

How to Practice and Learn Quickly!

By Lisa Shirah-Hiers

Your brain is like a field of un-mown grass. If you walk across the grass one time, it will spring back and won't show where you walked. But if you walk across the same place every day, pretty soon there will be a new dirt path there. If you play your piece once or twice your brain won't make a new path and you won't remember how to play the piece. But if you repeat it many times your brain will make a new pathway and it will become easy!

Our brains can only store about seven pieces of information in short term memory. That is why phone numbers are only seven numbers long. To learn quickly you must limit the amount of information you are trying to learn at one time. If you practice just one or two measures, and play them over and over again, you will learn that part of the music in just a couple of minutes! Your brain will make a new path. Then you can learn the next measure or two by itself. When you know the first few one or two measure sections, then you can try putting them together and playing all four measures at once. You might find you can do each section well, but get "stuck" crossing the bar line. If that happens you will have to practice the from the end of one measure to the beginning of the next measure. This way of practicing is a little like sewing a quilt; first you shape each square (measure) and learn that, then you sew them all together.

Your brain has different areas that learn in different ways. Part of your brain learns by using your eyes and looking at something. Part of it learns by listening/hearing. Part of it learns by moving. Part learns by speaking or singing. If you use all the different parts of your brain to learn the same thing, you will learn it fast and really well.

On the next page are some ways to practice a new song. Do these steps for each small one or two measure section of the piece, then do the same thing when you "sew" sections together. You may not have time to do all these steps every time you practice. Choose different ways each time you practice. If you do all the steps you will use your listening brain, speaking/singing brain, feeling/moving brain and your thinking brain.

Ten Ways to Learn Music Quickly

- 1) Clap and count the rhythm.
- 2) Look at the shape of the melody before you try to play it. Where are the repeats? Steps? Skips? When does the music go up? When does it go down?
- 3) Play your “air piano”. That means move the correct fingers in the air while you say the finger numbers. (Remember you might have to do this for just one or two measures to learn quickly.)
- 4) Put your hand on the keys and say the finger numbers while you play one or two measures at a time.
- 5) Put your hand on the keys and say the note names while you play one or two measures at a time.
- 6) Sing the note names without playing. Now sing while you play.
- 7) Sing the finger numbers without playing. Now sing while you play.
- 8) If the song has words, sing it without playing, then while playing.
- 9) For long or complex pieces use sticky notes to isolate one short passage of music to practice. Make sure you end a passage across the barline with the downbeat of the next measure.
- 10) Try looking at your music away from the piano. Can you hear it in your head? Experienced musicians can “hear” a piece of music just by looking at the notes the way you can hear the words on this page without reading it out loud. Looking at your music away from the piano will help you develop this skill.

There are many more ways to practice and learn a piece of music. Ask your teacher to help you. Set goals for each practice session. Practice smart and you will accomplish more in less time.