

Making the Piece Reliable

My work is a game, a very serious game.

M.C. Escher

Sample Only: Chapter 7

Sections indicated in RED below are included in this sample.

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The Practice Revolution: Chapter 7

- Defining the Task • Pressure Through Games
- The impact of Games on Practicing • The Limitation of Pressure Games • The Seven Stages of Misery • The Great Race • Tic-Tac-Toe • The Ledger System • The Lap • Card Games • The Twenty Minute Consequence • Hangman • Tweaking the Challenges for Games

7. Making the Piece Reliable

7.1 Defining the task

This stage becomes active as soon as the student has learned their piece well enough that they are *no longer surprised by information in the score* – in other words, once their new piece has been through the boot camp of techniques recommended in the “Learning New Pieces” chapter.

At this point, their piece is by no means performance ready, with plenty of work yet to be done with dynamics, phrasing and other interpretation issues, but at least they’re not being flummoxed by unfamiliar passages. In fact, most of the time they probably play it quite fluently.

Most of the time – and that’s the issue at the center of this chapter. Every so often, their piece will still collapse in a tangle of smouldering sixteenth notes, prompting protests of “It sounded better at home!”.

When students make this complaint, they’re actually admitting to more than they’d like. They’re effectively telling you “I can play this bit, but only sometimes – and probably not under pressure”.

It doesn’t matter how well your students have played their piece at selected glorious moments in their past. It’s now how well they can play the piece *when it really counts*. At the concert. In the workshop. Or even simply getting it right for the lesson.

7.1.1 Embracing the fear

Traditionally the solution for maximizing reliability has been to try to *minimize the pressure* that students feel at performances. The audience won’t eat you. The sun will still rise tomorrow even if you make a mistake. Don’t worry about it, I’m sure it will be all right on the night. That sort of thing.

Problem is, it doesn’t work. Feeling nervous to some extent is inevitable for anyone who cares about the outcome of a particular situation, and no amount of flowery rhetoric from the teacher is going to change that. (Was there EVER a concert that you weren’t nervous for as a student?)

So instead of trying to eliminate the notion of pressure from our student's consciousness, we should be trying to get them *used* to operating effectively in the face of it. And there's only one way to do that.

Introduce it into the practice room.

Because just like scales, new pieces or difficult runs, *having to play under pressure can be practiced*, and will improve noticeably with attention. The next time the student has to perform, and is feeling a little nervous, playing while nervous will be familiar territory for them. They'll know exactly how the piece will respond when the temperature is hot, because it's been in the furnace many times at home already.

In fact, compared to some of the techniques that this section of the book has in store for them, the performance itself should seem positively *easy*.

The aim of this chapter is to provide practice methods that will allow your students to put their pieces under genuine pressure in the practice room, and to discover any passages which might be brittle—before the performance uncovers those sections anyway.

7.2 Pressure through games

Part of the reason that practice rooms can seem so delightfully pressure-free is that there are *no consequences for errors*. If students mess something up, they can simply try it again—if they even noticed the mistake in the first place.

This is not a luxury they have at the lesson, hence the complaint that “it didn't sound like this at home!” when the mistakes are produced and noticed. The reality is that it actually *did* sound like this at home much of the time—it's just that the student wasn't paying attention.

It's time to create some consequences for errors at home too. Not to punish the student, but to increase their awareness of what really happens as they practice. Because if they practice mistakes, they'll perform mistakes, and ignorance is only bliss until the day of the concert.

In talking about “consequences”, I'm not proposing that the student be locked in a cupboard every time they play a wrong note. However, the reality is that they *will* practice with greater focus if there is a prescribed reaction of some sort to errors. The presence of consequences for errors won't eliminate mistakes that are caused by the student genuinely not understanding a passage, or those that are a reflection of technical

shortcomings. But it will eliminate errors caused by lack of concentration.

And that is a *lot* of errors.

The point is that as soon as automatic responses to errors are introduced to the practice process, students approach their work much more carefully – which then has profound implications for their ability to deliver pieces reliably.

7.2.1 Games as a vehicle for defining consequences

The practice techniques that follow are all dressed up as games the student can play, not because they're trying to disguise practicing as "fun" (although a lot of them can be!), but because by their very nature, *games provide consequences for the actions of the player*.

In other words, the student will not only have a framework for noticing mistakes in the first place, the game will also provide a reason for the student to *care* whether or not the mistake took place. If they make a mistake, there's a penalty, if they don't there's a reward.

So if they want to win, they need to play not only accurately, but accurately *consistently*. The same holds true for the performance itself – it's just that the penalties and rewards are different.

Quite apart from introducing some quality assurance into the practice process, games also provide a clear set of *rules*, so that the student's practice session *runs itself*, without them having to constantly wonder about what they should be doing next.

And most importantly, games can be *won*. Most of the games outlined in this chapter are tough to win, and the moment of victory can be a tremendous confidence boost. If anyone were to ask them on performance day "So – you think you're ready for this?", the student could provide a long list of evidence demonstrating that they are, simply by listing all the games they have played – and won – while practicing.

7.3 The impact of games on practicing

Most of these games share a common theme: Your practice session is over as soon as the game has been won. But it's not over *until* the game has been won.

In other words, if as a student, you want to maximize your free time, then the game *has* to go well for you—all of which gets them thinking about what they can do to ensure the game does go well. After playing a few games, they will discover that *how* they practice has a huge bearing on the outcome of the game. By modifying their behavior, and being smart about how they play, the games are over much sooner.

It just so happens that most of these behavior modifications are ideas that as their teacher, you would be applauding anyway:

The games go better if I practice slower

It won't take your student too long to discover a link between playing too fast and making game-prolonging errors. So paradoxically, the fastest way for them to get through each game is to play *slowly*.

The games go better if I don't try to tackle too much at once

Students who normally practice by trying to deal with the piece as a whole will quickly discover that smaller sections are much more co-operative. In short, every extra phrase they add to the section they are working on increases the odds that something will go wrong during the game.

The games go better if I'm careful with fingering

Particularly for piano students. Pupils who like to improvise their own fingering will discover that games can go on forever. So they learn to stick consistently with one fingering that works.

The games go better if I truly understand the passage in my head *before* I try to play it with my fingers

Games all but eliminate the practice technique of "fishing" for the correct notes with your fingers. Most of the rules are stacked heavily against trial and error approaches to practicing, forcing students to use their brains a little more when they work, rather than waiting for their fingers to stumble on the answers.

The games go better if I find out what *causes* stubborn mistakes

If all the student does is simply try the same section over and over again, they will often get bitten by the same mistakes time and time again. They'll discover that the best way to stop an error from giving them a hard time is to find out what makes it tick in the first place. It might be an unworkable fingering, or a clef change, or a missed accidental—but until they can label it, the problem is likely to recur. It comes back to a simple maxim:

"If you keep doing what you've been doing, you'll keep getting what you've been getting".

If the student doesn't like what they've been getting, they need to make intelligent changes, or risk history repeating itself.

The games go better if I frame things positively

Some of these games are tougher than others, and students need to maintain a "can-do!" assumption, otherwise their own thinking will defeat them. Students will soon learn that there is a close relationship between how they think a playthrough attempt will go, and how it actually goes—a lesson they need to understand long before they try the piece on stage .

7.4 The limitation of pressure games

Like all the practice techniques outlined in the Practice Revolution, pressure games are designed with a specific problem in mind. They excel in creating a practice framework that encourages *concentration* from the student, while also helping the student identify sections that are brittle under pressure. Similarly, they also allow students to "tick" sections that are lesson or performance ready.

However, while these reliability games produce *evidence* of mastery, they are not necessarily designed to be instruments for the *development* of such mastery—despite the fact that sometimes the combination of intense focus and repetition built into most games is enough to turn stubborn

sections around.

But once passages start regularly failing the various games, and have therefore been identified as being “unreliable”, they need to be subjected to other practice techniques. Precisely what those practice techniques need to be will depend on what was *causing* the unreliability in the first place.

So if the unreliability is present because the student simply doesn't know the notes well enough, they should be using techniques from the previous chapter on “Learning the New Piece”. If the unreliability is because of a *technical difficulty* inherent in the passage itself, they should use techniques either from the “Speeding the Piece Up” chapter, or the chapter on “Taming Tricky Bits”. And if the problem was to do with insecure memory, then the chapter on Memorization will provide the techniques that the student needs.

The best way to imagine these pressure games therefore is as *diagnostic tools* and instruments of focus, rather than cures in their own right. With those warnings aside, it's time to meet the games themselves.

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You can meet the practice games themselves, together with hints on how to customize those games in the print version of *The Practice Revolution*

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