

Practicing Piano on a Keyboard

Five tips to make practice time as effective and engaging as possible

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- **Introduction**

- With shelter in place directives and self-quarantine guidelines in place, many pianists are left without access to the acoustic instruments they may be accustomed to practicing on - whether at universities, practice studios, churches, piano shops, or schools - and are relegated to do the bulk, if not the entirety, of their practice on an electronic keyboard
- While certainly better than nothing, it is simply not a direct substitute that we should approach without forethought - in fact, this can be a potentially detrimental time in students' practice journeys, and without proper guidance and mindfulness they may risk introducing unintended bad habits and harmful injury in the process
- Assuring a proper setup for keyboard practice at home, as well as being attentive to certain technical guidelines and principles, will ensure healthy development and will keep students on track to return to their studies as normal in the future

- **Sitting**

- Before even getting into playing, one of the most important things to set up is how to sit at the keyboard
 - Aim for the forearm to be roughly parallel with the floor and give the arm and wrist flexibility to move and adjust to the topography of the keyboard
 - Shoulders should be dropped and relaxed, back should be supported and tall, and the center of gravity should lean towards the front of the bench so as not to encourage slouching backwards
 - The hand should maintain a strong bridge (the row of knuckles connecting the fingers to the hand) as well as a fluid, supple wrist
- Most chairs are not designed to be proper keyboard height - and many adjustable keyboard stands have limited range of motion and options for height increments
 - Consider being creative with seating - stacking books or a pillow on a kitchen chair that would normally be too low, or creating a makeshift piano bench from cushions and low-standing tables
 - Consider setting the keyboard (if detached from its stand) between two low shelves or tables, on a coffee table or desk, or finding creative surfaces to assure a proper height.
 - Ensure safety and stability when using irregular stands and seating, as well as comfort and flexibility
- Sitting too low (with elbow significantly lower than wrist) or too high (with elbow significantly higher than wrist) can put great strain on the muscles surrounding the wrist and forearm, and promote a collapsed bridge of the hand in order to compensate
 - Finding a proper, comfortable sitting height and position is imperative in preventing a variety of repetitive stress injuries, carpal tunnel, and tendinitis - and is the first step in promoting a healthy, efficient technique

- **Touch**

- One of the foundational and important principles to a healthy piano technique is the immediate and complete relaxation of the finger, wrist, and arm after articulation
 - Realizing that we are one of very few instruments who can no longer control the sound once it has been made, any effort spent pushing the key down or otherwise pressing or holding beyond the nominal weight required to keep the dampers raised is wasted and should be avoided at all costs
- Many keyboards have attempted to mimic the action of an acoustic piano by electronic means - some mostly successfully, and some not.
 - Be aware of artificial or “spring-like” action on some lower-end keyboards - this can entirely train the technique in an unhealthy and dangerous manner, encouraging tension within the hand and an awkward wrist position, and discouraging release and relaxation
 - Most notably, many keyboards require a significant amount of pressure or push to hold the key down - dramatically more than the action of a piano would require - which inadvertently cause the wrist to tense and the finger to press
- With this in mind, it is imperative that practice on such an instrument is extraordinarily and excessively mindful of these technical principles, aiming aggressively for release and avoiding any latent tension accumulation
 - Depending on the level of student and repertoire, it may be more valuable in the long run even to practice legato passages or pieces in a more detached manner, simply to discourage the hand from learning the notes along with the unintended choreography of a stiff wrist and rigid fingers
 - Encourage students to take more regular and more frequent breaks - perhaps every five or ten minutes, stand up from the keyboard, take a short walk around the house, and shake out any tension or accrued stiffness that may have snuck into practice time
- Most importantly, it is crucial to remember that this time of practicing on a keyboard is temporary and we will eventually be able to return to the piano - when we do, we certainly do not want to spend several more months detraining bad habits picked up along the way in blind pursuit of note-learning or repertoire-learning

- **Pedal**

- The pedal is often the least discussed and least understood aspects of piano playing - but one of the most important to understand and master
- Any pedal that can be plugged in is not really a “pedal”
 - The piano pedal is not a digital (on/off) switch - it has infinite variety and depth of damper adjustment, color, and many creative effects to lend to our playing
 - We may have to use some measure of imagination here, basing our pedaling more on previously learned gestures and less on the direct sound coming out of the speaker
- On the bright side, it can be advantageous to have to listen clearly for clean pedaling
 - As nearly all electronic pedals are simply an either on-or-off mechanism, a sloppy pedal change can be much easier to notice and avoid here, and students with challenges regarding clean pedaling may find the lack of subtlety to be advantageous
 - This may be a time to review and reexamine the process of proper pedaling - play a chord, put the pedal down, play a different chord - holding the new

harmony in the fingers, lift the pedal until the ear confirms the old chord is no longer sounding, and drop the pedal while the fingers are still down

- As always, we should do our best to focus legato within the arm and wrist, and not rely on the pedal as a crutch - as long as we are able to do so with healthy, fluent technique and not involuntarily create habits of holding or pressing while doing so
- **Sound**
 - The wide variety of electronic instruments on the market have an even wider variety of sounds available - from the clearly artificial MIDI sounds to high definition recorded sounds of acoustic instruments
 - Many keyboards have certain “thresholds of velocity” with dramatically distinct articulations within each range of attack speed
 - Rather than a smooth curve from pianissimo to fortissimo, a keyboard may have a handful of predefined dynamic ranges that the player has little control over
 - Try to find the most mellow and least bright sound available on your instrument, or turn down any brightness or articulation dials to their lowest setting
 - Avoid brittle, aggressive articulations which may cause us to shy away from using healthy technique
 - This encourages playing from the arm weight and filling the sound with our technique, not trying to control the individual speed of pressing a button with our fingers
- **Fun**
 - Explore different sounds, presets, recording options, and rhythmic patterns that may be built-in to your keyboard
 - Practice baroque music with a harpsichord or organ sound, discover Beethoven in a new light with an orchestra preset, improvise over Chopin with a Fender-Rhodes - take advantage of the new, interesting, and often quirky sounds and options the instrument may present
 - Many keyboards have a record option that allows you to record a track and then play on top of it with different sounds - this can be a great way to practice collaborative playing by recording the melody and then playing the accompaniment along with it afterwards, or creating interesting layering effects that encourage listening and collaborative skills
- **Conclusion**
 - We will all be back to normal soon enough, concert seasons will be back in full swing again, and we will resume our studies as normal before we know it
 - Use this time as “off season” practice, not to relax and lose all of the technique we have all worked so hard to build
 - We do not want to come back to the piano in a few months and have to spend months in rehabilitative practice just to get back to a normal, healthy, natural technique
 - Use this time to engage with new skills - daily sight reading and improvisation practice, exploring new repertoire, and listening to live concerts and recordings online will all help us stay in top shape and keep our minds and fingers engaged in the interim
 - Stay safe, be sure to frequently wash hands and clean keyboard surfaces, and make the most of our time away from the piano by being mindful of these principles