

Technical work - Practice Suggestions

Daily technical work is a prerequisite of good sight-reading and fluent performance. It is vital that you know how it feels to play in different keys without struggling with key signatures or finger patterns.

You should, at the very least, know the scales, broken chords and primary triads of the pieces you are learning, in advance of starting to practise them. A quick look for accidentals should tell you what other keys are used in the music.

For example, if your new music is mostly in G major then you should revise the basic technical exercises in both G major and D major (the Dominant key). If you spot a D# then the music has modulated to the relative key of E minor, so learn simple technical patterns in that key as well.

Composers are not bound to Dominant and Relative keys. An example, a piece may move from C major to E major. This is the Dominant of A minor (the relative minor of C major) but changed to the major form (E major instead of E minor).

Many unusual modulations are possible and should be clearly identified before you begin practising. Always know the answer to “What key am I in?”

The *Keith Snell Scale Skills Book 5* is ideal for technical study across all grades. Fundamental patterns and standard fingerings in all keys are well chosen. I recommend this as an adjunct to the AMEB book.

You may find another dealer elsewhere on the web. Beware of high postage costs from the USA which may cancel out the bargain prices.

kjos.com/scale-skills-level-5.html

print.halleonard.com.au/products/gp685/scale-skills-level-5

The AMEB books provide a good basis for developing pattern recognition. It's not your fingers that need help, it's your mental ability to recognise scales, broken chords and arpeggios in new music. Piano playing is mostly about thinking, not fingers!

Since most music is composed of predictable patterns it should be a major focus to master technical work before serious study on your repertoire pieces. Have technical work at performance level before your exam entrance date.

Thoughtful students set aside time each week to revise, memorise and accelerate technical work from Preliminary to Grade 4 (or up to their current grade). This is important because the keys used (up to four sharps and flats) are the most common in all music.

Everything in the AMEB Technical book *Preliminary to Grade 4* should be kept in perfect readiness. You must eventually know this entire book, from memory at high speed, whether you are studying the *Comprehensive* or *Piano for Leisure* courses.

ameb.edu.au/2018-piano-preliminary-grade-4-technical-work

I speak to all students about the difference between “walking” and “running” at the keyboard. If you use arm weight and hold your fingers down to overlap notes, as you may do in *legato* music, then you will never be able to play fast music.

Technical work should be played as quickly as your brain can keep up. Use a light “running” technique, keep your wrists relaxed and mobile, play *pianissimo*, and repeat until you can’t go wrong.

Playing softly is important. Wearing out your arms by pounding the keys is a very dull idea indeed. When scales, broken chords and arpeggios appear in music they are most often needed at high speed. Practising loudly won’t help.

Varied Repetition in Technical Exercises

Playing repetitive patterns using different articulations and rhythms is an easy way to boost your learning speed and memory retention. All of the suggestions here also work with long groups of quavers or semiquavers that may appear in your repertoire pieces.

Technical work should be played every day. A good plan is to play six days a week if possible, and include one sixth of your technical work each day. The idea is to play everything over the course of a week. If you only practise for five days a week then divide your technical work into five sections.

As you progress in understanding the note and finger patterns you will naturally speed up. At first, play accurately at the “speed of no mistakes”. After that, play as fast as you can, keeping an even tone without bumps or hesitations.

Up to Grade 5, aim to play at the metronome speeds marked in the book. From Grade 6, aim to play one octave of each scale in a single very slow beat at 40 bpm or higher, not in groups of four as the music appears in the book.

- Play *pianissimo* – you will be able to play faster!
- For new scales, play with one finger until you are sure of the note patterns.
- Rehearse your left hand twice as much as the right.
- Play new scales over just two octaves. Extend to four octaves later.
- Start contrary motion scales on the same note and with hands an octave apart.
- Play with correct fingering and with these articulations:
 1. Legato – Slide your hand sideways at thumb changes, no “chicken wings”.
 2. Staccato – Keep fingers close to the keys and play as short as possible.
 3. “Nuke from Space” – Begin each note with your hand high above the keys.
 4. Slow-Fast – Play the first note for a full beat then the next two notes as fast as possible. Continue this rhythm pattern for the entire scale.
 5. Fast-Slow – Play the first two notes very fast, then the next pair, and so on.
 6. Eyes Closed – Feel your way around the keys. Use your ears!
 7. Dual Articulations – Play RH legato and LH staccato, at the same time, then switch. This is required from Grade 6 but valuable at all levels.

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