

Practice Routine

Level 1

1. Sight read a piece slowly but only tap the rhythm of the melody. Go as slowly as you can. You are training to relax and to move through the entire piece and get an overview and a rhythmic skeleton for orientation.
2. Tap through the melody again but this time use the left hand to play beats in between the rests and the long notes. You are training for the spaces you will fill with phrases later.
3. Sing the melody but only try to get the basic contour of it, not the exact notes. You are training to hear the range of the melody and to be confident that you will get through the piece later.
4. Write out the measure numbers of the entire tune above each bar line. You are learning the symmetry of the tune and will need the bar numbers later when you write out variations of certain measures on another page.
5. Write out the fingerings of every note, even the obvious ones. You are training total awareness of your hand in relationship to the melody. Although you may change this later when the tempo is faster, you need to have a basis to work with first.
6. Play the left hand bass notes only, not the chords. Listen to what you are playing. You are training awareness of the accompaniment structure.
7. After you have played the whole thing with the bass notes only, play again just two bars of the bass lines, then sing it back to yourself. Go through the whole tune. You are training to hear contrapuntally the second level of the piece, the counterpoint.
8. Put the chords to the left hand bass notes in the way you will play them, such as Oom-Pah, etc. be aware of your articulation. You are training your left hand to be its own master, not just a servant of the melody.
9. Sing the melody SLOWLY while you play the left hand accompaniment. You are training independent listening as well as learning the tune without yet playing it so that you don't learn mistakes into it right away.
10. Play the melody with the accompaniment so slowly, that you hardly recognize the tune. You are learning to internalize relaxation into your playing and to learn correctly. If you make mistakes, play even slower than you have. This may mean playing at a tempo so slow that you don't even hear music in it.
Rachmaninoff practiced this way.

Level 2

1. Practice only the last 2 bars of each section, the cadence. Try a variation of these two bars, beginning and ending on the first and last notes. Go back and forth between your two versions. You are training to have a safe haven when you are improvising.
2. Practice “Back to front” from your cadence (the last two bars) into the first two bars of the section you started from and will go to. You are training how to safely move from the end to the beginning, which most people overlook, but which causes much stumbling
3. Go back and connect the bass notes to each other with lines that lead to each other. Write in the notes you are playing as letters. You are training how to play rhythmically and provide support to the melody and your fellow ensemble musicians and to increase the energy of the piece.
4. Fill in the long tones and the rests with lines that connect the melody to what will come next. You are learning to orchestrate the piece as if there were more instruments than yourself. This will guide your ensemble and will build your improvisation vocabulary.
5. Create variations for each two-bar unit of the piece. Take another piece of paper and make a template of the number of bars of the piece (usually 24 or 32 bars). Go back and memorize at least one variation for every two bar phrase. Write out the variations on your template page. Learn as many “versions” as possible. You are developing an improvisation phrase collection. It will turn up naturally in the next piece you work on.
6. Mix up your variation with the original: Two bars of the original, two bars of your variation. Switch the order: two bars of the variation, two bars of the original. You are learning to be comfortable with your improvisation collection. Eventually you will be able to switch at will and quickly. The more you practise this, the more you will become flexible switching, and new ideas may pop up and be integrated spontaneously and not confuse you.
7. Work out a RIGHT HAND accompaniment pattern based on the chords for every bar that you play against the bass and chords of your left hand. You are learning full-bodied accompaniment.
8. Construct RIGHT HAND accompaniment lines which are based on the obvious notes of the melody. This requires analysing the melody to find which notes are the structural ones. If you are not sure, take only the notes of the strong beats, such as the first note of the first beat and the first note of the last beat. Connect these notes if you like. You are learning to base your accompaniment on the melody and not just patterned chords. In this way, each piece will be unique
9. After you have memorized a right hand accompaniment melody and combined it with the left hand chords, sing the real melody at the same time that you play the accompaniment. If this is hard, take two bars at a time. You are learning to hear the whole piece as a conductor hears an orchestra.
10. Play the melody of the first two bars, then play the complete accompaniment of the next two, so that you are switching between the two functions. Now reverse the order, so that the accompaniment begins for two bars, then the melody. Try doing this in smaller units until you can switch over to the accompaniment at any point of the melody and back again. You are training flexibility of function within the ensemble. This results in an arrangement of the piece that will constantly change.