

Are technique exercises really important?

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by Rebecca Brown

Like any other extracurricular activity, piano lessons are filled with a mix of fun, work, and some things that don't seem to matter at all. Soccer practices are often filled with dribbling drills. Swim team practice may have them doing flip turns over and over. Basketball practice may spend half an hour doing nothing but shooting free-throws. It's pretty obvious how these exercises contribute to improving their skills in those sports. But what about when the coach makes them do things that don't make as much sense?

I remember groaning over having to do wall sits for what seemed like *hours* in basketball practice! It felt like punishment because it seemed to have nothing to do with basketball! However, basketball players spend a significant amount of time in a squat position during games. Those wall sits and shuffle-squat intervals were strengthening our legs, so we could endure those games and be effective players. It also seemed silly for my daughters to have to spend time doing jumping jacks, etc., on the side of the pool at swim team practice. But those calisthenics were strengthening their cardiovascular system, endurance, and full-body muscle strength. These are all necessary to be a strong swimmer. Soccer players will often do a lot of obstacle courses in order to develop coordination. And did you know that many of the most successful football players have taken ballet lessons in order to develop agility, coordination, and balance?

Piano lessons are no different. Many of the things we practice at the piano may seem like a waste of time, but they are really building the basic, foundational skills necessary to be able to play piano well. These are the skills that take us beyond just "reading notes." I'm going to take a moment to address a few of the most common technique exercises I assign to my students. I tell my students that these are "push-ups for piano." The more attention that is given to all of the technique and rhythm exercises, the easier it will be to fully master each song they are assigned, so they can play them with excellence.

I am a big fan of the Dozen A Day books. These are small technique exercises that focus on different playing techniques that will be used very frequently as they become more advanced in their playing. The first book is very, very easy.....as far as notes are concerned, that is. The exercises are written with easy-to-read notes on purpose. This allows the student to focus on technique, proper hand positioning, proper posture, accurate rhythm, and correct articulation of notes. Every practice session should begin with their Dozen A Day exercises. They should be played with the metronome. And

great attention should be given to playing with proper technique. I tell my students that these are “push-ups for piano.” Any advanced student will tell you that the Dozen A Day exercises don’t stay easy for long, though. They eventually reach a point where this becomes the most difficult part of their entire assignment.

Scales and arpeggios are also an important part of the core of every piano student’s training. Every single piece of music ever written is based around a scale and the chords associated with it. By practicing scales and arpeggios, we train the fingers and the brain to be able to quickly respond to various keys and the scale and chord patterns that will naturally show up in the music they are playing. These should be practiced daily, with great attention to accuracy, evenness, clarity, and fingering. Speed is not the primary goal.

We do, however, have to learn to play fast well. Any student can play fast. It takes a lot of training to be able to do it well, however. Hanon exercises are used with advanced students to help with virtuosity. These help develop individual finger dexterity, but also encourage playing fast passages with evenness and clarity. Students at this level have usually already begun to see the value of their technique exercises.

Another exercise we do regularly is rhythm drills. The right note played at the wrong time is still wrong. It is absolutely critical to learn to play with accurate rhythm....both with *and* without the metronome to assist. Your audience will notice an error in rhythm or unsteady beat LONG before they will notice a missed note. Therefore, we spend lots of time clapping and counting rhythms in piano lessons. I am very picky about accuracy on these exercises. Students need to make daily practice of their rhythm very important. You will also notice that I usually have some requirement about playing with the metronome when practicing their songs, as well. I could (and probably will soon) write an entire article about metronome use. For now, I will just say that the metronome is an invaluable practice tool that should not be neglected.

Obviously, this is not an exhaustive list of tools that we use to teach proper technique, etc in piano lessons. But I hope that, by focusing in on some of the more common ones, I have helped you to better understand the importance of these parts of a student’s assignment.