

Scheduling Your Practice Time



There is an abundance of great advice available on different ways of structuring your practice time, but I've found it difficult to put them together into a complete picture, making it hard to really apply what I learned.

The aim of this article is to discuss each of these aspects of practice structure as well as give practical advice on how to incorporate them into your current regimen.

The Importance of Scheduling

Everyone knows you need to practice in order to get better at piano. And perhaps you've been very diligent about sitting at the piano for an hour or two every day, but you don't feel like you're making the best use of your time. With all the repertoire you're learning, when do you have time to work on sight reading or technical exercises? Or perhaps you use all of your time on Hanon and find there's only enough time left to run through your pieces.

Even if you are managing your time well, you find yourself hitting roadblocks on progressing in your repertoire, so you may end up giving up on pieces rather than feeling you've completed them.

If any of these scenarios sound familiar, you may be thinking you need to come up with a better system for setting up your practice regimen. That is exactly what this document is designed to do: give advice on how to use your available practice time, and also to provide a means for keeping track of what you've done in case you find yourself veering off-track.



1. What Each Practice Session Should Include

- **Scales, Chords, and Arpeggios** - depending on where you are in your studies, you should have some element of these in your practice time



- **Technical Exercises and Etudes** - anything that is strictly technical - like Hanon, Czerny, Dohnanyi, Schmitt, etc.
- **Sight Reading** if you've been studying for about 6 months or longer, OR **Reading Exercises** if you're a beginner to music reading
- **Repertoire:**

Beginner: 6-8 short repertoire selections (4-16 measures each)

Intermediate: 3-6 pieces, depending on the daily practice time available, around half of them 1 page (around 20-30 measures long), the rest no longer than 2 pages. Make them a mixture of pieces you can complete in 2-3 weeks and about 2 months

Advanced: Depending on the daily practice time available, no more than 4 pieces, have at least one short-term piece that you can complete in 3-4 weeks, one mid-term piece that you can complete in 2-3 months, and a long-term piece that can take anywhere from 3-6 months (6 months pieces would be all movements of a sonata, a piano concerto, etc.)



2. How Much Time Is Enough (or Too Much)

Burn out is a real threat to progress at piano. We may go from running hot to cold as far as our desire to get better, and usually it has little to do with our actual motivation, and a lot to do with how our practice sessions are going.

If we take on too much repertoire, we end up frustrated and lose interest in those because we don't seem to make any progress.

If we spend too much time at the piano - far beyond our threshold of learning - we can also lose interest. This is because after a certain point, there's just nothing to be gained from working further that day. We need our minds to rest and sleep to let what we've just learned become permanent.

Everyone's threshold is different, however, and everyone's schedule is different. So in choosing how much time you can devote, you will have to consider what you are capable of doing consistently, and how long you can focus until you're "done" for the day. Of course, life events happen that keep us from practicing, or work schedules may fluctuate, so just do your best with figuring this out.



3. Dividing Up Your Allotted Time

Now you have a number of hours (or minutes) you can devote most days to practicing piano. How do you split it up reasonably between all of the above elements? These percentages are just recommendations, and if you feel you need more focus on something, certainly feel free to adjust to suit your needs.

8% - Scales, Chords, Arpeggios

8% - Technical Exercises

6% - Sight Reading/Reading Exercises

78% - Repertoire: evenly divided between all selections

EXCEPT ONE (see Rotation Scheduling below)

You'll note that most of your practice time should be spent on learning repertoire. Again, adjust to your own needs, but this is roughly a good proportion for optimal learning.



4. Rotation Scheduling

Now, you'll notice the last one about Repertoire that there is going to be one piece that you won't practice that day! Have you ever gotten "sick" of a piece you were working on for a few weeks? It may have even been a piece you loved, and yet as time went on, you wanted to practice it less and less, until you gave up on it.

This is because working on a piece for an extended period of time builds in not only good muscle memory and understanding of how to play, but also negative physical and mental tensions that can curb progress or halt it altogether. Sure, there are times when a piece is just too hard for us at our current level, too. But considering the piece is something within reach, we still can encounter this "waning of love" for it.

Taking a periodic day off from a piece will actually help keep it fresh, and it's enough time to "forget" those negative tensions, and possibly give us some time to look at it with a fresh perspective, even if you don't think about the piece. In fact, it's best if you don't consciously do it, but if you find yourself working out a problem in the background of your thoughts, don't stop the process.

Let's say you want to build in a rotation between all of your pieces, and you are working on 4 pieces total. It would look something like this:



Day 1: Debussy, Bach, Chopin (Beethoven rest)

Day 2: Beethoven, Debussy, Bach (Chopin rest)

Day 3: Chopin, Beethoven, Debussy (Bach rest)

Day 4: Bach, Chopin, Beethoven (Debussy rest)

Day 5: Debussy, Bach, Chopin (Beethoven rest)

By Day 5, you will be repeating Day 1's pieces. In this manner, each piece will have a rest day every 4 days. If you are working on 3 pieces, each piece will rest every 3 days, etc.

If you work on more than 4 pieces, I would group them so that you rotate no less than every 3-4 days. For example, if you are a beginner and working 8 pieces, I'd choose to have 2 pieces rest each day, so that would look something like this:

Day 1: Rep1, Rep2, Rep3, Rep4, Rep5, Rep6 (Rep7, Rep8 rest)

Day 2: Rep7, Rep8, Rep1, Rep2, Rep3, Rep4 (Rep5, Rep6 rest)

Day 3: Rep5, Rep6, Rep7, Rep8, Rep1, Rep2 (Rep3, Rep4 rest)

Day 4: Rep3, Rep4, Rep5, Rep6, Rep7, Rep8 (Rep1, Rep2 rest)

Day 5: Rep1, Rep2, Rep3, Rep4, Rep5, Rep6 (Rep7, Rep8 rest)

Basically, two pieces would get a rest every 4 days.

If you are working on intermediate or advanced repertoire but can only spend enough time to work on two pieces, I recommend doing a rotation that matches a piece resting every 3 days:

Day 1: Rep1, Rep2 (no rest)

Day 2: Rep1 (Rep2 rest)

Day 3: Rep2 (Rep1 rest)

Day 4: Rep1, Rep2 (no rest)

Day 5: Rep1 (Rep2 rest)



5. Technical vs. Play-Thru Rotation

Another part of rotation has to do with what you are doing on your repertoire for that day. Pieces do require a lot of attention spent on focused technical work on difficult passages, but if that's all you do it's hard to know how you've progressed.

You want to play through your pieces to not only assess how your technical work has been doing, but also you will need to keep sight of the piece as a whole. In a way, I feel Play-Thru days are a way of "resting" that piece because you're not doing the focused, intense work that day.

I think it's healthy to have a Play-Thru day on a piece once or twice per week. So in the first schedule with 4 pieces, it may look like this, where **T** stands for Technical and **P** stands for Play-Thru.

Day 1: Debussy (T), Bach (T), Chopin (P) (Beethoven rest)

Day 2: Beethoven (T), Debussy (T), Bach (P) (Chopin rest)

Day 3: Chopin (T), Beethoven (T), Debussy (P) (Bach rest)

Day 4: Bach (T), Chopin (T), Beethoven (P) (Debussy rest)

Day 5: Debussy (T), Bach (T), Chopin (P) (Beethoven rest)

Each piece would have 2 T days before a P and then followed by a rest. You might also have noticed that I put the technical work at the beginning of the session when my mind is more alert and save the play-thru for the end of the session.

Given your allotted practice time, a P will always go much faster than a T, so you can consider this in how many pieces you choose to work on.



6. Planning What You're Going To Do

Going into a practice session with the decision already made from your previous session on what needs work is a huge help. It's difficult sometimes to recall what needs the most attention, especially if you had a rest day yesterday. Precious practice time can be wasted trying to decide what needs to be done.

Why not make note of it at the end of each session what work work on the next time? Just write down the measure numbers and specifically what needs work for the next day's practice so when it's time, you can hit the ground running!



7. Keeping a Practice Log

I highly recommend that you keep a log of some kind. You will need to tailor it to your number of pieces specifically and also to suit your own aesthetics and how you work. Whatever format you decide to use, I do think it's helpful to have some form of keeping track so that you have measurable progress and you can really know how long you've been working on an issue or a piece. I've provided a pdf sample of a practice log for reference at the end of this article.



8. Long-Term Planning and Breaks

So we've talked about giving a piece some time to rest every few days, but there's a huge benefit to completely letting a piece go - strategically - in the process of learning to overcome issues and give the piece more of a natural feel.

Pieces that I've learned, forgotten, relearned, and forgotten and relearned again are ones that will stick with me for the rest of my life. In a very short time, I can bring back music that I worked on to a performance level because it's had time to really settle. This has to do with mylar formation in the brain over neural connections made in the process of learning. Once you're done "learning" and that thing learned is no longer in use, the brain will begin to cement it to memory it by covering with mylar (I'm not a doctor, so this is my limited understanding of what goes on, but it IS a thing). So why wouldn't we take advantage of this in the process of learning new music?

I do this by strategically planning when I'm going to stop working on a piece for an extending period of time:

- **Play 4-6 weeks:** Learn new piece to best of ability - get as much of it done as possible, including all dynamics, articulations, pedaling, expression, and as much technical work as possible to play this up to tempo (or close). You will want this pretty much memorized, but you don't have to be completely off-book, just have it that well-known before you take a break from it.
- **Break 3 weeks:** Don't play this piece at all. Don't even try think about it or work on it mentally during this time. These breaks are a great time to being working on another movement if you are playing a multi-movement piece.
- **Play 4 weeks:** Relearn this piece. Use the sheet music and go slowly as if you are looking at it for the first time. Try to get in every detail possible. You might need to only do slow practice for a few days up to the first week and then it



should speed up fairly quickly. You will notice that some technically challenging parts are much easier, and that you have room to add more expression to your playing.

- **Break 2-4 weeks:** Give the piece another long break. This could be extended to 3-4 weeks if you desire.
- **Play for finishing touches:** Again, relearn the piece slowly at first, but getting it back up to speed should take much less time now. Technical challenges may still exist, but will have improved by now. This part can take as long as you like, but if you are working a piece up to performance level, I'd want it to be about 3-4 weeks.

As you can see, the above schedule is roughly 6 months from start to finish. You can get pretty detailed in your scheduling, so if you are working on a sonata or multi-movement work, you can use the "break" times to learn a new movement and cycle through that way, then bring them all back for the last finishing touches section.

You will want to have your repertoire in different stages of learning, and easier/shorter repertoire may not need such a long schedule. A piece that's a mid-term piece (roughly 3 months) could be 3 weeks learning, 2 weeks off, 2-3 weeks on, 2 weeks off, and then polishing for 2 weeks.

A short-term piece would probably not need the long breaks and should be fine with the days off illustrated in the Rotation Scheduling above.

I hope this article has been helpful to you in determining what to do in your practice time. Feel free to incorporate as much or as little as you like into your practice scheduling, or add components a little at a time until you're up and running efficiently!



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