

# Smetana Piano Studio

## The Practice Journal: Promoting Independent and Artistic Practice

### Are you practicing - or just playing?

When you sit down to practice, do you go on auto-pilot? Set the timer, play through the piece a few times? Maybe stop and go back once or twice when you get to a tricky spot, then move on to the next piece?

This type of “practicing” may eventually lead to progress, but it will take a long time and, frankly, it’s so BORING!

### A Better Way

Effective, energized, inspiring practice leads to dramatic progress in the same amount of time - often in LESS time!

The key? Finding that “relaxed but focused” space where you are able to truly listen to yourself and implement effective strategies that fix problems - or better yet, prevent them! Without judgement, without drama. This isn’t about telling yourself how many things you did wrong and how bad it sounded. It’s about recognizing what can be improved and improving it - then feeling proud of your accomplishment and moving on to the next challenge!

Keeping a practice journal is a great way to facilitate active, engaged practice. It can be a spiral-bound notebook of any size and color you like, or it can be a fancy blank book. You can even add a divider tab and some lined notebook paper to your current 3-ring binder and keep your practice journal there.

You’ll know you’re ***truly practicing*** when you see obvious and consistent improvement each day, when practicing feels like a rewarding adventure (most of the time!), when you start coming to your lessons with specific questions, and when you’re ***surprised*** by the things you learn in the lesson! Come to each lesson having already done what you know to do - then we’ll elevate it even further!

### Step 1: Prepare for Success

- Practice when you are most productive. (In the morning before school or work? In the early afternoon? After dinner? Right before bed?)
- Make the space around your piano inviting (clean, well-lit, comfortable temperature, etc.) and keep your music, metronome, music dictionary, and a pencil out so you can get right to it whenever the mood strikes.
- Stay focused - no phones, no distractions! Develop “attentional endurance” - the ability to stay focused and on-task for longer periods of time.
- Incorporate these three elements of effective practicing, depending on the stage of the piece:

1. Conceptual - figuring out how a piece can/should/deserves to sound: listen to multiple recordings by different artists; listen to different types of pieces by the same composer and his/her contemporaries; learn about the composer and current events of the time; look at artwork from the time period; study the score and hear it take shape in your own mind
2. Mechanical - learning how to produce that sound with our bodies
3. Performance - producing exactly the sound we want from the beginning to the end - not just once, or after a few tries, but on the very first try

### **Step 2: Expect Progress - Set Specific, Achievable Goals**

- Read the previous day's Practice Summary at the beginning of your practice session.
- Set appropriate goals for each piece. Build a solid foundation and add on from there.
  1. Notes-rhythm-fingering
  2. Articulation, dynamics
  3. Phrase shape, balance of melody and accompaniment, pedal(s)
  4. Tempo and overall artistry, mood, character
  5. Memorization and the ability to play beautifully the first time, even under pressure
- End each practice session by jotting down one specific thing you'd like to improve in each piece and one or two ways to make that improvement. That way you have a clear plan in place for the next practice session!

### **Step 3: Utilize Effective Practice Strategies**

- "HiIT" (high intensity interval training): set a timer for 10 minutes. Define a specific goal to accomplish in that time, and do what it takes to accomplish it. If you have time, repeat the process with another goal.
- Iterative Practice: cycle through the piece (or section) multiple times, with increasing attention to detail each time.
  1. Big-picture basics
  2. Finer details but still pretty obvious
  3. Picky details
  4. Very nit-picky details
- Intentionally practice 50-75% LESS than you normally would, BUT approach each practice session with a clearer plan, more specific objectives, and a determination to be productive for every single minute of your practice time.
- Adopt a problem-solving mindset:
  1. Define the problem (how do I want this to sound?)
  2. Analyze the problem (why doesn't it sound that way?)
  3. Identify possible solutions
  4. Test your solutions
  5. Implement the best solution
  6. Continuously evaluate: am I getting the sound I want or do I need to identify more possible solutions?

- Record your practice - and watch it! Take notes. It's often easier to tell what can be improved when you can objectively see and hear what you are actually doing (as opposed to what you think or hope you are doing).

#### Step 4: Sum it Up!

So, what do you actually write in your Practice Journal? It's up to you! But here's a structure to get you started.

- **Before-Practice Goals: assess each piece and jot down the one or two most obvious things you'd like to improve. List a few ways to make those improvements.**  
*Example: "Schubert: improve clarity, evenness, and musicality in LH trills. Try: warm up thoroughly, including lots of trill prep exercises; keep arm relaxed; crescendo through the trill. Mozart: increase tempo. Use metronome, stay in control but push. Bach: get it started already! Figure out fingering for the Gigue."*
- **Keep track of significant milestones so you can build on them tomorrow.**  
*Example: "Schubert m. 125-126 accurate at 50 today. Goal speed: 80!"*
- **Practice Summary: after each practice, answer these questions:**
  1. **What did I do WELL in this practice session?**
  2. **What is one thing I want to improve in my next practice session?**
  3. **What is one thing I can do differently to help make that improvement?**
  4. **How would I rate today's practice session on a scale of 1 (poor) to 10 (amazing)?**

*Example: Today I really brought out the dynamics and created exciting contrasts between the sections. Tomorrow I want to be sure I'm using a smart fingering in the left hand so the notes fall under my hand more easily. I'll start at m. 25 and play LH alone, slowly at first. Today's practice was an 8!*

When you read your journal the next day, hopefully you'll feel energized by what you accomplished and eager to follow through on your plan! Over time you'll feel a greater sense of ownership in your playing and develop your own educated artistic vision. You'll set new and higher goals for yourself, and have confidence in your ability to problem-solve and follow through until you reach those goals. Ultimately, you'll be an independent, expressive, artistic musician, set up to enjoy music for the rest of your life.

*These practice journal ideas are both developed from Cathy Smetana's own practice and based on the work of Noa Kageyama ([bulletproofmusician.com](http://bulletproofmusician.com)) and Jason Selk ([enhancedperformanceinc.com](http://enhancedperformanceinc.com)).*