

## **Webinar Practice Routine Checklist:**

### *Building a Strong Foundation:*

For the first two weeks with any new piece, try to learn the music with the Hands Separate exercises and/or the Rhythmic Variation exercises described below. You can also apply these methods to any piece you already know.

Do NOT try to speed anything up, use a “flexible” tempo to accommodate tricky passages and do not let careless wrong notes creep into either practice technique.

Teachers should try to listen to students practice these techniques. If a teacher can play the opposite hand with hands separate practice with a student, this is even more helpful.

### **Hands Separate Exercises:**

1. Be able to play a piece, or section through LH alone, and RH alone (with or without music).
2. Start with small phrases (8 measures) and build up to knowing complete sections (exposition, development, etc.) and gradually build the smaller sections into larger groups, ideally being able to play an entire movement or small piece by itself with either hand alone.
3. If possible, try and play these sections, hands separately, with your teacher playing the other hand to work on rhythmic integrity, with extra attention focused on specific hand movements, balance with the other hand, voicing, and any other desired musical details. If your teacher cannot play the other voice, record each hand separately with your phone and try to play the other hand with your own recording.
4. **BONUS TECHNIQUE:** Once you can play each hand confidently alone, you can start practicing hands together but spend time exclusively watching (if memorized) or paying attention to each hand separately while playing hands together to continue to solidify memory and practice the “auto-pilot” of the other hand.

### *Pros:*

1. Knowledge of the LH geography is one of the most important ways to prevent memory slips.

2. Thinking musically with at least two different musical voices (LH and RH) builds the sense of “chamber playing” between the two hands and practicing hands separate builds the autonomy of the different voices as they interact with each other.
3. Practicing hands alone allows our mind the time to creatively imagine other instrumental forces which could be producing our sounds (strings, winds, brass, etc).

*Cons:*

1. Playing entire pieces or sections hands alone can take significant time, and while a good exercise in the beginning stages of learning a piece, moving to the more advanced method of watching each hand individually while playing the other hand with *autopilot* uses the brain in more similar ways it will function for a performance, and allows one to practice more material in less time.
2. Teachers need to allow extra time for students to explore playing hands separate, not demanding they bring in hands combined too early as often the good musical and physical work is quickly forgotten when hands are combined too early.

**Rhythmic Variation Exercises:**

1. Most any piece can be subdivided into groups of 3, 4 or sometimes 6, depending on the time signature.
2. Start working with the smallest grouping of 3, 4 or 6, and learn to pause on the first note of the sequence.
3. Once this is mastered, try pausing on the last note of the sequence (most important later in the process for NOT RUSHING to downbeats).
4. As you get proficient at stopping on the first and last notes of these groups, make sure you do not get lazy and make the pause too short.
5. The longer the pause, the more your brain can visualize the next set of notes (physically and musically) it needs to play, and you want to keep these notes always in the conscious memory, not the auto-pilot memory.

*Pros:*

1. Rhythms allow you to break any complex grouping of fast notes into small, manageable groups.
2. Concentrating on only 3 or 4 notes at a time allows us to avoid hitting too many wrong notes in the learning process.
3. We can think musically from the beginning of the process, “singing” each of these notes, thinking about their musical direction.

4. We can play these notes as fast or as slow as necessary until we achieve proficiency with any passage.
5. These small rhythmic groups allow the fingers to more easily integrate wrist and elbow movements, which allows more weight of the arm to be distributed through the fingers.
6. Controlling the music through these atomic small groups also helps the memorization process.

*Cons:*

1. This method can be more complicated to get familiar with
2. Students can find the rhythms too abstract to keep musical ideas intact
3. Results are not as immediate as other methods of practice (but are longer lasting).
4. Teachers may need to spend numerous sessions with students, making sure they are not playing the rhythms too quickly, and that they are listening to the direction of every note and integrating the arm motions properly.

Once these two methods of Hands Separate and Rhythmic Variation are comfortably controlled, we can start to string the piece together with the metronome.

**Metronome Practice:**

1. If a student has control of the above methods, the metronome can help “glue” the rhythmic variations together and can “iron-out” any rhythmic inconsistencies.
2. After the piece can be controlled 50%-80% speed with the metronome, we can hopefully put away the metronome and only use it occasionally for ramping up very fast technical sections, or for periodically testing that our musical ideas have not gone too far out of relationship with the basic pulse.
3. In fast technical sections, it can be helpful to eventually play sections with the metronome at 110% speed, allowing the 100% normal speed to be infused with the 10% extra adrenaline rush which will accompany most performances.

After integrating all these practice techniques to get a piece close to performance level, we need to also practice NOT being in “practice mode” and start working on “performance mode.” Most of these techniques are quite cerebral and we want to build as much music into our autopilot so we can start to be free when we are in performance mode. Try to build a 3<sup>rd</sup> day of “free” performance playing into the routine.

## **Routines for music when ready for first performance:**

Day 1: Play your piece(s) twice, using Hands Separate (but together) practice. Practice manageably sized sections watching LH one time, and RH one time, musically “singing” each note, playing slowly, activating the conscious memory of the watched hand, and the autopilot of the unwatched hand. All slow, no fast playing.

Day 2: Play your piece(s) twice, using Rhythmic Variations (stopping on first and last note of groupings), can be slow, medium, or fast playing in the groupings (pause must be long enough!) thinking of relaxed hand motions and the musical direction of each note.

Day 3: Play your music in “performance mode.” Pick manageable sections (2-3 minutes) and play three times. By the third playthrough, it should be reasonably clean and the way you want it to sound in performance. If not, revert to previous techniques to keep cleaning and perfecting.

Repeat three-day cycle, maybe alternating Metronome work on Day 2 instead of the Rhythmic Variations to clean faster passages. On Day 3 play through the whole piece, recital or concerto, to develop LONG concentration. When we practice, our brain always takes mini-breaks and doesn't usually concentrate non-stop for 30 minutes, or 45 minutes at a time. We need to practice this long focus, and a full playthrough once a week (or more) can help our stamina when we need to focus non-stop for long periods of time.

## **Routines for maintaining music after one or more performances (or under time pressure!):**

Day 1: Play piece one time, Hands Separate (but together) watching LH (as this is where slips happen most). The RH usually controls the melody, and our brain more naturally gravitates towards this music anyway, so we can skip watching RH more often than LH.

Day 2: Play piece one time, using Rhythmic Variation only stopping on the last note. This helps us keep control of that last note of a group and should help us not rush. Metronome any tricky fast passage sections with 2 medium speeds.

Day 3: Play through whole concerto, recital or piece in performance mode twice.

**BONUS COMBINATION:** In a serious time crunch, I combine the Hands Separate and Rhythmic Variations. I play a piece twice, watching the LH while stopping on first note, and watching RH while stopping on last note.

For further reading:

Piano Practice: Practice Routines and Techniques for Concert Pianists by Bryan Wallick  
<https://repository.up.ac.za/handle/2263/32394>