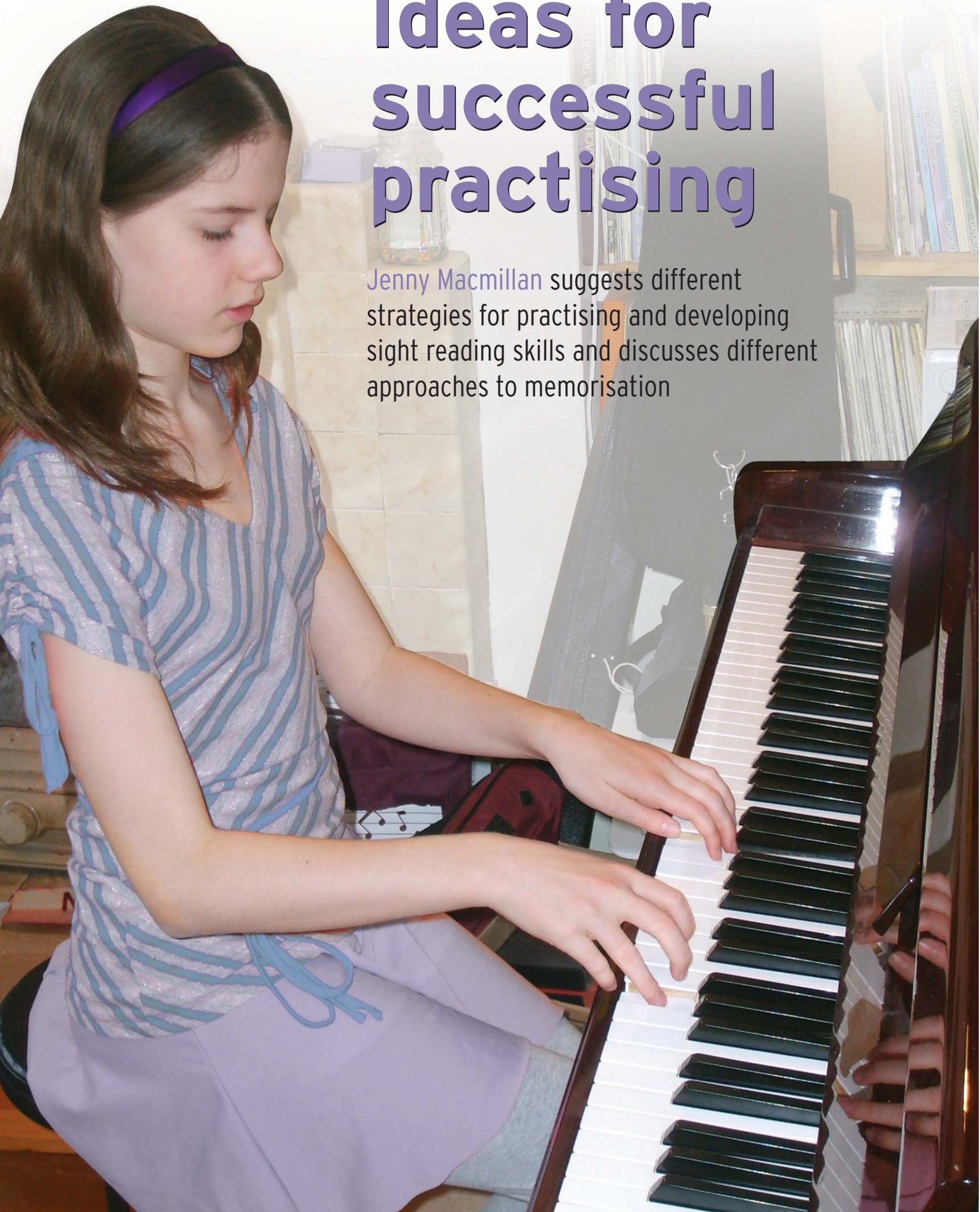


Ideas for successful practising

Jenny Macmillan suggests different strategies for practising and developing sight reading skills and discusses different approaches to memorisation



STRATEGIES FOR PRACTISING

First a few ideas for practising specific difficulties. No-one will agree with every one of these practice strategies, and not every idea is suitable for every piece, but at some time in my experience as a student, a teacher, or an observer, I have found each of the strategies to be useful. If the ideas seem to veer on the side of advocating detailed, analytical practice, it's because the majority of young (and not so young) instrumentalists tend to do too much playing through pieces and not enough diagnosing and solving problems!

TACKLING PROBLEMS

Let's look at some ways of approaching practice:

- First of all, I recommend starting with the most awkward part of a piece – while you are fresh and so it gets covered every day.
- Then focus on the smallest issue – break up the problem into simple parts, for instance identify scale and arpeggio patterns, awkward leaps, tricky rhythms – and practise short sections accordingly.
- Make the problem more complex, for instance if there is a leap of one octave, practise leaping two, three and four octaves; on return to the actual interval it seems, in comparison, easier.
- Use a metronome. When a tricky passage can be played perfectly at a steady speed, gradually notch up the metronome until the passage can be played at full speed. Murray McLachlan explains that using the MM helps create "order, discipline and control," because it leaves "no room for hesitation, uncertainty or confusion." He considers it excellent for developing technique.

- As a contrasting way of practising, temporarily allow yourself to play inaccurately – wrong notes, loose rhythm, poor intonation. First practise the movements, the feel, the sound – even deliberately playing wrongly. Use the whole body freely. Then gradually focus on one aspect at a time to improve it. This is a favourite point of William Westney in his wonderful book *The Perfect Wrong Note* – initially the movement and the sound are the most important, not the correct note.

- If a student is not progressing well, yet I know they are practising regularly, I often ask them to record a practice for me. Viewing or listening to this invariably sheds light on where the problems lie.

ACCURACY

The ability to identify errors and learn how to deal with them needs to be developed as early as possible.

- Practise a beat or a bar up to speed and stop, play the next beat or bar and stop – at each stop review what you have done and think about what you want to do next – listen, look and analyse.
- Stop at each mistake and practise the difficulty, otherwise you may not remember it. Don't fudge – all the notes are important.
- After attempting a difficult passage several times and finally playing it successfully, it is important to repeat the passage correctly several times, otherwise the incorrect one which has been played many times will be retained better than the correct one which has been played only once. It takes discipline to do this!
- It is important to practise not only the assigned passage, but

also to put it into context – to arrive in a controlled fashion. Start a beat before, or a bar before, then two bars before, then at the beginning of the phrase, each time listening to check that the awkward passage is still correct. Apart from anything else, this offers more scope for repetition of the tricky passage.

“Security of performing from memory comes from memorising in several different ways

MOSAIC PRACTICE

- Work at all similar passages in the piece, for instance melody throughout, accompaniment throughout, all staccato sections, all piano sections and all semiquaver passages.
- Choose a piece with stepped dynamics, for instance piano and forte but not diminuendo and crescendo. Play all the soft passages, then all the strong ones; then sing the strong ones and play the soft ones and vice versa; then play all through stopping at each change of dynamic to prepare physically and mentally for the new sound.

OPPOSITES

- Practise opposites, for instance legato passages staccato and double staccato for active fingertips, or staccato passages legato for accurate fingering.
- Deliberately practise exaggerating the opposite of what is needed. For example,

upbeats generally need to be played softly – how does it sound if they are played strongly?! This sort of practice helps develop the ability to listen acutely.

- Sometimes practise slow pieces fast to understand the structure, phrasing, climax; sometimes practise fast pieces slowly to get the detail precise.

TIPS AND TRICKS

Double bassist Duncan McTier writes in his *Tips and Tricks*: "Any mistake, or less than acceptable result, made within a passage is more than likely to repeat itself unless corrective action is taken. Faults do not correct themselves merely by repetition! Before a passage can be improved, the player must first play detective, analyse the result of the previous attempt and decide what plan of action is required to improve it. It is imperative to work slowly enough, or on sections that are sufficiently small, for the player to be able to notice all the problems."

THREE ANECDOTES

Here are three of my favourite anecdotes:

- Practise fast, progress slowly; practise slowly, progress fast
- The faster the piece, the slower the practice
- The cleverer you are, the slower you can play

DEVELOPING SIGHT READING SKILLS

Some ideas for developing sight reading skills:

- Look at one bar or phrase of music for ten seconds, cover it up and play it (to develop short-term memory).
- Transpose a sight reading piece (then how much easier is it to read it in the original key!).
- Improvise in the key of the

piece (remembering that good improvisers tend to be good sight readers).

- Try playing the correct rhythm but improvising the notes (for perfectionists who will insist on going back to correct their mistakes).

- The best sight readers don't look at their instrument while playing. Therefore, get used to playing your repertoire pieces without looking at your fingers, with your eyes closed, or in the dark.



PLAYING FROM MEMORY

People vary in their memorising preferences. Those with strong aural memory may like to play a piece and then listen back to it in their head. Those with strong visual memory will look at the music and then repeat short passages at their instrument. Kinaesthetic memory involves miming a piece, perhaps on a table top. Analytical memorisers will examine the piece for its structure.

Security of performing from memory comes from memorising in several different ways. Here are ten different approaches to memorising. Adopting as many methods as possible should lead to greater success.

1. After playing through the piece a couple of times to get the gist of it, memorising should begin immediately, rather than first learning a piece, and then deciding to commit it to memory.
2. Pure repetition is an inefficient way of memorising. It is important to support the memory with an analysis of the structure of the music – understanding the harmonic changes, the melodic sequences, the rhythmic patterns and the form of the piece.

“**The ability to identify errors and learn how to deal with them needs to be developed as early as possible**”

3. It is more important to concentrate on the musical aspects of a piece than the technical aspects when memorising. These aspects might include identifying phrase shapes, climaxes and the emotional colour of the music.
4. Effective practice requires breaking down and repeating passages that are causing difficulty. Playing from memory very slowly will develop security. Work by repeating short sections of the music.
5. Professional musicians are able to think through the music away from their instrument. They rehearse the music in their minds. Miming the music from memory at the instrument is another valuable method of becoming more secure.
6. If mistakes are made when practising from memory, it is important to listen and correct the errors by ear, rather than refer to the music, in order to develop aural awareness and security.
7. It is essential to identify strategic points in the music and practise

- starting from each of them. Also useful is to mime picking up from any bar in the music.
8. Practising a piece several times during the day offers repeated opportunities for the music to transfer from short-term to long-term memory. Regular, shorter practices are more beneficial than infrequent, long practices.
9. Listen extensively to master performances of the music being learned, as well as to other music by the same and contemporary composers.
10. Practise performing in all sorts of situations in order to build confidence. One successful memorised performance increases confidence so the task becomes less demanding next time.

CONCLUSION

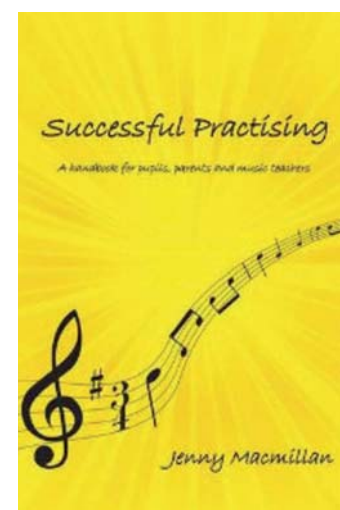
Learning an instrument involves discovering how to tackle difficulties – through analysing each problem, devising a strategy to overcome it, and applying that strategy.

It requires self-discipline to dedicate time to practise. Arguably, playing an instrument develops co-ordination, memory, and mental agility. It is possible that improvements in these areas will enhance self-esteem.

Above all, patience must be learned. The Zen master, Dogen, replied to a young monk who was anxious that his progress was slow: 'The joyfully seeking mind is primary.' ■

NOTES

- McLachlan, M. (2011) Using the metronome in technical work. *International Piano*, Jan/Feb 2011.
- Westney, W. (2003) *The Perfect Wrong Note: Learning to Trust your Musical Self*. Pompton Plains, NJ, USA: Amadeus Press.
- McTier, D. (1999) *Tips and Tricks, Volume 1: Preparation and Practice*. Twickenham, UK: McTier Music MM402.



FURTHER INFORMATION

Jenny Macmillan's book, *Successful Practising: A handbook for pupils, parents and music teachers*, is available from shops @ £15 and from her website @ £15 including p+p within the UK (£18 outside the UK). Find out more and read sample pages on: www.jennymacmillan.co.uk