

Music Btec Practice Report.

By Emily Crutcher

In this report I am going to describe Warm-up techniques, technical exercises, studies, repertoire and cool-down / relaxation techniques, referring specifically to my instrument - the piano.

With the piano, a variety of warm-up techniques and technical exercises are necessary, not only to get the piano 'going' or tuned, but also to warm-up your fingers and wrists so that you can play properly. There are a variety of different methods you could use to warm up both the piano and yourself, as well as using technical exercises, but perhaps the most common and the most effective are scales, in particular: Contrary motion; scales where you begin on one middle note, and work outwards from that note with both hands using all the standard scale notes, Arpeggios; these are scales where you play the 1st, 3rd, 5th, 1st/8th, 3rd, 5th notes of the scales and then come back down again. Broken Chords are similar to arpeggios, using the same notes, but instead, you begin with 1st, 3rd, 5th; then go to 3rd, 5th 1st/8th and so on, before carrying on back down again. Chromatics where you play all the notes - including black notes - for one or two octaves and also standard scales - the notes of the scale, usually with both hands and played with one or two octaves. All of the before warm-ups will help to warm-up both your fingers and your piano, so that you can play well for your lesson or performance. In my lessons, we always start off with about 5 minutes of scales to get both myself and the piano going. It also helps when playing my pieces, because scales are the bases of all tunes and songs.

You should also try to play your scales smoothly. Here are a few things I think help to keep your scales smooth:

- When tucking your thumb in a scale run, let the thumb gradually move into position while the fingers before it are playing so the thumb doesn't wind up being late into position, which causes you to jerk your hand in an awkward direction to try to get there on time.
- Beware of individual fingers that may be stronger than the others (many times the thumb or middle finger) that might create accents in your scale run you don't want. Think in terms of the overall philosophy of "finger independence" in which all the fingers are equally weighted to give you the smoothest run possible.
- Avoid awkward or uncomfortable hand movements of positions that are not necessary in the scales - these will only make it harder to play them. When crossing your fingers over, don't use your whole wrists, but just turn it round in a comfortable way and use your fingers to stretch the rest of the way.

When studying, practicing and performing your repertoire, you must always make sure you have warmed up first. After that, quickly scan over the piece, and then count yourself in using the time signature - you should make sure you remember any sharps or flats in the piece and what key it is in. If you know which key your repertoire is in then it will make your piece a lot easier to play.

I usually work on my grade pieces when I go to my lessons, but occasionally I

will use 'making the grade' books, to get me ready for the next grade. For instance, one of my Grade 3 pieces that I worked on was called 'Allegretto,' and it was in the key of D major. D major contains all of its notes natural, except F# so it is easy to tell it apart from others, and also easy to play. If I ever become stuck or cannot play parts in a piece I am working on, my piano teacher tells me to work on it 'phrase by phrase.' This helps you get the hang of it, and then you can put it all together. When practicing a piece that contains some phrases you find easy and some that you find hard, you should work on all of them together at the same speed, because once you have perfected your playing you can then work on timing and dynamics in your repertoire, these two will make your piece more interesting and engaging but it is more important to firstly perfect the notes in your piece. Most accurate work is created at slow speeds in "slow motion". This is when the brain can process notes, rhythms, tone, relaxation, good posture, counting, and accuracy with all simultaneously. Slow practicing creates a "focused" picture of exactly what you are doing for your brain. Fast runs create a "blurry" version of your song. When you try to retrieve it from memory and play you get a blurry version back that is usually filled with all kinds of errors and mistakes. You should also curve your fingers. If you collapse your knuckles when playing, you must try to push the knuckles out to a curved position. This is the starting "power" position in playing, and you will want to keep your hand position in a consistently proper playing position. You shouldn't let random habits of different finger shapes creep into your precise technique.

When playing the piano, it is as equally important to cool-down or relax yourself with techniques as it is to warm up, especially between playing repertoire pieces, relaxation and cool-down techniques relieve stress in the pieces, because if you stress when playing the piano then you will not be able to play nearly as well as you would be able to when you are calm and confident. A Natural technique is the ultimate piano technique. Those who play naturally and effortlessly have a relaxed feel to their playing. Besides creating a natural feel to your playing, building in relaxation to your practice session is important at both the advanced and beginner levels. Benefits to a relaxed approach are:

- Your body saves energy by not working as hard.
- The relaxed state helps to achieve a longer and more COMFORTABLE practice session.
- A relaxed body fosters more ease in creating motions that bring power for playing.
- Relaxation throughout your playing "mechanism" allows more accurate control for accuracy as the brain commands the fingertips and other body parts. The accurate messages your brain is sending your fingers, arms etc., are not disturbed or blocked by excessive tension.
- A relaxed upper body fosters better breathing while playing (deep low diaphragm "baby" breathing) that send more oxygen to your brain constantly. This relaxed and high oxygen state creates Alpha (memorization) waves in your brain important for memorization and overall learning.

Very good – perhaps you could take some photos of the Alexander technique and include those. As a pianist myself, I often find that I get quite tense across my shoulders and I need to do some stretching exercises – do you think you could include these?

Overall a great first draft. Try to include more images and score notation to help to demonstrate your points.