

Piano Major Students' Practice Routine Towards Piano Examination

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A Malaysian public university, Universiti Teknologi MARA offers various music programs at the bachelor's degree level. Each program has a major instrument as a requirement. This study reports piano students' practice routine of the two programs in Music Education and Performance towards their piano examination. A combination of semi-structured interviews and a survey was conducted based on practice routine, practice structure, and the level of preparation. The classes of the semester are conducted online which has given an impact on the students' behavior. Different music majors depict similar results in their practice routines because of the environment and time management. The study contributes to the understanding of students' perspectives on self-practice and their level of effectiveness in preparation for the piano examination.

Key words: *piano practice, performance, practice behavior, survey, interview*

Introduction

Practice should be a sacred and noble ceremony for musicians. Self-discipline may be required at first, but then we have to climb the waterfall of personal achievement, providing a treasure of enjoyment and achievement. It is not forced labour, it is a fine art that combines inspiration, style, patience, precision, balance and most importantly seeking greater pleasure in movement and expression. The ultimate purpose of practice is to prepare for performance because music focuses on the interaction between the performer and the audience. The study of practice quality considers the strategies adopted, the organization of the practice, attention, self-regulation (Hallam et al., 2012; Jorgensen & Hallam, 2016).

Attitude refers to a set of feelings, faith, and behaviors about a particular object, person, object, or event but such evaluations are often either positive or negative, and sometimes uncertain. According to Chaiklin (2011), there are differences between a psychological definition and also a sociological definition. A psychological definition of attitude defines

linguistic expression in action while a sociological definition of attitude looks at linguistic expression as an intention to act. We all have thousands of attitudes, including family and friends, education and a preference for music. All of our attitudes have their own characteristics, and there are no two or more attitudes that affect us equally.

Studies showed that some of our attitudes are at least partially inherited through parental genetics (Olson et al., 2001). Another attitude is conveyed through the media. While some of our attitudes are shared by others, other attitudes such as our preference for other styles of music and art are more individualized. The most frequently considered attitudes include not only the degree to which the parent allows or limits the limits set by the parent for the child, but also the degree of warmth and acceptance or calm and refusal that exists in the parental relationship. Investigating the influence of attitudes toward parenting behavior is a favorite topic, suggesting that research links are generally passive in nature. There is a study exploring the influence of parental support during both piano lessons and practices, on the student's learning outcomes. According to Margiotta, (2011), parents' beliefs and wishes create an emotional climate within the family, which determines how they choose to communicate with children by communicating certain messages and values to their children.

In a survey of teachers, students and parents' behaviors and attitudes towards parental involvement, Macmillan (2004) found that experienced, educated and specialized trained teachers tend to promote parental support. In such cases, the parent is lacking in the practice of support in an effective and structured way. There is convincing evidence that parental encouragement of exercise affects the level of a child's musical ability (McPherson, 2009). Encouragement can come in various forms, including active supervision of practice, initiating practice, reminding children to practice for a certain period of time, and simply providing moral support (Ismail et al., 2021). Active practice by students and parents will greatly increase the benefits. In a study, it shows that a small part of the factors may affect the progress of students learning piano, mainly the participation of parents in the process of practice and class, as well as the personal characteristics of the students such as skills, effort, learning period and enjoyment of practice and lesson (Ismail & Anuar 2020; Margiotta, 2011).

Musicians can read and write to the extent that they can audibly understand sheet music and respond to performance to notate. Playing with improvisation and ears is a natural reflection of musicality. Besides, many people still think that playing by ear is a natural skill that cannot be corrected with training. For example, after mental practice, more advanced aural skills are associated with better memory performance (Tajuddin et al., 2021; Highben & Palmer, 2004). These findings indicate that the strategy of using auditory images in mental exercises is associated with better memory performance, and is associated with the expected improvement of movement in later instrumental performances. There are strategies from different perspectives. Cases are selected based on the individual's successful use of the mental practice. According to him, there are different ways to look at in the study such as the pianist practicing spiritually by reading the silent (silence) sheet music and while simultaneously listening to the music released in sheet music (listening state). To really

resolve individual differences, mental practice defines a score to include all strategies to prepare without instrument performance.

In a study, the mental practice was carried out in the early stage of learning music and the pianist was asked to perform the first practice of playing without an instrument during sightreading of music. The purpose is to investigate different methods of mental practice strategies that were reported by pianists in the experiment and examine how they look over the notation during the time. In music studies, eye-tracking methods have been mainly used to study the reading of music being played (Madell & Hebert, 2008; Puurtinen, 2018). The silent study of musicians and the understanding of sheet music in a more natural environment are rarely dealt with (Penttinen et al., 2013). According to Birch (2017), gamification had a positive effect on the number of skill elements acquired by students with moderate effects on their behaviors and attitudes towards the practicing technical element. The elements consist of chords, scales and arpeggios. In the study, piano students were asked to play games so their behaviors in playing will be taken and be compared to practicing. Practice games can help speed up music education and practice sessions.

Issues on Students' Musical Practice

Musical practice is important as it helps develop our discipline, music reading skills, better technique, and muscle memory. It is one of the crucial learning activities for university music students as well. Unfortunately, some students sometimes neglect the importance of practicing to become a better musician. It is one of the most crucial components to success when it comes to learning and mastering an instrument. Musical practice is essential for successful learning on a musical instrument, it is the focus of attention for a number of music psychologists. However, learning instrumental music performance at the university level can be difficult.

One of the main issues for this research is how long individuals must practice to achieve expertise (Williamon, 2000). Expert musicians spend years processing and developing their skills to meet or surpass the expectations of their audiences. Other than that, based on other research, performing musicians also spend years developing and refining their skills.

Another challenge or issue faced by students is the ability to maintain full attention for sustained amounts of time. It takes a lot of effort and self-determination for the students to stay focused and not be distracted by something else. In addition, students also face considerable challenges, including developing a relationship with a studio teacher, planning for an uncertain and testing career, and learning to cope with competitive social environments (Bennett & Stanberg, 2008; Gaunt, 2011). Among these difficulties or challenges is sustaining the hours of practice required to develop performance ability. It is also important for the students to practice consistently so that they can improve through time. The most important factor in musical instrument learning or musical practice is their own

enjoyment and satisfaction. Different people have different opinions about how we should practice to become a great musician, but it is important to practice regularly. This study reviews the piano students' behaviors towards musical practice from UiTM.

This study objectives are to identify the routine of students' piano practices from two degree levels majoring in piano. The study offers important insights into the students' perspectives on their piano routine practices towards the piano performance for the examination during the online distance learning term.

Musical Practices Expert Reviews

According to Uygun and Kilincer (2017), studying and learning musical instruments is like a long and persistent journey that requires patience. Students will be able to continue their journey by always building information and skills they have learned from their instruments without losing their minds when faced with difficulties on this journey. There are no specific rules for music or for practicing instruments, and some, particularly singers, can excel in their profession without undergoing formal training (Mohammed, 2017, 2021). Besides, there are many ways that have been tried for many years to help musicians to become better players. When practicing music, daily practice is necessary. Routine and repetition make the practice long-term effective. Experienced musicians are more likely to maintain a high level of concentration and attention during their practice, which can be improved by focusing on what they are doing and how it can be better.

According to Hambrick (2014), a high-performance level of experts requires long-term practice. It is defined here as "consistently good performance on a specific representative working set of a domain". In contrast to formal and informal aspects of practice, they discovered that high-achieving musicians do more formal training than their less successful peers. They also performed better at certain skills such as scales and technical exercises. High achievers are more likely to report being able to play their favourite pieces by ear or improvising. There are so many things that can be learned from expert practice. It has been concluded that the informal methods of those who practice contribute to the success of music. Find the right balance between their freedom of practice and also discipline.

Mental practice is often used by musicians to improve their performance. It is sometimes referred to as imagery where it was defined as the symbolic rehearsal of a physical activity in the absence of any gross muscular movements (Clark, Williamon, & Aksentijevic, 2012). Learning new pieces from music scores can be a challenging and often monotonous routine process for musicians. Mental practice can help musicians improve their performance. It can also help them develop their mental representations of music and its performance. In a study by Fine et al. (2015), the musician understood the mental preparation associated exclusively with performances such as aural, visual or motion images of the show.

Clarifying specific goals to reach and using the learning strategies are also important in musical

practice. In their study, Kilincer and Uygun (2013) examined musicians' practice and learning strategies during piano music. Santos and Gerling (2011) put forth students' diversity of strategies depending on their level of expertise. By having strategies, teachers and students work as a team to specifically separate specific areas and determine weekly learning goals between classes. It was found that the strategies used for instrumental practice and learning in the related studies mentioned above were taken up in other ways based on the research approach on the topic.

Methodology

Two programs are selected and 10 students participated for the study. These programs require major instrument while other degree programs only require as a minor instrument. There are 6 students from Music Performance program and 4 students in Music Education program. There are two methods applied: 1) An online interview sessions with the piano students through video calls and 2) a survey form of five weeks routine. We adapted a mixed method design for this study as we collected and analyzed qualitative and quantitative data independently. The mixed methods approach was selected for this research due to the special depth of understanding that is difficult to gain from a closed question survey only. Therefore, open-ended questions were provided during the interviews and in the survey. It is arguably that the mixed methods approach is also ideal to discover piano students' behaviors towards musical practice as they would have the opportunity to freely elaborate their answers receive specific answers needed.

There are three sections designed for the interview session; 1) Musical background, 2) practice routine and 3) level of practice preparation. The survey form created known as "Final Exam Practice Journal" distributed to each students. They are require to fill in the details after practices for 5 weeks prior to the examination week.

Results

Practice Routine

The practice routine divides into three sections; 1) practice purpose, 2) practice location and 3) practice time and duration. The table 1 shows the percentage of participants of their practice purposes. It shows the main purpose of the participants' practice is for their studio exam which is 93.5%. The 6.5% is for their forum performance. Students are more concern and focus on studio piano examination rather than forum performance grades although both are essentials for the programs with different credits weightage. The data of practice purposes shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Practice Routine (Practice Purpose)

No.	Type of Exam	Percentage
1.	Studio Exam	93.5%
2.	Forum	6.5%

Another important aspect of the practice routine is the practice location as it affects the piano students' behaviors towards musical practice. The table 2 shows the percentage of practice locations chosen by the participants. Most participants practice at home with 93.5% follows by university with 6.5%. There is no studio rental selected for the location.

Table 2. Practice Routine (Practice Location)

No.	Location	Percentage
1.	Home	93.5%
2.	University	6.5%
3.	Studio rental	0%

The third important aspect of practice routine is practice time and duration. The table 3 shows the percentage of participants' practice time and duration. For the practice time, it shows that the percentage of practice time during the day is 76% while during the night is 24%. The highest percentage of the practice duration is 1-2 hours, which is 59.8%, follows by less than 1 hour practice that is 20.7%. However, the percentage for practice duration of 3-4 hours is 16.3%. An unexpected result of the lowest percentage of more than 5 hours practice duration is 3.3%.

Table 3. Practice Routine (Practice Time and Duration)

No.	Time Category	Time	Percentage
1.	Practice time	Day	76%
		Night	24%
2.	Practice duration	1-2 hours	59.8%
		Less than 1 hour	20.7%
		3-4 hours	16.3
		More than 5 hours	3.3%

Practice Structure

For the second section, a practice structure explores the strategies or methods application during their practice sessions. The data collection is through interview sessions. Several transcriptions with English translation from the participants as follows:

"... before playing the piano, [I do]..stretching with the wrist. Then, [I] will begin with the arpeggios, scales and chromatic scales. It is for my third and fifth finger muscle movement" (Male 1)

"Okay, so I usually start with scales. I always warm up first before I believe, because, well, it's, it's common for all musicians to do that." (Female 1)

"Uh, so first and foremost, I will sit on a chair and warm up my wrist. So I will play either a Baroque piece, inventions or, scales just to prevent wrist injuries." (Female 3)

"Yes, yes. Uh, before I, uh, play my pieces, I like to warm up my hands, um, playing scales or arpeggios or any kind of, uh, I usually play Czerny and Czerny has a lot of a warm up for hands." (Female 4)

"Um, I usually do warm ups, like scales and joining 2 hands is a bit like sight reading and, uh, yeah, before that I would do hand warm ups, like, uh, wrist." (Female 7)

"What I play is I play these scales, these scales, um, It's not like basic scales. Like we have our own scales. For example, we have Czerny scales.." (Female 8)

Based on the responses, most of the participants begin with warm ups before the repertoires. Participants begin with warm ups with technical studies such as scales, arpeggios, and Czerny Progressive Studies book to avoid wrist injuries and to add flexibility of the finger muscles.

However, there are participants begin with repertoire rather than technical studies. Based on the transcriptions, Female 2 responses that she plays the entire piece without warm-ups because of time constrain and Female 3 practice in sections of a piano piece. Female 9 prefers by pages to gain the perfect written notations. Unlike Female 6, she prefers to play the entire piece at first, then focus on the unsure sections.

Level of Preparedness Towards Performances

Preparations are needed for pianists when approaching a performance and organise their practising accordingly. Practising is a finely refined discipline that is essential to music making artistry. If any pianist is well accomplished, it will result in a performance that is both precise and expressive, engaging and distinctive. In addition, the level of planning required to bring music to life in performance increases the chances of lessening its emotional impact. This is because decreasing assures that music's originality and creativity are preserved, resulting in memorable, exciting, and emotionally impactful performances. This theme is required to identify their initiative in performance preparation towards final studio exam and forum. In this third section, there are three sub-sections; 1) practice measurement, 2) self-evaluation of preparedness and, 3) anxiety management.

Practice Measurement

Musicians are renowned for striving for perfection and avoiding mistakes at all costs especially in the base of everything which is practicing. The outcomes of the piano performances are based on how long it takes for the individual to start practicing. Timelines towards performances are crucial for pianists because it will determine either they will perform well or otherwise. It can be frustrating which can lead to anger and despair, to some students as they are trying at their very best to plan for convenient practice time. Table 4 shows the practice measurement based on duration level of preparedness towards performances for the examination.

Table 4. Practice Measurement

No. Duration of preparation	Percentage
1. more than a month	22%
2. less than a month	78%

According to the responses, 22% of participants responded that it took them more than a month for them to practice. However, 78% of the participants responded that it took less than a month to practice for the examination performance. One of the participants, Female 5, mentioned that she took six to eight months for her to practice and master the pieces for performances specially with difficult and challenging piano pieces.

Self-Evaluate Preparedness

The self-evaluate preparedness discover the participants' confidence practice preparation towards performances. We categorise the language scale from the lowest number (number 1) as strongly not prepared to the highest number (number 5) as strongly prepared. Table 5 shows the self-evaluation of preparedness in percentage.

Table 5. Self-Evaluate Preparedness

No. Item	Percent
1. Strongly not prepared	0%
2. Not prepared	4.3%
3. Neither	22.8%
4. Prepared	62%
5. Strongly prepared	10.9%

62% of participants responded that their level of preparedness towards performances for the examination are confidently prepared. At 21%, participants select 'neither' prepared or unprepared for the performance follows by 'strongly prepared' with 10.9%. However, the lowest percentage of 4.3% shows participants selected 'not prepared' and 0% for 'strongly not prepared'.

According to the interview, Male1 mentioned that the closer the performances, the more relaxed he is. He will rest his fingers and spend more time on his own and family during the weekends and practice more on the weekdays. Furthermore, the most confident respondent, Female 1 mentioned that her preparation 200%. The transcription of the interview session as follows:

"..in general, I am always prepared for 200%, 200% because when I screw up there is going to be another 180%. And if I screw up again, I still have another one and 150%. Uh, so you see, we have to be very well-prepared and. Uh, this is actually taught to me by Dr. Juan. He always tell me to prepare 200%, 200%, 200% ready because he knows that I always screw up. So he just wants to save my life. And of course we do not hope for any mistakes and during our performance, but we just got to prepare for the worst." (Female 1).

Anxiety Management

Performance anxiety sometimes restricts people from accomplishing on what they want to do and has a negative impact on their career. It also can have a severe impact on an individual's self-esteem and confidence. It can be stressful to be the centre of attention and have all eyes on us. Since pianists are performers, anxiety also can affect their abilities to perform. For this theme, it explores ways of participants' handling their anxiety before performing.

Based on the interviews, we found that one of the participants, female 6, could not perform with an empty stomach because it affects her energy to practice and focus on the piano practices. The transcription of the female 6 as follows:

"...basically how do I manage, the anxiety is that I need to make sure that my stomach is full, but, um, like eating heavy food, like rice or nasi lemak and it helps me. In some ways, like it makes me feel calm, um, in some ways, because before it did, it did happen where I didn't eat, um, heavy food. And when I performed, I was like, maybe I was hungry and I was just so nervous. And then my hand got cramped during the performance. So it didn't go well. (female 6)

2 of the participants need to communicate and talk to friends to overcome their anxiety before performing. According to female 7 and female 8, they will talk to their friends to feel less nervous before performing. The transcriptions of the female 7 and female 8 as follows:

"....talk or express my feelings to friends to ease the anxiety." (female 8)

" usually I will like distract myself by talking to my friends, uh, like being off other things before the performance and not being stressed out, yeah." (female 7)

Another 2 of the participants give self-assurance to themselves in order to prevent nervousness and stress before performing. According to female 1, she will tell herself to focus and immerse on the piece instead of thinking of unnecessary stuff. Also according to female 9, she will take a deep breath and keep a positive mind so she will not mess up her playing during performing. The transcriptions of female 9 and female 1 as follows:

"I try to focus and try to immerse on the piece, you know, instead of thinking about nonsense stuff in my head, and I try to get the ridiculous and nonsense stuff out of my head before I perform." (female 1)

" um, how do I manage is I will take a deep breath, um, and I will set my positive mind. Um, okay. Today I will do my best and I'm sure I can. That's what, um, I overcome my anxiety." (female 9)

Discussion and Conclusion

Hambrick (2014) states a consistency in good performance achieve through longer duration of practices for a skillful performer. We suggest that the objective is applicable to the degree students program. However, most of the UiTM students practice in less duration towards the performance. The students prefers practising at night time rather than during the day. It is because of the practice location is mostly a house environment where distraction from the family, comfort or discomfort of the house, neighborhoods that may demotivate their practice duration. In addition, spending time on computer games and social medias at home is mentioned during the interview session.

Students have different perspective on starting their practices whether with the technical studies or focus to the pieces. Both is reasonable to argue with. The technical studies is the most preferable to avoid fingers, wrist and hands fatigue, strain or cramp. It shows that students techniques are yet to be develop at this level until they achieve the highest level where technical studies is less necessary to begin with for the practices.

The level of preparedness among the degree level students is between prepared and unprepared. It shows students are less confident although they have prepared and organize their practices earlier. However, it relates with their practice duration behavior. Less practice duration provides less confidence in performance. Students positive thinking through communication with friends and self-reminder have help them to reduce the anxiety towards the performance, including food consumption as mentioned by Ismail and Loo (2018). The three factors are the mind distraction to less focus towards the performance. Therefore, the performance anxiety is manageable.

It is evident that the degree level of piano major students behavior in UiTM is manageable with challenges during the online distance learning semester. The preparedness towards the performance is slightly less effective to most students because of the environment and time management. Although this study is based on a small sample of participants, the findings suggest an important insights of students' behavior towards the examination mostly from home. The scope of this study was limited to the participants integrity and honesty to the survey form distribution for 5 weeks. However, some of the statements that they mentioned during the



interview differ from the survey form. Furthermore, one of the limitations of this research is that it only focuses on the perceptions of piano students from the Bachelor in Music Education and Bachelor in Music Performance from the Faculty of Music, UiTM because these programs require major instrument. A further study could assess the effectiveness of the practice routine and the level of preparedness through a recorded-audio or video for a concrete data collection. Therefore, a definite need for another study in a long-term of practice routine towards public performance rather than examination that may change students perception and mental preparation.

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