



“Tuning Up” to Practice

Unlike other instrumentalists, we pianists don't need to tune our instrument every time we play. Around twice a year we call the piano tuner to take care of it. However, there are times when we DO need to consciously “tune up” our frame of mind before we can even sit down at the piano.

If you're like me, there are times when you just don't feel like practicing. It doesn't matter if there's a performance or adjudication coming up, or if you're dreading your next lesson because you haven't prepared *anything*! In spite of that, the last thing you feel like doing is head to the piano.

Over the years, I've found several things that help me get past the procrastination phase, and dive into my pile of music.... including those pieces that I agreed to play for someone, but that maybe aren't my cup of tea, to put it kindly.

First of all, let me say that procrastination, as I understand it, is simply a case of not being mentally and emotionally lined up with the task that you're avoiding. It's actually better if you *don't* practice when you're not in the mood, so to speak, because it will be harder to make good progress.

Not being “lined up” for practice (or “tuned up”) can be the result of many factors, but rather than try to figure all that out, I think it's best to simply jump to solutions! It's really not that difficult to set the stage for a juicy, satisfying learning session, one that leaves you feeling like your brain just expanded, and the music pouring through you is palpable and oh, so delicious!

Here are a few ideas to consider:

Lighting the Fire

Do something, anything, related to your practice. It can be as simple as putting your music up on the rack and seeing yourself practice later today (or tomorrow). Or maybe decide what section you're going to start with when you eventually feel up to it. You could sit down with the score, away from the piano, seeing if there's something you never noticed before. (That's actually important practice!) Or listen to a recording of your piece, or of any piano piece, for that matter, etc..... anything to get the momentum going.

You see, it's mostly about what you choose to focus on, and the longer you focus on something that you're wanting to accomplish, the more the momentum builds and the more in tune you become to the task at hand.

Another important thing to keep in mind: your best, most productive practice is FUN, so putting yourself in a light, playful frame of mind is one of the best ways to “tune” yourself to practice-mode.

Finding the Sweet Spot of Energy, Momentum, and Enjoyment by Making Lists of Appreciation

What if you don't like the music you're required to play?

Make a list of positive things about the pieces, along with positive aspects of learning these pieces. It doesn't matter what the circumstance (or piece) is, you can always find something positive about it, for example:

- I enjoy the rhythm
- It's easy to play it fast
- This section has a pretty melody
- Playing this piece helps me learn.... [something that's been difficult in other pieces]

What if your parents are making you practice when you're not in the mood?

Make a list of things you appreciate about playing the piano in general, such as:

- I love my piano
- I enjoy hearing compliments from others when I play for them
- I appreciate that my parents are giving me lessons
- I love the feeling of playing easy music
- I love the feeling of making difficult passages easy to play
- I like that sense of accomplishment when I finally "get" the piece, or section

What if you're stuck because you have doubts about your ability to learn a particular piece?

Make a list that starts with something that you know for sure about your ability to learn, such as:

- I've learned pieces before, even though they were hard to start with
- I enjoy learning new things
- I like that I can discriminate.... [dynamics, mood, harmonies, etc.]
- I love the *feeling* of playing the piano
- It feels so good when "difficult" becomes easy
- Learning to play a piece makes me feel smart
- I love to make music, and this is going to be fun!

Keep the list going until you reach a feeling of confidence and eagerness to learn.

What if you're in the mood to practice, but you're feeling overwhelmed with homework, etc.?

It helps to give yourself permission to devote a block of time every day to piano practice, preferably before homework. In that block of time, be very present with your practice. Even if your practice time is shorter than usual, a lot can be accomplished if you focus on short sections that need the most work.

Before going to sleep at night, make a list of all the things you appreciate about playing the piano. This simple exercise is very powerful!

And finally, have compassion for yourself, be light, have fun learning. Remember that "practice" is simply a series of little moments that comprise a wonderful journey!