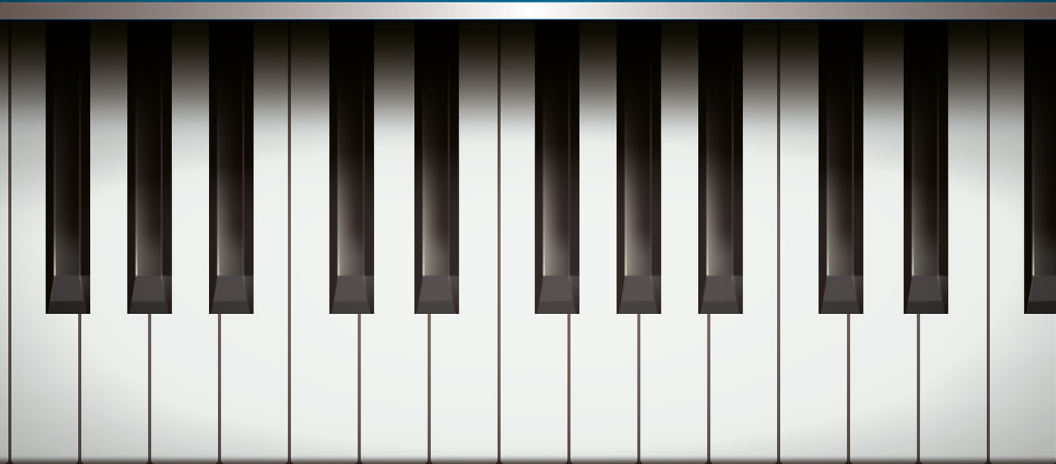


— THE —
TEN
ESSENTIAL
RULES
— FOR —
MASTERING
— THE —
PIANO



**TRANSFORM YOUR PIANO SKILLS AND
UNLEASH YOUR MUSICAL POTENTIAL**

MATTHEW CLAYTON

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CONTENTS

BACKGROUND	6
Learn how to practice properly	9
Learn how to read music	15
Find a good music teacher	18
Practice sight reading everyday	22
Study music theory	25
Maintain motivation	29
Don't neglect technical studies	33
Immerse yourself in the music world	36
Choose an instrument	39
right for you	39
Perform with confidence	42
Practical tips and exercises	45
Final thoughts	68

BACKGROUND

I'd like to share my musical journey with you. Music has been my passion since I began learning piano at the age of five. Through weekly lessons, I progressed through the ABRSM graded piano system and ultimately earned a music degree, followed by a Postgraduate Diploma in music. My initial goal was to become a classroom music teacher, so I enrolled in a teacher training program. However, by that time, I had started taking on private students, and my piano teaching business quickly flourished. I found immense joy in developing my studio and sharing my love for music with my students, which led me to forgo a traditional teaching career. Over the years, I've had the privilege of teaching more than a thousand students how to play the piano.

Fifteen years later, I reflect on my experiences teaching a diverse range of students, from five-year-olds to those in their seventies, across all skill levels from Grade 1 to Grade 8. I've taught piano and music theory in various environments, including schools, colleges, and private lessons, and I've encountered every type of pupil imaginable.

Why the Piano?

I'd like to take a moment to reflect on why I chose the piano over other instruments at such a young age. I was captivated by its ability to produce such a rich and full sound. Unlike instruments like the violin or trumpet, which typically offer a single melodic line, the piano provides an orchestra at your fingertips. You can play both the melody and the accompanying chords simultaneously. If you're reading this, it's likely that you, too, feel a mysterious pull toward this remarkable instrument.

The Purpose of This Book

This book isn't a shortcut to success, but by following the ten rules outlined within, you'll see significant improvements in your piano playing. Dedication and practice are essential; time is a precious resource, no matter your age. We all lead busy lives, and developing a skill can be time-consuming and sometimes frustrating. Have you ever considered how much time you truly dedicate to yourself? When you factor in sleep, work, socialising, and household chores, how many hours remain?

In my experience, success comes down to prioritisation. If you truly want to achieve something, you'll find the time for it. My hope is that this book demonstrates how a small amount of consistent practice, along with the rules I've set out, can lead to significant improvement. I want to show you that practice doesn't have to feel like a chore; rather, it can be a precious opportunity for personal growth, allowing you to explore your creativity.

Playing the piano has brought me immense joy over the years, and it's heartwarming to see that enthusiasm reflected in my students. If you're reading this, you likely don't need convincing to learn piano; you're probably already on that journey. However, it's worth noting the broader benefits you can expect: increased self-confidence, improved coordination, enhanced well-being, and greater happiness. Studies suggest that learning a musical instrument can also boost your math and literacy skills—not to mention the sheer joy of making music.

So, the purpose of this book is to be your companion on your piano journey. With my years of experience as a piano teacher, I aim to guide you in taking your playing to the next level. Follow these ten rules, and you'll turbocharge your progress toward success. These principles have helped me and thousands of others, and I wish you every success on your path to mastering the piano!

1.

LEARN HOW TO PRACTICE PROPERLY

The cornerstone of progress at the piano is practice. Much like learning a new language, the more you practice, the more fluent you will become. Over my years as a piano teacher, many students have asked how they can accelerate their progress. While various factors contribute to improvement, the undeniable truth remains: the more you practice, the faster you will advance. However, many learners miss the mark in how they practice. Effective practice is an art in itself; approach it incorrectly, and you may waste countless hours without seeing any real progress. By following my practice tips, you'll be surprised at how quickly you can improve.

Set Aside Specific Practice Times

The amount of time you should practice daily depends on several factors, including your age, current skill level, and concentration. The key is to allocate a specific time each day and stick to it. Scheduling practice at the same time daily transforms it from a chore into a routine. For instance, practicing for 15 minutes before breakfast not only links your practice to another activity but also provides a sense of reward afterward. Think of practice as essential as brushing your teeth. I've seen many students struggle because they fail to prioritise practice, often trying to squeeze it into their

busy lives without a set schedule. Remember: no practice, no progress—or, worse, regression.

For beginners, I recommend at least 20 minutes of practice once a day. If that feels daunting, start with shorter sessions, such as two 10-minute practices—one in the morning and one in the evening. Longer practice sessions can be overwhelming for beginners who are still grappling with new concepts and making mistakes. Focus on consistent, shorter sessions at first, gradually building up to 20 or 30 minutes as your skills improve. Once you lose concentration, your learning stagnates, so consistency is more important than duration in the beginning.

Avoid Last-Minute Cramming

One common mistake is cramming practice the night before a lesson. While any practice is better than none, it's far more effective to break it into smaller, regular sessions throughout the week. Our brains respond better to consistent, incremental learning rather than last-minute efforts.

Set Specific Goals for Each Session

Before you sit down to play, identify what you want to accomplish. Having a systematic approach to your practice is crucial; without it, you might end up aimlessly meandering through pieces without mastering anything. Set realistic, focused goals for each session, such as "I will master these four bars" or "I will work on legato in the left hand for the last two lines." Writing down your goals can be especially helpful. Failing to do this often leads to practicing things you already know, neglecting the areas that need the most attention.

Slow Practice: No Wrong Notes

Research shows that playing wrong notes can lead to ingrained mistakes that are difficult to unlearn. A good strategy is to practice slowly enough that you avoid errors entirely. While playing at a slower tempo may seem unmusical, a small amount of patience now will allow you to increase the tempo later. I've often seen students play too fast, resulting in sloppy performances filled with mistakes. It's far easier to speed up a piece you've practiced correctly than to unlearn incorrect notes. Focus on challenging sections, ensuring no mistakes occur, and use consistent fingering to help your muscle memory develop.

Don't Start from the Beginning

When mistakes happen mid-piece, students often feel compelled to restart from the beginning. This wastes valuable time—especially on sections you've already mastered. Use your practice time wisely by addressing specific problem areas instead of repeating what you already know.

Listen to Recorded Versions

In today's digital age, we have access to countless recordings of the pieces we're learning. Take advantage of this resource! Familiarising yourself with the melody and harmony can help you better understand how the piece should sound. Consider using YouTube videos that feature scrolling scores, allowing you to follow along visually as you listen. Studying the score without being at the piano can also enhance your practice.

Warm Up Before You Practice

I always start lessons with a warm-up, and this should extend to your practice sessions as well. Warming up with finger exercises, scales, or arpeggios increases fluidity and reduces stiffness, especially on colder days. Just as athletes warm up to prevent injury, musicians should do the same to protect their wrists, hands, and fingers.

Use Pencil Marks on Your Score

Observing professional musicians, you'll often see their scores filled with pencil marks. Don't hesitate to make notes in your music—whether it's circling a sharp you frequently forget or marking a challenging passage. This practice is common among those in ensembles like orchestras and jazz bands. If you're using digital scores, consider using a stylus for similar annotations.

Stay Motivated

While technical skills like articulation and phrasing are crucial, it's equally important to select pieces that inspire you. Choose music you enjoy to keep your passion for learning alive and make practice sessions something you look forward to.

Practice with a Metronome

When I was learning, my keyboard had built-in backing rhythms, which helped me keep time—a crucial skill for any musician. If you have an acoustic piano, consider practicing with a metronome. Start slowly and increase the tempo as you master the notes. While rhythmic accuracy is vital, avoid becoming overly reliant on the metronome; include it in every few practice sessions instead. Some styles, like Chopin's

expressive music, may not lend themselves well to metronomic practice, but as you advance, you'll learn which pieces benefit from it.

Avoid Bad Habits

It's essential for beginners to be mindful of posture and positioning to avoid tension, which can lead to injury and hinder musicality. Good hand technique will accelerate your progress, so focus on proper positioning from the start.

Minimise Distractions

To make the most of your practice time, isolate yourself from distractions. In our fast-paced world, this is easier said than done. One major tip is to keep your smartphone away during practice—it's often the biggest distraction. Embrace the peace of focused practice, and enjoy losing yourself in the music.

Record and Review Your Practice

With smartphones at our fingertips, recording your practice sessions has never been easier. Listening to yourself play reveals areas that need improvement and allows you to track your progress over time. Comparing recordings from weeks apart can highlight your development, providing motivation to keep pushing forward.

Don't Over Practice

While practice is generally beneficial, over-practicing can lead to diminishing returns, especially for those who may become obsessive. If you find yourself over-practicing, it's crucial to set limits, especially as you approach a performance or exam. Sometimes, repetitive practice can lead to mistakes, as your

mind may wander when you're merely running through a piece you already know well.

Reward Yourself

Positive reinforcement is a powerful motivator. At the end of a practice session, give yourself a small treat, even if it's just a piece of chocolate or a cup of coffee. Ending on a positive note helps you return the next day with renewed energy and enthusiasm for your practice.

By incorporating these strategies into your routine, you'll create a solid foundation for your piano journey and enjoy every step along the way!

2.

LEARN HOW TO READ MUSIC

Reading music is an invaluable skill for any pianist, even those pursuing it as a hobby. While notable musicians like Paul McCartney may not read music, having the ability to interpret a score opens up countless opportunities for growth and enjoyment. Many of my students aspire to confidently play pieces they've never seen before, and achieving this goal requires dedicated practice of reading music.

Learning to read music is akin to mastering a new language—it takes time and effort, but the rewards are significant. Although some students may initially find success with YouTube tutorials or by playing by ear, this approach often leads to limitations after the first year. The ability to read written music is irreplaceable and enhances overall musicianship.

Consider the analogy of spoken versus written language. While one can communicate verbally, being able to read expands understanding and appreciation. The same principle applies to music. Developing the skill to read music allows for deeper insights into composition and performance.

For beginners, it's crucial to start by learning the names of the notes on the staff and their corresponding keys on the piano. Mnemonic phrases, like "FACE" for the right hand and "All

Cows Eat Grass" for the left, can aid memorisation. I encourage my students to sing out loud the note names while playing, reinforcing their learning. Initially, identifying notes may be slow, but with practice, this process will become almost instantaneous.

Once students grasp the basics of note identification, they can explore other musical elements, such as note values, rests, and dynamics. While alternative systems, like tablature for guitar or chord charts for piano, can be helpful, they lack the comprehensive detail of traditional notation. Written music conveys essential information, including dynamics, pitch, time signatures, and articulation, all of which guide the performer in delivering the composer's intentions.

For aspiring professional musicians, the ability to read music is a fundamental requirement. Sight-reading—the skill of playing unseen music—becomes essential for session work and orchestral performances. Even if you're not aiming for a professional career, reading music enables you to collaborate with other musicians, providing opportunities for fun and creativity, especially when accompanying singers.

There's an abundance of written music available for all levels, from beginner to advanced. I often recommend sites like [musicnotes.com](https://www.musicnotes.com), which offers a diverse selection across genres such as pop, classical, jazz, and film. Being able to read music keeps motivation high, as there's always a new piece to explore.

While genres like rock and pop may lend themselves to ear-based learning, classical music demands proficiency in reading notes. To tackle the beautiful works of composers like Mozart, Beethoven, and Chopin, understanding written music is essential. For adult learners, I suggest method books like the Alfred Beginner Piano Books. Unlike some child-focused materials, these books introduce concepts gradually

and include familiar tunes, making practice enjoyable and rewarding.

How Long Will It Take to Learn to Read Music?

This is a common question, and the answer varies based on several factors, including practice frequency, the learner's background, and prior experience with other instruments. While it's possible to grasp the basics of music reading within a few months, achieving proficiency to navigate complex pieces will take longer. The key is to enjoy the journey, remain patient, and follow a structured approach to learning. Consider working with a professional teacher, using a method book, or enrolling in an online course that covers the fundamentals of music reading comprehensively.

3.

FIND A GOOD MUSIC TEACHER

The Benefits of Music Lessons

In today's digital age, many people can become proficient on an instrument through online courses and YouTube tutorials. However, those who choose to work with a qualified instructor often find that the benefits of personalised guidance are invaluable. Reflecting on my own piano journey, I've always had a private teacher to provide support and direction. When I was learning, resources were limited compared to the wealth available online today. For self-learners, I commend your drive and motivation, but I strongly recommend engaging a qualified piano teacher at various stages of your development.

At times, you may encounter challenges that require expert assistance, or you might feel that your progress has plateaued. Having a teacher can offer the feedback and encouragement needed to overcome obstacles. Bad habits can easily develop when learning an instrument, and a skilled teacher can help you address these early on, making it easier to correct them before they become ingrained. Most people look back fondly on their formal music lessons, recognising the discipline and dedication they instil. Conversely, many regret not seeking a teacher sooner, wishing they had improved their technique or reading skills earlier.

When considering a piano teacher, it's important to know what to look for. The majority of music educators are dedicated professionals, but here are a few tips to help you find the right fit. Seek a teacher who not only possesses strong performance skills but also has the qualifications to back them up. Many teachers hold Grade 8 certifications, professional diplomas in performance or teaching, and even advanced degrees in music. Generally, the fee charged reflects the teacher's level of training.

However, a teacher's qualifications alone don't guarantee effective instruction. Years of teaching experience, along with qualities like communication skills, personality, and enthusiasm, are equally important. Many accomplished performers may struggle as teachers, so finding someone who balances performance experience with nurturing teaching methods is key. A good teacher can impart valuable lessons from their performance experiences, such as how to recover from mistakes, manage nerves, and convey a piece's emotional essence.

It's reasonable to ask prospective teachers about their students' achievements. They might provide pass rates for graded exams, online reviews, or examples of student progress.

Another crucial factor is the rapport between student and teacher. Not every teacher-student pairing will work, and there are various reasons for this. Some teachers excel with specific age groups or have particular specialties. It's perfectly acceptable to try a few teachers before committing to one. Be clear about your goals from the outset, whether you want to improve your jazz improvisation, brush up on music theory, or start from scratch as a beginner. Finding a patient and supportive teacher who aligns with your aspirations can significantly enhance your learning

experience. Given the investment involved in piano lessons, it's essential to find someone who is the right fit for you.

In my teaching studio, built over fifteen years, I prioritise instilling a love and joy for music in my students. While technique, music theory, and sight-reading are fundamental, fostering a passion for music helps students overcome challenges. When faced with obstacles, the enjoyment and excitement they felt when starting out will motivate them to persist. I strive to make lessons engaging and enjoyable, so students look forward to them rather than dread them.

Receiving feedback from a teacher can be challenging, but it's crucial to approach it with an open mind. Constructive criticism is part of the learning process, and a good teacher will help you identify and address areas for improvement. I aim to keep my feedback positive and encouraging, ensuring that students feel supported rather than discouraged.

Sometimes, a student's journey with a teacher may naturally come to an end for various reasons, which is completely fine. Throughout my own progression from beginner to music degree level, I had three different piano teachers, each offering unique approaches and insights. While it's generally not advisable to frequently change teachers, I recommend considering a new instructor after a few years. A fresh perspective can lead to new opportunities and exposure to unfamiliar music.

I occasionally receive inquiries about group lessons for siblings or friends. While this arrangement can benefit young learners, I believe it's less effective for adults. Sharing a lesson can dilute the teacher's focus, which undermines the personalised attention essential for effective learning.

Although there are many online directories for finding local piano teachers, word of mouth remains one of the best

methods for discovering a great instructor. Recommendations from friends or family who have had positive experiences can be invaluable. If you're struggling to find options, consider reaching out to local music schools or universities. They may not only have instructors available but can also recommend reputable teachers in your area.

For added peace of mind, check if the teacher has a DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service) check, especially if they work with children or vulnerable adults.

Ultimately, finding the right teacher often comes down to practicalities like scheduling. The more experienced and sought-after a teacher is, the less availability they may have. A busy teacher is typically a sign of their effectiveness and popularity among students.

I want to conclude this chapter by discussing online piano lessons, which have grown in popularity. Initially skeptical, I found that the COVID-19 pandemic forced me to adapt to online teaching. To my surprise, the experience has been positive. I now teach students of various ages online, some of whom I've never met in person, yet their progress remains impressive. Online lessons offer several advantages: students save time on commuting, and I can demonstrate music directly at my piano, which enhances their learning. Additionally, this format has improved my students' listening skills, as they focus more intently on the sound of my demonstrations without distractions. Online lessons also expand your options for finding a teacher, as you're not limited to those in your immediate area. If you find a teacher who resonates with you, don't hesitate to consider online lessons as a viable option.

4.

PRACTICE SIGHT READING EVERYDAY

What Is Sight Reading?

Sight reading is the ability to play music from a written score that you have not seen before. It's a skill many aspiring pianists want to master, and when I ask students about their primary goals in learning the piano, the most common response is, "I would love to pick up a piece of sheet music and play it." As discussed in earlier chapters, the ability to read sheet music is invaluable. That's why I include at least one sight reading exercise in every lesson I teach.

One of the key benefits of strong sight reading skills is the ability to learn new repertoire quickly. The faster you can accurately place notes and rhythms, the more time you have to focus on interpreting the piece and adding musicality. Unfortunately, many students neglect sight reading practice in favour of learning pieces they enjoy. While this approach is understandable—since sight reading can feel tedious and less rewarding—it often leads to memorisation. Students may play pieces from memory rather than practicing their reading skills. While playing from memory is a respected technique among top concert pianists, relying solely on this method

limits your growth and can hinder your overall piano education.

As I mentioned earlier, the more you practice sight reading, the more fluent you will become. It's akin to learning a new language—you need consistent practice to achieve fluency. I encourage piano students to dedicate daily time to sight reading, even if it's just five to ten minutes. You'd be surprised how much this can enhance your note reading skills.

Frequent practice allows you to develop the ability to scan ahead in the music, rather than just focusing on the notes in front of you. I liken this to experienced drivers, who anticipate hazards well ahead, compared to beginners who may only notice the car directly in front of them. By scanning ahead, you can identify changes in pitch, rhythm, or unusual chords.

Another essential aspect of sight reading is recognising patterns and sequences in the music. This allows you to focus on the overall shape of the piece, speeding up your playing. Many pieces feature recurring melodic ideas, so being able to anticipate upcoming notes is a significant advantage.

When you start sight reading, it's crucial to choose music that matches your current skill level. Attempting to sight read pieces that are too advanced can be discouraging. Instead, select music that is two or three grades below your usual playing level. If you find that you can keep the flow of the piece going, even with a few mistakes, you're likely working at an appropriate level. Begin with easier pieces to build your confidence, and remember that persistence is key. Don't just try a piece once and give up; repeatedly practicing a piece will yield great benefits. Using a metronome can also help you maintain a steady tempo. Although any new music can serve as sight reading practice, consider utilising graded exam resources from organisations like Trinity College London or ABRSM for structured material.

I encourage my students to track their sight reading progress. Note your current level and revisit it in six months—you may be pleasantly surprised to see improvement.

You don't have to limit yourself to entirely unfamiliar pieces; choosing well-known tunes, like hymns, show tunes, Christmas carols, or folk music can make practice enjoyable. This is particularly useful if you're practicing sight reading without a teacher present, as familiarity with the tune will help you recognise mistakes.

Familiarising yourself with various key signatures is also essential. A solid understanding of key signatures will prepare you for expected chords, sharps, and flats in the music. Before attempting a sight reading piece, try playing through the scale of its major or minor key. You might even practice the primary chords of that key (Chords I, IV, and V), as they are often used in the music. Many students refer to the “circle of fifths” when learning key signatures. I suggest starting with easier keys, such as C, G, and D major, before progressing to more complex keys like A and E major.

Consistency is key in sight reading—aim to play at least one unseen piece of music every day. This will familiarise you with new notes, rhythms, and positions, significantly improving your piano skills. No one begins their piano journey able to play an unseen piece flawlessly on the first try; such skill comes from dedicated practice. The effort you invest in sight reading will open up a world of music, providing endless joy and opportunities for growth.

5.

STUDY MUSIC THEORY

Why Study Music Theory?

A solid understanding of music theory greatly benefits piano learners, yet only a minority give it the attention it deserves. Knowledge of how music is created and structured—keys, chords, melodic and harmonic structures—enables you to recognise patterns and play more fluently. I often compare this to speaking a language: think of giving a speech as a performance. Understanding the meaning of the words and the context in which you are speaking enhances your delivery. The same principle applies to music performance. Music theory teaches you how composers construct their works, allowing you to play more effectively and authentically interpret their intentions. There's little downside to understanding the rules of music, which will benefit not only your performance but also your composition skills.

At What Point in My Learning Should I Begin Music Theory?

I don't recommend diving into music theory as an absolute beginner. At this stage, it's essential to focus on developing basic practical skills and learning simple pieces. I typically introduce music theory after students reach the Grade One level. While I do incorporate some foundational theory—like

treble and bass clefs and note values—before Grade One, I avoid delving into extensive theoretical concepts until students are ready.

For graded exam boards like ABRSM in the UK, passing Grade Five music theory is a prerequisite for progressing to the Grade Six practical exam. Other boards, such as Trinity College London, treat it as a non-compulsory option. In my view, if you wish to advance beyond the intermediate levels, a solid understanding of music theory is crucial. Without it, how can you truly feel confident in what you're playing?

A common misconception is that music theory applies only to classical music. This is not true; music theory is relevant across all genres. You can study the structure of a string quartet just as effectively as a pop song, Broadway tune, or opera aria. Fundamental principles of music often appear across various styles.

What Are the Topics of Music Theory?

Key topics in music theory include notes on the staff, rhythms, time signatures, musical symbols and terms, transposition, scales, chords, and musical structures.

At a basic level, learning the names of the notes on the staff is the first step. Next, understanding rhythm is crucial—not just the value of notes and rests, but how they connect or "group" together for readability. These elements are organized into time signatures, which indicate how many beats are in each measure/bar.

In sheet music, you'll encounter many symbols and performance directions—often in French, German, or Italian. Understanding these is vital, as they convey the overall mood of the piece. For instance, a somber piece will require a different approach than one that is fast and lively.

Music theory students also learn about transposition, which involves changing the pitch of a piece while maintaining the tune. You'll explore how scales are constructed, including major and minor scales, and how chords function within those scales. Understanding chord types—such as major, minor, augmented, diminished, and seventh chords—will help you recognise how chords connect and how chord progressions are constructed. You'll also learn to label structures in music; for example, a Beethoven sonata has a specific form, just as a twelve-bar blues or a ternary form in a pop song does. Mastering these topics will undoubtedly enhance your playing ability and deepen your appreciation of music.

The Myth of Creativity

A common myth is that music theory stifles creativity. In reality, music theory provides the tools necessary for improvisation and expression on your instrument. To break the rules creatively, you first need to understand what those rules are.

I encourage my music theory students to connect theoretical concepts with actual pieces of music. Learning theory in isolation can feel dry; engaging with examples of these concepts in practice makes a significant difference.

What Good Workbooks Should I Work Through?

There are many music theory workbooks available. My personal favourites are the Trinity College London theory books, which present topics in a structured, incremental manner, building upon foundational concepts. These books range from Grade One to Grade Eight. The ABRSM also offers a quality set of books. You can also find workbooks focused on music theory concepts relevant to specific genres, such as popular music.

Do I Need to Find a Music Theory Teacher?

While you can learn music theory through online videos and YouTube tutorials, finding a music theory teacher can provide tailored instruction. Most instrumental teachers cover music theory up to around Grade Five, but for more advanced levels, you may need to seek out a specialist.

Conclusion

The benefits of studying music theory for piano students are numerous. By starting to study theory, you will gain a deeper understanding of music, broaden your knowledge of composers and repertoire, improve your reading and playing accuracy, enhance your improvisation and composition skills, and ultimately push yourself to the next level as a musician.

6.

MAINTAIN MOTIVATION

Why Motivation Matters

Every learner begins with a spark of enthusiasm, but sustaining that motivation through challenges is the real test. Many piano students abandon their practice when they hit a plateau or experience a setback in their skills. This often happens because they stray from the foundational principles outlined in this book, opting for quick-fix methods that yield minimal long-term benefits. By committing to the right approach and following the guidelines here, you can maintain your motivation.

Set Clear Goals and Create a Plan

Piano learners sometimes lose direction, leading to stagnant practice. Establishing clear goals is essential. When tackling a new piece, think ahead to what you'd like to learn next; this keeps your motivation alive. Reflect on the pieces you've always dreamed of playing. If you feel stuck, explore online playlists that align with your current skill level. A music teacher can also assist in selecting repertoire that excites you. When I was learning, my teacher introduced me to diverse styles—from Chopin Nocturnes to Latin jazz—that I would have never considered. Their guidance helped me discover music that suited both my level and personal style.

Aim to have about five pieces in your learning schedule. Once you've perfected them, consider sharing your progress—whether by recording a video for social media, performing for friends and family, or organising a formal concert. This may seem intimidating, but many students who initially feared performing found it significantly enhanced their musicality and motivation. A sense of achievement is a powerful motivator before you tackle your next piece.

Diversify Your Repertoire and Explore New Styles

Many piano students fall into the trap of repeatedly playing the same genre. It's vital to mix things up and explore new musical avenues. I often hear students say, "I can't play jazz; it's too difficult." While jazz can seem complex, there are plenty of accessible pieces to help you build skills like syncopation and swing rhythms. Many students who start with simpler jazz pieces discover a newfound passion for the style. Don't hesitate to experiment with different genres, as this can reignite your motivation.

Rediscover Your Passion

As you reach the intermediate levels (around grades 4 to 5), revisit pieces you once enjoyed. Everyone has favourites from their piano journey—replaying these can reveal just how much you've grown as a musician. You might find that pieces you struggled with before are now much easier. Additionally, if you played simplified arrangements earlier, try finding the original versions; they may challenge you, but tackling the authentic scores can bring a satisfying sense of accomplishment.

Try Composing Your Own Music

For more advanced learners, composing music can be an exciting way to combat boredom. If you find yourself lacking motivation, start creating your own melodies and harmonies. You could even consider working with a composition teacher or enrolling in a course. Begin by improvising at the piano, then try structuring those ideas into a cohesive piece. As the composer, you control the difficulty level, which can enhance both your practical skills and confidence.

Connect with Other Musicians

Playing with fellow musicians can be incredibly rewarding. Whether it's joining a band, accompanying a singer, or simply playing duets, collaborating with others can help you develop rhythm and communication skills. Many musicians find that jamming together is not only fun but also a great stress reliever.

Learn About the Piano

Gaining knowledge about the piano's history and mechanics can deepen your appreciation and enhance motivation. Understanding how pianos are constructed—how hammers strike strings and the role of pedals—can enrich your practice. Unfortunately, many educators overlook this aspect, but I believe it's a valuable part of learning that can make your time at the keyboard even more engaging.

It's Okay to Take a Break

If you're feeling overwhelmed and no longer enjoy playing, it's perfectly acceptable to take a break. Stepping away can often reignite your passion when you return. Allow yourself

the time to recharge; sometimes, a fresh perspective is all you need.

7.

DON'T NEGLECT TECHNICAL STUDIES

Scales and Arpeggios

For self-learners without a music teacher, it's crucial not to overlook technical studies. But what do we mean by “technical studies”? These are exercises that strengthen your fingers and enhance your overall technique, including finger exercises, warm-ups, scales, and arpeggios. Improving your technique allows you to produce a better sound, making your playing more professional and manageable. With solid technique, you'll learn pieces faster and reduce the risk of injury associated with years of playing. It's easy to spot those who have neglected this area; don't let that be you!

Establish a daily practice routine. Just as athletes train regularly, so should musicians. Scales are an excellent starting point, but there are many to choose from. Break them down by key, practicing major and minor scales in groups. I recommend that students at least practice the scale corresponding to the key of their current piece. To keep things interesting, vary how you play your scales—try different dynamics (*forte* and *piano*) and articulations (*staccato* and *legato*). Practicing scales in contrary motion also enhances hand coordination.

Arpeggios are equally important. Essentially broken chords, arpeggios not only build finger strength but also reinforce music theory. Mastering arpeggios will help you learn all your chords. Many piano pieces feature left-hand arpeggiated patterns accompanying melodies, so being able to play legato arpeggios confidently will greatly benefit your performance. Advanced students should also practice arpeggios staccato and in first and second inversions, as many pieces won't start from the root of the chord.

The Hanon Finger Exercises

For those looking to enhance their technical skills, I highly recommend the Hanon finger exercises. Created by Charles Louis Hanon (1819-1900), “The Virtuoso Pianist in 60 Exercises” remains a staple for both teachers and students. This systematic approach is designed to improve finger agility and precision.

One of the advantages of these exercises is their progressive complexity; they start simple and gradually become more challenging. Regular practice yields significant benefits: improved coordination between hands, clearer tone production, and stronger muscles in the fingers and wrists, all of which will aid in playing more advanced pieces. If you're new to Hanon, focus initially on finger strength—speed will come later. Follow the written finger numbers closely to maximise the exercises' benefits. Stay relaxed to promote a good tone, minimising tension in your arms and hands while keeping your fingers curved. Once you achieve accuracy and an even tone, gradually increase your speed, but remember that precision is key. If you struggle, slow down and practice each hand individually before combining them.

I suggest using these exercises as a warm-up before diving into your pieces. If your hands feel stiff, these patterns can help loosen them up. Strive for an even tone during Hanon

exercises; nothing should be accentuated, a skill that can be applied to your pieces. These exercises are also beneficial for students looking to increase the speed of their playing.

Improve Your Ear Skills

Developing your musical ear can significantly enhance your piano playing. Start by learning to identify intervals—the distance between two notes. For instance, the interval from C to D is a second, while C to E is a third. Intervals can also be classified as major, minor, or diminished. Being able to recognise these intervals will improve your understanding of the music you read.

Additionally, work on identifying chord types by ear. Over time, you should be able to distinguish between major and minor chords, as well as extended chords like sixths and sevenths. This ability will enhance your improvisation skills, particularly useful for composition or playing in pop and jazz styles. Practicing rhythmic patterns—such as dotted crotchets or quaver triplets—will also build your rhythmic vocabulary, allowing you to anticipate how music should sound before you play it. Musicians with strong aural skills can often hear notes in their minds before playing them.

For those following a graded piano system, ear training is typically included in the exam. However, I encourage all students, even those not pursuing exams, to engage with aural tests; developing these skills will benefit your playing overall. Some exam boards now offer apps for self-guided ear training, making it easier than ever to practice listening skills independently.

8.

IMMERSE YOURSELF IN THE MUSIC WORLD

Enhancing Your Musical Experience

To truly improve on any instrument, immersing yourself in the world of music offers invaluable benefits. Learning to play the piano can sometimes feel isolating, so it's worthwhile to explore engaging ways to connect with music and meet new friends.

Join a Choir

One of the best ways to enhance your musical journey is by joining a choir. Most people who take this step never regret it. Singing in a group not only boosts your confidence but also sharpens your musical skills. Choirs foster a sense of community, providing physical and emotional benefits by reducing stress and creating a feeling of togetherness. You'll experience joy and achievement as you connect with fellow music enthusiasts who share your passion.

Participating in a choir will help you develop your "musical ear," allowing you to internalise melodies from the written score. This skill is invaluable for piano playing and sight-

reading, as it prepares you to play notes before even touching the keys. Additionally, you'll gain a deeper understanding of harmony as different sections sing various notes to create a harmonious sound. Your sense of rhythm and pitch will improve, enhancing your overall musicality. While joining a choir can feel daunting initially, most choirs are welcoming and eager to include new members.

Attend Concerts

In our busy lives, we often overlook the opportunity to experience high-quality music performed by professionals. Fortunately, many live music events are available at affordable prices. Pianists can sometimes feel isolated during practice, so attending concerts can be a refreshing and therapeutic experience. Watching skilled musicians can reignite your motivation, especially if you find yourself feeling uninspired.

Exposure to different styles and genres—whether pop, classical, jazz, or orchestral—can provide fresh ideas and inspiration for your own playing. Make time to enjoy live performances and support the arts while immersing yourself in the music you love.

Enrol in Music Appreciation Classes

Many local councils and educational institutions offer music appreciation courses. These classes are an excellent way to deepen your understanding of music and its composers. You'll develop analytical skills that are essential for any piano learner, allowing you to dissect music and engage in critical thinking. The more you understand how composers create their work, the more you'll enjoy it. These classes also provide opportunities for discussion with like-minded individuals.

Join a Group Piano Class

Group piano lessons can be incredibly beneficial, sometimes even more so than individual lessons, depending on the dynamics of the group. Being surrounded by peers at a similar skill level can inspire you to practice more diligently. A little healthy competition can motivate you to improve, especially if you know you'll be performing in front of others.

In group settings, you'll develop your ensemble skills, working with piano duet books that typically feature a primo part and an accompanying role. Playing with others brings music to life and teaches you how to communicate musically. You'll enhance your aural skills, learning to listen not just to your own part but also to those of your fellow musicians. This collaboration fosters a deeper understanding of how instruments complement each other and encourages more expressive playing as you strive for balance with your co-performer.

Try Transcribing a Piano Piece

Transcribing music is a valuable skill that can greatly enhance your musical abilities. The next time you hear a catchy song on the radio, try writing down the melody in sheet music form. This practice will improve both your musical ear and your written music literacy. Additionally, challenge yourself to write out the chord progressions of the songs you enjoy. Pay attention to the pitch, intervals, and chords as you listen. This exercise allows you to apply the music theory you've learned in a practical context, reinforcing your understanding of musical notation.

9.

CHOOSE AN INSTRUMENT RIGHT FOR YOU

Choosing the Right Piano: A Guide for Learners

Many piano learners ask me what type of piano they should buy, and the options can be overwhelming. Choices range from five-octave beginner keyboards to advanced synthesizers, 88-key digital pianos, and traditional acoustic pianos. The right instrument for you will depend on your current skill level and your future aspirations.

I began my journey with a basic five-octave Yamaha keyboard that lacked sensitive touch or hammer action. The only time I experienced the feel of a real piano was during my lessons. While some might argue that this limited my early learning, I found it quite the opposite. My keyboard had built-in features like different sounds and backing beats that kept me engaged. I fondly remember playing "Jingle Bells" with various beats, from marches to blues to Bossa nova, which helped me develop essential skills despite the lack of touch sensitivity. Keeping that initial spark alive is crucial for young learners; technical development can come later.

Keyboards without hammer action generally serve learners well only up to grade 1. Most of my students opt for 88-key

digital pianos with hammer action. Over the past decade, the sound quality of these digital pianos has significantly improved. No longer do they have the synthetic, tinny sound of the past; many now sample the rich tones of real concert grand pianos. While the quality varies and is reflected in the price, I personally recommend brands like Yamaha—particularly the Clavinova range—and Roland, both of which are favoured by professional musicians for their high-quality sounds and built-in speakers.

When selecting an instrument, consider practical aspects that suit your lifestyle. If you plan to move the piano between rooms, a lightweight model on a portable keyboard stand may be ideal. If you prefer a more permanent fixture, you might opt for something that resembles a traditional piano, like a Clavinova.

Some learners choose the traditional route of an acoustic piano. While these instruments require more upkeep, their sound and touch can be exceptional. Keep in mind factors like room temperature and humidity, as they can affect an acoustic piano's performance. If cost is a concern, consider looking for refurbished pianos; many older models can feel as good as new.

Ultimately, the right piano will vary based on individual preference. Some instruments require more pressure to produce sound, while others have a lighter touch. Similarly, some pianos offer a deep, mellow tone, while others provide a bright, crisp sound. It's essential to choose a piano that fits the size of your space; a large upright piano can overwhelm a small room and deter learning. Remember, a piano might sound very different in a showroom than in your home, so consider room acoustics, including flooring and furnishings.

I advise consulting an experienced pianist or teacher rather than relying solely on a salesperson who may prioritise a

quick sale. Take your time to find the right instrument; it's a significant investment, and you'll likely spend many hours in front of it.

Key Considerations

When choosing an instrument, consider the number of keys. Some quality electric pianos come with 76 keys, which may be convenient for portability but could limit your ability to play many classical pieces.

Regarding key action, if you're serious about piano playing, avoid synthesizers with completely unweighted action. While they may suit certain genres, they can restrict your development in others. Semi-weighted actions might work for beginners, but transitioning to hammer action will be necessary for progress.

Digital pianos offer the advantage of connecting to computers for high-quality recording. Many models also allow you to download new sounds, keeping your instrument up to date. Features like Bluetooth connectivity enable you to play along with backing tracks.

In an ideal world, we'd all have multiple instruments to suit various styles and settings. However, given the cost and space considerations, my advice is to select a versatile instrument that will serve you well for years to come.

10.

PERFORM WITH CONFIDENCE

Embracing Performance as a Piano Learner

I recognise that many piano learners aren't pursuing their studies to perform publicly, which is completely fine. However, I encourage my students to seek out performance opportunities, no matter how small. This could be playing for a few friends, family members, or even just for one person. Performing, in any form, can significantly boost your confidence and provide a sense of achievement. In today's world, recording a video of your performance and sharing it on social media can also be a meaningful way to engage with your music. This aspect of performance is what I call “putting it all together”—all those hours of technical training culminate in a live presentation of your skills.

Overcoming Performance Anxiety

It's common to feel anxious about performing, whether in an informal setting or a formal event like an exam. Here are some strategies to help manage that fear:

1. **Preparation is Key:** Make sure you practice your piece thoroughly. Being intimately familiar with the material is crucial; any lack of preparation will be evident in your

performance. Seasoned performers often emphasise that knowing your piece inside and out is essential.

2. **Plan Ahead:** Consider logistical details, such as how to get to the venue. Familiarise yourself with the location, and aim to arrive early. This preparation can help reduce stress on the day of the performance.
3. **Breathing Techniques:** Deep breathing exercises can calm nerves. Taking slow, deep breaths can be incredibly effective in reducing anxiety.
4. **Visualisation:** Some musicians find it helpful to visualise themselves successfully performing at the venue. This mental rehearsal can foster confidence.
5. **Reframe Anxiety:** Instead of viewing your nerves as anxiety, try to see them as excitement. This shift in mindset can positively impact your performance.
6. **Enjoy the Experience:** While it may seem daunting, try to focus on enjoying the performance. When you approach it with joy, that sentiment will resonate in your playing.

Navigating Graded Exams

For those preparing for graded exams, anxiety is common—especially among adult learners. Children may feel nervous, and even after a bad exam experience can often bounce back quickly, gaining confidence for future exams. A frequent question I receive is, “What if I make a mistake during the exam?” My answer remains consistent: mistakes are normal. Even the most prepared performers can make errors; it’s how you respond that matters.

1. **Keep Playing:** If you make a mistake, don't stop. Quickly find the nearest place to pick up the music. The flow of the piece is essential.
2. **Be Kind to Yourself:** Don't dwell on small errors. Acknowledge them, but move on. The more you perform, the better you'll handle unexpected occurrences.
3. **Perspective:** Remember, a graded exam is just a snapshot of your progress at a specific time and does not define your overall ability. Focus on your strengths as a performer, and don't let one performance overshadow your achievements.

The Importance of Warming Up

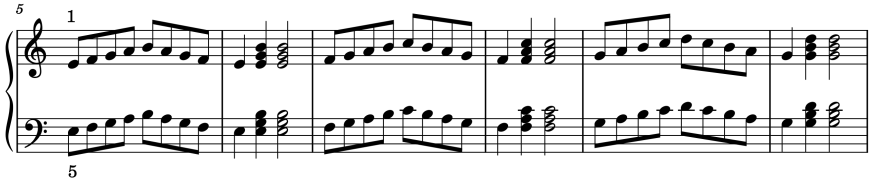
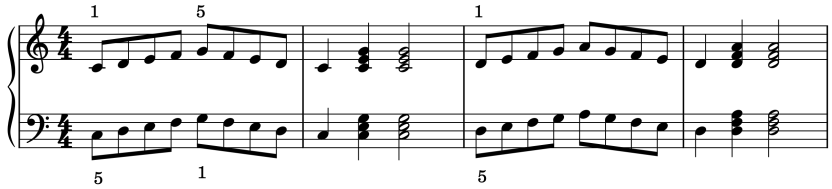
Warming up is crucial not just during practice but also on the day of your performance. Limbering up your fingers helps ensure a smoother flow when you play. Engaging in warm-up exercises—such as scales, arpeggios, and Hanon exercises—can make a significant difference.

Practice as if You're Performing

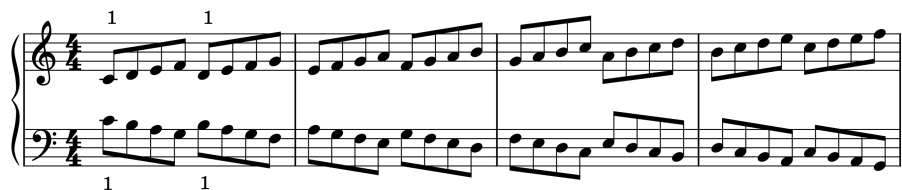
In earlier chapters, I discussed various strategies for improving your practice. As you prepare for a performance, it's beneficial to simulate the experience as closely as possible. This means practicing in the exact order you will perform, leaving the same gaps between pieces, and approaching your practice with the mindset of a live performance. By doing this, you'll be better prepared to enter the zone when it's time to play.

PRACTICAL TIPS AND EXERCISES

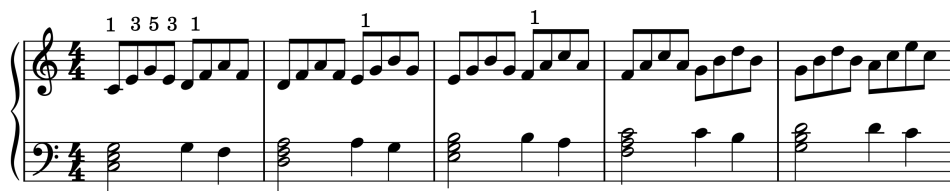
Fingers Exercises



This type of finger exercise can be used for beginners and advanced. It involves moving up and down a five-note pattern followed by a three-note triad. This exercise can be repeated up the major scale, making it an excellent warm-up for the fingers. It's particularly beneficial for beginners, as it helps build finger strength and coordination. Regular practice of this pattern can enhance dexterity and prepare you for more complex pieces.



The exercise below builds on the previous one, as it incorporates skipped notes, which are beneficial for your piano development. The left hand has a bit more to consider due to the inclusion of a descending second interval at the end of each bar. This added complexity not only challenges your finger coordination but also enhances your overall technique. Regular practice of this exercise for the beginner will contribute to your growth as a pianist by developing your ability to navigate more intricate patterns. For the intermediate pianist this can be used as a warm up.



This exercise below represents another step up in difficulty, as it incorporates both skips and steps. While the left hand mirrors the right, it's important to pay attention to the finger numbers, even though the notes are the same. This will help you develop greater coordination and independence between your hands.

3 5 4 5 3 4 5 4

5 3 4

This exercise above introduces a sequence of four notes played in contrary motion, where the hands move in opposite directions. This technique is excellent for developing hand coordination and balance, as it requires you to maintain independence between your hands while also ensuring that each hand plays its part accurately.

Common Left Hand Accompaniments

A musical score in 4/4 time showing a simple left-hand accompaniment. The right hand is empty. The left hand plays four chords: C, G, Am, and F. Each chord is held for one full measure. The chords are represented by block chords in the bass clef.

The above example features a simple yet popular chord progression in C Major, which can easily be transposed to any key. In the most basic form of left-hand accompaniment, you can hold each chord for a minimum of one beat, providing a stable harmonic foundation. This technique allows beginners to focus on playing melodies with the right hand while maintaining a steady rhythm with the left.

A musical score in 4/4 time showing an arpeggiated left-hand accompaniment. The right hand is empty. The left hand plays four chords: C, G, Am, and F. Each chord is arpeggiated over one full measure. The chords are represented by block chords in the bass clef.

The example above demonstrates an arpeggiated left-hand accompaniment, which adds a richer texture to the overall sound. This style is versatile and works well for various genres, particularly ballads. To enhance your skills, try transposing it to different keys.

The example below presents a variation on the arpeggiated style, introducing a rising second at the end of each bar. This addition adds a touch of melodic interest and keeps the accompaniment engaging. By incorporating this subtle change, you can create a sense of movement and anticipation in the music.

The image shows two systems of musical notation for piano accompaniment. The first system, starting at measure 9, is in C major and consists of four measures with chords C, G, Am, and F. The second system, starting at measure 14, is in Eb major and consists of four measures with chords Eb, Bb, Cm, and Ab. Both systems feature a bass line with a rising second interval at the end of each bar.

You can see the same accompaniment transposed into the key of Eb Major. Have fun in transposing these examples into different keys.

3

C7 F7 Dm7 G7

The above example showcases a standard jazz chord progression, accompanied by a basic dotted jazz rhythm in the left hand. This rhythmic pattern provides a lively foundation that allows for creativity in the right hand. Feel free to experiment with improvisation, using scales or arpeggios that fit the chords. Try varying your melodic lines, playing with different rhythms, or incorporating syncopation to add flavour to your improvisation. This exercise is a great way to develop your jazz skills and explore your musical voice!

7

The above example features a spiky rock and roll left hand pattern that alternates between a perfect fifth and a major sixth. This rhythmic foundation is characteristic of 1950s American rock and roll music, driving the energy of the piece. Experiment with playing it at different tempos or adding accents to emphasise the rhythm. You can also try layering a melody in the right hand to create a full rock sound.

This example below showcases a jazz Latin rhythm that incorporates crushed notes, adding a distinctive flair to the accompaniment. The crushed notes create a syncopated feel, giving the rhythm an exciting, offbeat quality that's perfect for Latin-inspired pieces.

Try playing it with a relaxed groove, allowing the crushed notes to blend smoothly into the main rhythm. Experiment with different tempos and dynamics to see how it affects the overall feel. You can also explore improvising a melody in the right hand that complements this rhythmic foundation.



6

Musical notation for measures 6-9. The bass clef part features a boogie-woogie style eighth-note pattern: A2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5. The treble clef part is mostly rests.

10

Musical notation for measures 10-13. The bass clef part continues the boogie-woogie pattern. The treble clef part shows chords: C7, F7, G7, and C7.

Have fun with the boogie-woogie styled left-hand accompaniment! Start by focusing on keeping the notes even and precise, ensuring each one rings clearly. Once you feel comfortable with the pattern, gradually increase your speed. Boogie-woogie really shines when played at a brisk tempo, so let the energy build as you practice!

The Art of Scales and Arpeggio Practice

A

B

C

D

E

Examples A to E provide a solid practice routine for any piano learner, I use the key of D in this example but you can easily adapt this to any key that suits your current level.

- 1. Scales Hands Together:** Begin by practicing the D major and D minor scales with both hands together. Start with legato articulation, focusing on smooth transitions between notes. Ensure both hands are synchronised.
- 2. Staccato Articulation:** Move on to practicing the scales with staccato articulation, as shown in examples C and D. This will help improve your finger strength and control.
- 3. Contrary Motion:** Conclude your practice session by playing the chosen key in contrary motion as shown in example E. This exercise challenges coordination and enhances your overall technique.

The image shows two musical examples, F and G, in the key of D major (two sharps: F# and C#). Example F is a scale exercise in contrary motion. The right hand (treble clef) plays an ascending D major scale (D4-E4-F#4-G4-A4-B4-C#5-D5) over two measures. The left hand (bass clef) plays a descending D major scale (D5-C#5-B4-A4-G4-F#4-E4-D4) over the same two measures. Example G is also in contrary motion. The right hand plays an ascending D major scale (D4-E4-F#4-G4-A4-B4-C#5-D5) over two measures. The left hand plays a descending D minor scale (D5-C#5-B4-A4-G4-F4-E4-D4) over the same two measures. A fermata is placed over the final note (D4) of the left hand in the second measure of example G. A circled number '8' is placed above the first measure of the left hand in example G, indicating an eighth-note rhythm. A circled number '3' is placed above the first measure of the right hand in example G, indicating a triplet rhythm.

Practicing arpeggios is indeed crucial for developing technique and musicality.

- **Example F** demonstrates the A major arpeggio in root position, where you play the notes A, C#, and E in sequence. Focus on maintaining a steady rhythm and a smooth, even tone.
- **Example G** shows the first inversion of the A major arpeggio, starting on C#. This inversion alters the order of the notes to C#, E, and A. Practicing this inversion helps you become familiar with different fingerings and positions on the keyboard.

Incorporating both root position and inversions into your practice routine will enhance your finger strength and agility, making it easier to navigate more complex pieces

How To Identify Intervals



Familiarity with intervals is indeed key to developing your piano skills. Here's a brief overview of some of the main intervals, along with examples of well-known pieces that incorporate them:

- 1. Minor Second:** The interval between C and Db.
 - **Example:** This interval can be heard between the first two notes in *Fur Elise* by Beethoven.
- 2. Major Second:** The interval between C and D.
 - **Example:** "Happy Birthday" starts with this interval.
- 3. Major Third:** The interval between C and E.
 - **Example:** "When the Saints Go Marching In" features this interval prominently.
- 3. Perfect Fourth:** The interval between C and F.
 - **Example:** The opening of "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" uses this interval.
- 4. Perfect Fifth:** The interval between C and G.
 - **Example:** "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" begins with this interval.

5. **Major Sixth:** The interval between C and A.
 - **Example:** "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean" showcases this interval in its melody.
6. **Major Seventh:** The interval between C and B.
 - **Example:** The opening of "Take On Me" features this interval.
7. **Octave:** The interval between C and the next C.
 - **Example:** "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" begins with an octave leap.

For augmented and diminished intervals, you can explore pieces that use altered chords or non-diatonic scales, often found in jazz or contemporary classical music.

Listening to these pieces and identifying the intervals will deepen your understanding and help you recognise them in your own playing.

Music Terminology

Familiarising yourself with music terminology is crucial for interpreting written music effectively. Here's a starting list of essential terms for pianists.

Basic Terms

1. **Allegro:** Fast tempo.
2. **Andante:** Moderate, walking pace.
3. **Staccato:** Short, detached notes.
4. **Legato:** Smooth, connected notes.
5. **Forte (f):** Loud.
6. **Piano (p):** Soft.
7. **Crescendo (cresc.):** Gradually getting louder.
8. **Decrescendo (decresc.):** Gradually getting softer.

Structure and Notation

9. **Measure (or Bar):** A segment of time in music.
10. **Chord:** A group of notes played together.
11. **Arpeggio:** Notes of a chord played in sequence.
12. **Key Signature:** Indicates the key of a piece with sharps or flats.
13. **Time Signature:** Indicates the number of beats per measure.

Performance Techniques

14. **Dynamics:** The volume of music (loudness/softness).
15. **Articulation:** How notes are played (e.g., accent, staccato).
16. **Phrase:** A musical thought or sentence.
17. **Repeat Sign:** Indicates a section should be played again.
18. **Da Capo (D.C.):** Go back to the beginning.

Advanced Terms

A

Right Hand

Left Hand

B

Right Hand

Left Hand

C

Right Hand

Left Hand

D

Right Hand

Left Hand

RH

LH

19. **Fine:** Indicates the end of a piece or section.
20. **Syncopation:** Offbeat rhythms.
21. **Modulation:** Changing from one key to another.
22. **Interval:** The distance between two notes.
23. **Tremolo:** Rapid repetition of a note or rapid alternation between notes.

Performance Directions

24. **Fermata:** A note held longer than its usual duration.
25. **Pedal Markings:** Indicate when to use the piano's sustain pedal.
26. **Cadenza:** A free solo passage in a concerto or sonata.

Miscellaneous

27. **Tempo:** Speed of the piece.
28. **Sforzando (sfz):** A sudden, strong accent.
29. **Dolce:** Sweetly; softly.
30. **Trill:** Rapid alternation between two adjacent notes.

Rhythmic Exercises

2

Right Hand **E** $\frac{6}{8}$

Left Hand $\frac{6}{8}$

RH ⁵

LH

Right Hand **F** $\frac{3}{4}$

Left Hand $\frac{3}{4}$

Right Hand **G** $\frac{4}{4}$

Left Hand $\frac{4}{4}$

Practicing rhythmic exercises is essential for piano players as it develops timing and precision, enhances hand coordination, and improves sight-reading skills. It fosters consistency in playing, enabling musicians to maintain a steady tempo and expressiveness in their music. Additionally, a solid grasp of rhythm supports adaptability across various musical genres and helps reduce performance anxiety. Moreover, engaging with rhythmic patterns encourages creativity, inspiring improvisation and composition. Overall, rhythmic practice is key to becoming a more confident and versatile pianist.

You don't need to be at a keyboard to practice these rhythmic exercises. You can easily tap the rhythm with your right hand on your right knee and your left hand on your left knee.

Exercise A focuses on maintaining a steady crotchet beat with your left hand while adding more variation with your right. Be mindful of accurately counting the rests and ties. Start slowly, then gradually increase your speed. It's also helpful to count yourself in for two bars before beginning the exercise.

Exercise B is in triple time and features dotted rhythms. Pay close attention to the long-short pattern created by the dotted quaver and semi-quaver, ensuring that they together equal the length of a crotchet.

Exercise C introduces syncopation. The offbeat rhythm of a quaver followed by a crotchet will be more effective if your left hand holds down the basic crotchet beat.

Exercise D incorporates triplets. Ensure rhythmic accuracy by making sure the three triplet quavers equal the duration of a single crotchet.

Exercise E is in compound time. Be sure to count the duple time accurately.

Exercises F and G emphasises rhythmic independence between the hands. Start by practicing the rhythms in each hand separately before attempting to combine them

Good Posture At The Piano

Maintaining good posture at the piano is crucial for both sound quality and injury prevention. Many beginners focus so intently on playing music that they overlook the importance of proper posture.

First, ensure that your body and seat are positioned centrally in front of the keyboard. Relax your shoulders and back, as tension is common when learning an instrument, but it's essential to consciously reduce it. Your forearms should be parallel to the floor, and while your arms don't need to be completely straight, your elbows and wrists should remain flexible. Avoid playing with rigid, flat fingers against the keys, as this can lead to poor results. Keep your feet relaxed and flat on the floor, and be mindful not to sit too close to the piano, which can restrict your movement.

Position your sheet music so that it doesn't cause you to stretch or strain. It should be aligned with your natural line of sight. This applies equally to using an iPad; many students place their devices off to the side, which can lead to bad posture.

Ignoring proper posture can create habits that strain your body, wrists, and hands, potentially making your piano experience frustrating enough to consider quitting. In contrast, good posture enhances your precision and musical

expression. Ironically, correct posture may feel awkward at first, but with practice, you'll grow accustomed to it and find it significantly reduces fatigue and strain.

Improvisation

Many of my students are eager to enhance their improvisation skills at the piano, whether to craft jazzy solos or to begin composing their own pieces. The ability to create music spontaneously comes more naturally to some than others, but it's a skill that requires dedicated study and practice.

While it may seem that a jazz musician is improvising entirely off the cuff, the reality is that professional musicians often rely on a repertoire of established licks and phrases tailored to specific musical contexts. To successfully improvise, it's essential to have a solid grasp of music theory, as understanding the harmonic structure of the piece you're working with is crucial. Knowing the key and the types of chords in use will inform your choice of scale. For instance, if you're playing a blues piece with dominant seventh chords, the blues scale is likely your best bet.

For beginners, I recommend starting with major and minor scales for improvisation. A common question is, "How do I use the scale effectively?" Simply running up and down a scale can be monotonous. Instead, try selecting small fragments—just two or three notes. You'll be surprised at how much musicality you can create with just a few notes. Focus on crafting catchy phrases, perhaps incorporating repetitive rhythms. Once you're comfortable with this, gradually expand to four or five notes, and eventually explore the entire scale in inventive ways.

I also encourage students to write down various chord progressions in different keys. Experimentation will help you familiarise yourself with which notes complement specific chords.

Lead sheets can be an excellent starting point for improvisation. These arrangements typically feature only the melody line and chord symbols, like those found in "The Real Book" of jazz standards. With no written left hand, you'll need to create rhythmic accompaniment that fits the style. Although the melody is provided, the chord symbols offer a foundation for your improvisation. The more you practice this, the more sophisticated your solos will become.

Better improvisation can often be achieved through the use of pentatonic scales and modes. Many pianists overlook modes, as they aren't typically included in standard teaching methods like they are for guitarists. Additionally, modes are rarely assessed by graded piano exam boards, which can leave a gap in knowledge.

To improve your improvisations, it's essential to understand the various modes and how to apply them over different harmonies. Each mode has its own unique sound and character, allowing you to create more nuanced and expressive musical ideas. Taking the time to explore these scales will expand your improvisational toolkit and enhance your overall musicianship.

Improvisation can greatly benefit from collaborating with other musicians. Jamming together allows you to bounce ideas off one another, making the music come alive in a dynamic way. Utilising the call-and-response technique is particularly effective, where one musician plays a phrase (the call) and another responds with a contrasting idea. This interactive approach not only fosters creativity but also enhances your improvisational skills at the piano, helping you develop a deeper sense of musical conversation and spontaneity.

Advanced improvisers often know how to "break the rules" of music theory to add interest and depth to their playing. Introducing notes that fall outside the scale can elevate your improvisation to new heights.

Improvisation is a skill that takes years to master. Once you've grasped the fundamentals of music theory, it's crucial to navigate your own path and discover your unique musical voice. Many of my students find great joy in this process, as improvisation adds a fun and expressive dimension to piano playing. It allows them to create their own music, fostering creativity and personal connection to their art. Embracing improvisation can lead to a fulfilling and enriching musical journey.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The piano has been my life, and I hope this book serves as a solid foundation for advancing your skills. The ten rules outlined here have been tried and tested with my students, who come from diverse musical backgrounds and skill levels. If followed diligently, you will surely notice improvements in your piano playing.

Consider this book a starting point. It offers an overview of essential concepts, all of which can be explored in greater depth as you progress.

I wish you the best on your piano journey! Remember that music should always be enjoyable. While it's important to adhere to good techniques, never lose sight of the passion that first drew you to the piano. Keep that spark alive!