reinforcing memory.
- 4. Leaps** Practice leaps with different fingerings, or play an octave higher or lower than written
- 5. Simplification** There are several useful ways to simplify
 - a.** Simplify underlying harmonies and play with melody as written
 - b.** Play melody as written, but accompaniment only on beat #1, or beat #2, and so on

Dr. Scott McBride Smith

- c. Stop in the middle of each beat and omit the notes that complete it, or leave first half of beat empty

- **Fast Practice**

This is best done in small groups of notes, with many repetitions. You can expand by adding individual notes, or by adding groups (see below).

- **The Emotional State of the Pianist**

Playing the piano has never been easy, but today's busy, stressful world sometimes makes it hard to find the creative space in which to practice. Try to find a balance between enforcing goals and your natural curiosity, giving time to each. Feel free to experiment, within the guidelines you and your teacher have set for yourself. Remember that music should be filled with joy and love.

- **Practice Devices**

- a. **Add-a-note** This is helpful for sections with tricky fingering, or in which balance is an issue. Play one note, add another, then another, repeating until you have the spot smooth and even. This can be done forward or backward.
- b. **Travel Exercises** A variation of **Add-a-Note**. If we never had to move our hands, playing the piano would be a snap—it's the hand position changes that lead to trouble. Remember those colored pencils? Mark the places where the hand has to move (crosses, extensions/contractions or leaps) and practice the motion *in between* the notes. Then add the note before, then the note after, then two notes before, two after...you get the idea!
- c. **Touch before Play** Another variation, especially useful for leaps. Students often focus too much on notes. It would be better if they concentrated on the motion that produces the notes. Practice leaps in a three part process.
 - Play first note
 - Move smoothly to second note and touch it briefly

Dr. Scott McBride Smith

- Play second note
Touching the second note before playing helps ensure accuracy.
- d. Add-a-group** Especially helpful in fast passages. Divide the phrase into small groups, repeating each one and then combining. This also can be done forward or backward.
- e. Rhythms** Practice in dotted rhythms, or in Scotch Snaps (reverse dotted rhythms). For passages with notes in groups of three, or four, practice lengthening each note in turn.
- f. Shifting Accents** Miss Marcus felt that this was more useful than practicing in rhythms. Practice with the accent of the first note of the group, then the second, etc.
- g. Double and Triple Pairs** This is especially useful for passagework. Take each pair of notes and repeat it two or three times. I tell students that the fingers have to work twice (or three times) as hard, so that the section will get two or three times better.
- h. Hand switching** Play the RH part in the LH and vice versa. Excellent for checking memory. Parts can also be played in different octaves.
- i. Redistribute parts between the hands** Another useful technique for balance, helpful when the melody (or a strong bass) and the accompaniment are found within one hand. Practice that section with two hands, playing the part to be projected louder in one hand, the accompaniment softer in the other. This helps imprint the desired sound in one's consciousness.
- j. Times in a row** Set a goal of playing a section five times in a row perfectly, then four, then three. A good way to increase concentration. This is often done with the **metronome**. In early stages, and in slow movements, it helps to set the metronome to a subdivided beat. In 4/4, for instance, you could set the metronome to indicate eighth notes or even sixteenths. In later stages, the metronome could click only accented beats, or only one beat.
- k. On and off the keyboard** Practice one hand as written, the other on top of the fallboard. Another good test of memory and interpretive planning.

Dr. Scott McBride Smith

- **Fixing Mistakes**

Sadly, even the greatest pianists make mistakes. There are so many things that can go wrong! Careful learning can avoid many problems, but there always will be a need for fixing. This can be done in several ways.

1. **Immediately.** Stop, and play the measure in which the mistake occurred 5 times in a row perfectly. If the mistake is on the first beat of the measure, play it and the measure before it 5 times. This ensures that you are fixing the mistake and its cause.
2. **Perfect Phrases.** Stop, and play the whole phrase in which the mistake occurred 5 times in a row perfectly.
3. **At the end of the section or whole piece** Make a mental note when problems occur, but don't stop. When finished, go back and fix mistakes 5 times in a row.

- **Performance Practice**

It is never a good idea to become too used to stopping to fix, for it can become habitual and interfere with effective performance. Alternate sessions of repetition and fixing with those in which you simply play. I recommend **4-Way Practice**. Play straight through the piece, keeping going no matter what happens.

1. **Slow** Concentrate on details.
2. **Medium** Focus on shaping and contour
3. **Fast** Focus on sweep and dramatic contrast
4. **Super-Fast** This should be faster than you plan on performing. Can you control the performance at this tempo? Then playing it at the slower desired speed should be a snap.

Practicing away from the piano can also be a help. Try to play the piece while sitting at a table, performing movements on the table top. Then try to mentally play it sitting in a chair, with no finger movements, singing to yourself.

“Remember that in rehearsal you must always think back, and in performance you must always think forward.”

Sir Adrian Boult

Dr. Scott McBride Smith

Special Problems

- **Balance** Can't hear the melody because the accompaniment is too loud? Practice ghosting and re-distribution. Another useful technique is called **Delayed Practice**. Play the melody (or the part that you wish to be heard most prominently) loud, alone. Play all the other accompanying voices soft, and slightly delayed. Yes, I know your teacher told you to always play the notes of a chord exactly together, but this is a special case! By playing the melody loud, by itself, followed shortly by the accompaniment, soft and delayed, you help your ear and your muscles train themselves.
- **Memorization** This could be a whole book of its own!
 1. **Check LH.** Most mistakes at the piano start in the LH. Make sure you can play that part accurately, by itself.
 2. **Know your sections.** Make sure that you have memorized starting points in case you forget or have a concentration lapse. I number the sections in reverse, make flashcards, and have students pick cards at random and start at that numbered section.
 3. **"Up" practice.** Ask a friend to help you with this. Play the piece, as if at a concert. When your friend says "up" at random places, you have to lift you hand or hands from the keyboard and put them in your lap. After a moment, try to proceed smoothly from the place you left off, acting nonchalant and pretending that there was a rest written in that spot. If you cannot do so, jump to the next section. Never go back!
- **Double Notes** Practice playing the top note twice, or three times. Do the same with the bottom note.

Dr. Scott McBride Smith

"And don't forget, the more technique you have, the worse you'll play."

Theodore Leschetizky

The sardonic words of Leschetizky bring us full circle in our search for *continuous improvement*. For if you are only seeking technical mastery, your playing will indeed be worse. Play with joy and creativity, make decisions aligned with your core values and your quest will be successful.

Copyright©2003 Scott McBride Smith. All rights reserved.
May not be copied without written permission of Dr. Smith