

## MIRANDA'S GUIDE TO SUCCESSFUL PIANO PRACTICE!

Everyone knows that if you want to play an instrument well, you have to practise. It is not possible to learn to play just by coming to lessons. You need to practise throughout the week to make your lessons productive and worthwhile. If you don't practise, you end up covering the same things every week, your progress will be slow and you'll probably get really fed up and want to give up. This is a shame, given how keen and excited you probably were when you first started to learn the piano.

Here are some things that put people off practising:

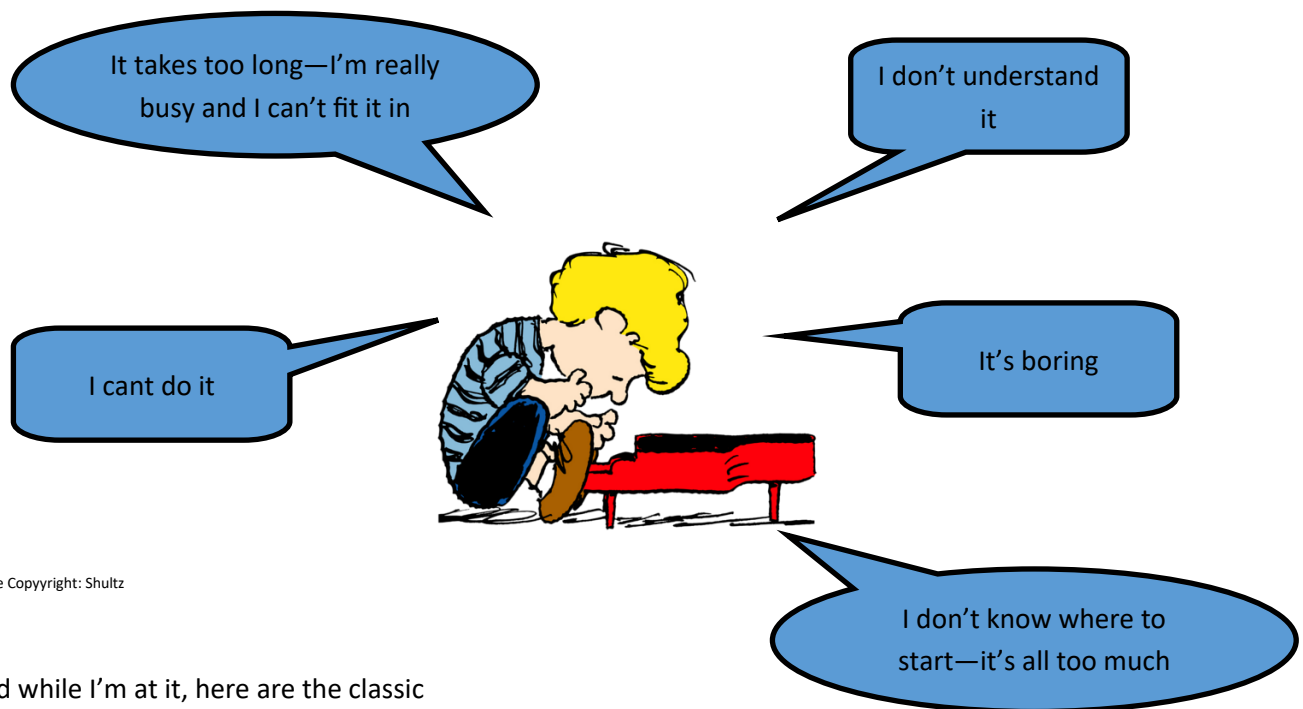


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And while I'm at it, here are the classic mistakes that people make when they **do** practise:

- Not reading their notebook or studying the music for tips
- Not setting a goal/focus for the practice session.
- Playing things they can already play
- Trying to play too fast (especially scales)
- Just playing pieces through in the hope that they'll get better that way
- Playing favourite tunes/other things than what is in the notebook

***Basically, not practising purposefully!***

I hope that this little guide will help you to develop a good practice routine which you will enjoy and benefit from. I can't promise to make practising fun, but hopefully you will start finding it more rewarding and satisfying, and notice that you are making faster progress. That in itself is motivating!

## How often? How long?

This is the big one, and probably the thing that puts people off the most. We've all heard about concert pianists who practise 8 hours a day. We think that if we don't practise every day we might as well give up. But trying to fit that into your busy week can be very difficult, and so often it doesn't happen at all. My advice is, be realistic—every day just isn't going to happen. I say:



### ***Aim to practise FOUR times a week***

That means that, with your lesson as well, you'll have five sessions at the piano per week. Then there's the issue of how long should you practise for? Again, most people think they need to practise for much longer than they really do. Thirty minutes is actually a very long time when you're sat at the piano. Practice session length depends on age and level, but I would say:

<b>Level</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Minutes</b>
<b>Under Grade 1</b>	<b>Under 8</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Grades 1 and 2</b>	<b>8—10</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Grades 3 and 4</b>	<b>10—13</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Grade 5</b>	<b>13—16</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Grades 6 and 7</b>	<b>16—18</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Grade 8</b>	<b>16—18</b>	<b>40</b>

If you don't fit perfectly into this table, go with the longer session. E.g., a twelve-year-old beginner and an eight-year-old doing grade 3 should both do 15 minutes per session.

You might be surprised at how short the times are. *They are!* This is because it's not a case of how LONG you spend practising, it's all about the QUALITY of your practice...



## HOW SHOULD I PRACTISE?

In the famous words of Bananarama (1980s girl band) *It ain't what you do, it's the way that you do it*. And this could not be more true when it comes to practising. Those surprisingly short practice sessions I mentioned on the previous page will only work for you if you...



### ***Practise with purpose!***

Just sitting at the piano and playing a few random scales, a couple of your pieces and a large sprinkling of your favourite tunes, even if you're there for an hour, is

**NOT** practising! What's worse is that you think you've practised but most likely all you've done is reinforced your mistakes because you haven't focused on them—you've just played them...**again**. So you've learned how to do it wrong! When you come back to your lesson, we have to go through it all again. *No wonder it's becoming boring!* Let's look at that list from page 1 again:

- ***It takes too long—I'm really busy and I can't fit it in:*** It shouldn't take ages. Look at the table on p2 to work out exactly how often and how long you should practise for. Sit at the piano, all ready to start, and set a timer for your practice length. Press go... and start! When the alarm goes, your done! Take a look at your week and see if you can find four places where you can fit in a practice. How about getting up a bit earlier three times a week and doing it before school, and then one at the weekend? Is there a time in your day that's 'dead time' - like when you're waiting for your dinner, or for your turn on the Xbox? I sometimes use practising as a 'break' from my other work—try it—it's not as bad as it sounds!
- ***I don't understand it:*** Have you looked at the notebook? Remember, what I write in there has been specially written for you. Read the notes EVERY TIME YOU PRACTISE! Even if you think you know what's in there, look anyway. Just the smallest thing might jog your memory and solve your problem. If it doesn't, then write it down. Make a note of what you don't understand—or write a question—or make a note of what you tried to do and what went wrong. All this will help me to help you when you come to your lesson. Your practice time will not have been wasted!
- ***I can't do it:*** I hope that I will have helped you in the lesson and checked that you **can** do it before you go home. If you find you can't do it, check the notebook. Look really carefully at the music—I will probably have written something on it to help or remind you what to do/how to do it. If you still can't do it, move on to something else and improve that. Remember to tell me about your difficulties at your next lesson.
- ***I don't know where to start:*** Start with the notebook! I usually give you a small target for each thing you are working on and it's almost always something that we covered in the lesson. There will be tips in the notebook and pointers on the music—look for them. Plan your practice session—decide what you are going to work on that day. Keep it small—you can always add on if you get the hang of it quicker than expected.
- ***It's boring:*** Yep. Like learning anything, there will be dull moments. But most people who are brilliant at something weren't born brilliant at it. They've worked **really** hard to be that good. Try to remember how it feels when you have learned a tune and can play it really well; how proud you feel when people tell you how nicely you play, or when you pass an exam. It's a real buzz! Remind yourself that you'll get that feeling again after you've worked hard and learned this scale or piece. But also, think back to those marks that you lost because you never quite got around to sorting out a dodgy bit of fingering or rhythm, and how you wished you had...

Have a reward ready for when your time is up. You could play some favourite tunes, or just mess around on the piano and make things up. Or, if you've had enough of piano, go and do one of your favourite activities.

## Miranda's Dos and Don'ts for Purposeful Practice!



**DO:** Organise your practice session. I recommend dividing the time into three, at roughly a ratio of 2:4:4, doing scales first, then two pieces, so a 12-minute session would be: 2-3 min scales and 4-5 min on each piece. A twenty-minute session would be: 4 minutes on scales and 8 minutes on each piece.

**DO:** Focus! You don't have much time, so decide exactly what you're going to achieve this session. It might be a fingering that you keep getting wrong, or a rhythm that needs correcting. Aim for a very small goal.

**DO:** Check the notebook and look for tips written on the music. I keep saying it but in lessons I try hard to give you the help you will need at home, by writing things in your notebook or on the music. If you've forgotten what I said, it's very likely to be written down somewhere—**have a good look!**

**DO:** Break your learning down into tiny goals—if you have four tricky bars to learn, aim to master one of them each session.

**DO:** Make a note of any problems you have had when practising. Write them down in the notebook or (in pencil) on your music.

**DO:** Practise new things **SLOWLY**. And then even slower. Like a dancer learning a routine, do it step by step, over and over until it starts to feel 'easy'. Then you can speed it up **a little bit!** Try '3-in-a-row', where you have to play it perfectly three times in a row before you can speed it up or move on to the next bit. If you get it wrong the third time, it's back to 1 again!

**DO:** Try 'silent playing' for difficult passages: you 'play' it without pressing the keys down, so you're just touching the keys. Repeat a few times and then try it properly—you'll be amazed how effective this is!

**DON'T:** Keep playing the tune through again and again—it's unproductive and wastes time. Practising is NOT a time to celebrate what you **can** play, it's time to sort out problems and master things you **can't** yet play. Play it once through at the start and again at the end, if there's time.

**DON'T:** Play for fun in practice time. Try hard to 'ringfence' your practice time and only work on things set for you in the notebook. Playing for fun is very important—I really hope that you do lots of this, but it's not practising so please save it for outside practice time.

**Ask yourself...**

Am I practising  
or am I playing?

