

## Preparing Gen Z Students For Effective Practice

In music study, patience, diligence and focus on long-term goals serve any performer well. Regardless of our current skill level, these qualities help us rise to increasingly difficult musical and technical challenges.

Unfortunately, the current generation of pre-college music students, labeled Generation Z, possesses instead a craving for instant gratification. Students who were born in the early-to-mid 1990s have never known a world without the Internet, so, unsurprisingly, they value the rapid delivery of content at the touch of a screen. As frequent multi-taskers, focusing on a single task for any length of time seems arduous.<sup>1</sup> From our perspective as teachers, these traits challenge us to find creative ways in which to engage our students. Effective music practice strategies involve patience and a high degree of focused attention. Practice techniques, like slow practice or hands-separate practice, are simultaneously the worst

and best for these students since they clash with their “style,” but they also yield quality results in regular practice. How can we foster an appreciation for careful and methodical practice in students who love to hate this type of task?

Before tackling this question, we could first consider whether we *should* foster this appreciation in our students. The alternative choice might be to find shortcuts around the intense style of practice required by advanced music. For this purpose, most of us have a list of “student saver” pieces that we fall back on to get students out of practice ruts. Generally, repertoire that is highly patterned and is simple technically, but sounds hard, keeps students in lessons. Alternatively, many teachers now offer RMM (Recreational Music Making) classes that require less rigorous practice outside of class meetings.

Considering these possibilities, it can be tempting to classify Gen Z students into two dichotomous groups: those who study casually and those who study seriously. As lovers of the great tradition of classical music performance, many of us choose to see instead two merging groups: those who study seriously and those who have not yet realized they want to study seriously. In either case, sustainability is the key. As with many of life’s endeavors, accomplishments that require the most dedication and long-term commitment yield the greatest personal rewards. Also, consider the fact that the longevity of the music

itself will make the largest impact on our students’ lives. Simpler and easier music tends to get old quickly, while the more complex masterworks live up to their reputations as timeless. More than any previous group, Gen Z will need convincing that complex, difficult music is possible and worth the effort. The strategies outlined below will help them to persevere and succeed.

### Strategy 1: Plan For Practice In The Lesson

Teaching our students to practice efficiently and effectively is a significant part of our duties as pedagogues. For beginner students, a significant percentage of lesson time should be dedicated to practicing together within the lesson. After students experience success during the lesson, they will be much more likely to repeat the activity at home. Considering our limited contact time with our students, fitting in all of our content and practice time into a brief meeting period requires advance planning. With a reasonably timed lesson plan in hand, we can easily accomplish our goals. If lesson time seems too short, and we are rushing through the presentation of concepts, or in the worst case, running overtime, this could be an indicator that the challenges we present are too great, and we must find the intermediate steps that will prepare the student gradually.

The most important benefit of students practicing in the lesson is that we get to see and hear them practice correctly. If instead the student misun-

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derstands the week's assignment, even slightly, he can waste a valuable week of progress. When he returns for the next lesson, and we reassign the previous week's work, we risk the student slipping away into a downward spiral toward apathy. If the student returns unprepared for the third week, the writing is on the wall—another lesson will be less appealing than a trip to the dentist's office.

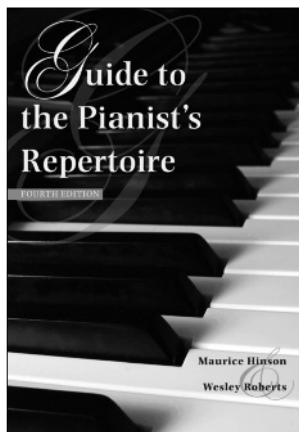
For practice in the lesson, use the most powerful practice techniques appropriate to the specific task. To appeal to some of my students' love for video games, I have started leveling my piano practice techniques by power—in other words, the degree to which a technique helps make a passage easier quickly. Also, just as you would not fight a virtual video game enemy who is strong in fire with a fire attack (Your strongest ice attack will be most successful, of course!), different musical passages require different practice techniques to meet the challenge. For example, at the piano, for long passages of fast sixteenth notes in the right hand with blocked chord accompaniment in the left hand, practice techniques could be leveled this way:

Practice Technique	Power
Hands-separate practice	2
Metronome method (slow to fast)	3
Very slow practice—deep into the keys	5
Slow & detached (non-legato)	6
Stop and prepare practice (fast)	8
Rhythms (long-short, short-long and the like)	8

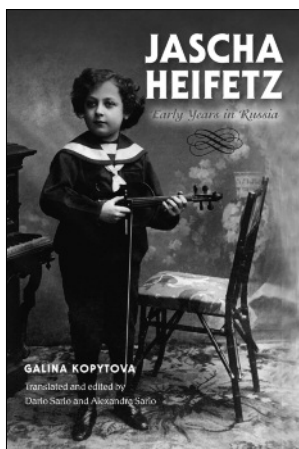
Table 1: Practice Techniques Leveled by Power

For fun, students might also enjoy modifications to degrees of powers. For instance, practicing in two-measure segments add +1 power to each technique, while practicing longer sections subtracts -1 power. When we try the most powerful techniques in the lesson, and after a few repetitions the passage is instantly easier, the student gets excited for a week of practice.

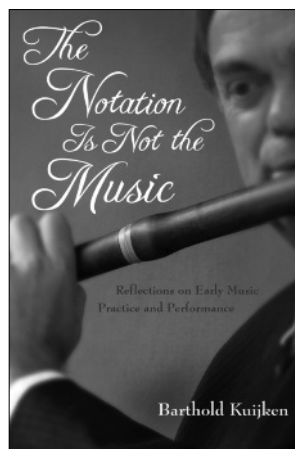
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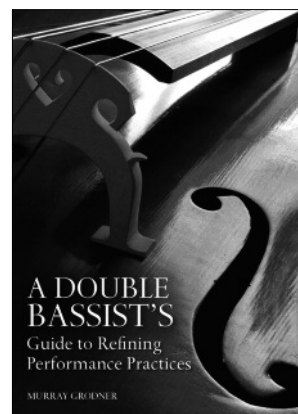
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## Strategy 2: Assign Every Detail Of Practice

When I sit down to practice, I often find the sheer amount of work looming ahead overwhelming. However, after I break down my tasks into manageable parts, I eagerly dive into the experience. Our beginner and intermediate students will require extensive training in learning how to break large goals down into manageable tasks. Depending upon a student's learning style and personality type, the level of detail in assignments and plans can vary, but unless he has many months (or years, in some cases) of quality practice under his belt, we need to offer detailed guidance.

Setting goals at several levels prepares the student for the journey ahead. Consider, as an example, assigning Schumann's *Fantasy Dance, Op. 124, No. 5*.<sup>2</sup> This is an ideal selection for students with bad practice habits—with a bit of careful work, it can sound amazing. The first level of planning should include long-term goals. These goals depend greatly upon the student's level of proficiency, but here is one example:

Week 1	Entire piece performable at a slow tempo; Measures 1–4 memorized
Week 2	Entire piece performable at moderate tempo by memory
Week 3	Entire piece performable hands together or separately by memory
Week 4	Studio class performance at performance tempo

**Table 2: Long-term Goals for Learning Schumann's *Fantasy Dance, Op. 124, No. 5***

This quick pace is possible with the *Fantasy Dance* since it contains only 14 measures of unique music—repeats comprise the remainder of the piece. Longer works would require several more weeks during which more sections are assigned for practice.

The next level of practice would be the actual week's assignment. A check list for week one might look like this:

mm.	Practice technique		Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6
1–4	Blocking	3x						
	Rhythms	3x						
	Slow practice	1x						
5–8	Left hand alone	3x						
	Right hand blocking	3x						
	Hands together blocking	3x						
	Rhythms	3x						
	Slow practice	1x						
9–12	Left hand alone	3x						
	Right hand blocking	3x						
	Hands together blocking	3x						
	Rhythms	3x						
	Slow practice	1x						
1–end	Slow practice	1x						

**Table 3: Week One Practice Assignment**

In this table, the days of practice vary based on the sections assigned. (A darkened cell indicates that the task is not assigned for that day.) An assignment at this level of detail will seem concrete and manageable. This plan also maximizes the effectiveness of each minute of practice time. For Gen Z students, assigning practice time slots (for example, 30–40 minutes each day) yields less desirable results than assigning specific tasks or outlining weekly goals. We probably could

not manage this level of planning for every piece a Gen Z student learns, but for challenging pieces, and until the student is prepared to do this on his own, it is often necessary.

### Strategy 3: Balance Challenging Repertoire With Quick-study Pieces

Even considering the repetitive nature of the *Fantasy Dance*, careful practice is required to voice and shape the melody, along with meticulous pedaling work to control the texture. While a Gen Z student could be well prepared for these challenges with the practice assignments above, he can still be overwhelmed with too many assignments of this type. We must balance our repertoire assignments to include more easily learned works as well.


My students regularly rotate through three levels of repertoire. The first includes several pieces that are almost sight-readable at the student's current level. For beginners, these are often found in method books, and the student is prepared to accomplish one or two specific goals within a single week of practice. The second level of difficulty includes works that require two or three weeks of practice, but they are highly patterned, motivational pieces. (Teaching collections by contemporary composers like Robert Vandall and Christopher Norton contain countless gems that keep students coming back for more.) The third level comprises the most challenging repertoire, and the timeline for practice is expanded as necessary. In this way, while studying one or two challenging pieces, the student is also flying through many easier works.

### Adapt And Persevere!

As experienced teachers, we know there is no one perfect system for every student. They each have unique personalities and backgrounds, and we must be creative and adaptable in order to foster a love for music study within each one. We also realize not every week of practice is the same—our students are inundated with schoolwork, extracurricular activities and other social and family obligations. Our most carefully laid plans sometimes succeed, but at other times fall apart. When they do, our job is to pick up the pieces and find the best way to get back on track quickly. Success breeds motivation. Our goal should be to help our students experience regular success, and through that experience, gain a deeper fascination for advanced music study. ■

### Notes

1. For an extensive list of the characteristics of Generation Z, see Adam Renfrow's article, "Meet Generation Z," at: <http://gettingsmart.com/2012/12/meet-generation-z/> (accessed May 25, 2013).
2. For reference, the score for the *Fantasy Dance* is in the public domain and can be viewed online at: [http://imslp.org/wiki/Albumblätter,\\_Op.124\\_\(Schumann,\\_Robert\)](http://imslp.org/wiki/Albumblätter,_Op.124_(Schumann,_Robert)) (accessed May 25, 2013).




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