



# PIANO PRACTICE BREAKDOWNS

TOOLKIT TO PRODUCTIVE PRACTICE

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# Introduction

Hello! My name is Dominic Cheli, and I am a concert pianist and head of tonebase Piano.

For many of us, the largest barrier to improving at the piano is also quite simple: **knowing how to practice effectively and what to do during your precious time.**

While educational resources like tonebase or even private instructors are wonderful for teaching you the actual skills you need to learn in order to develop, they often fall short of explaining exactly what you should be doing in your practice. To remedy this, I wanted to create a tool that would help you organize your time and make progress in every session, regardless of how much time is available in a given day.

Where did this idea come from? Well, in one of our most popular live-streamed events (*which you can still watch [here](#) as a member of tonebase!*), I discussed the process of reaching your practice goals through specific systems and routines. After the live-stream ended, I wanted to take it a step further and put them down in writing for passionate pianists like you to easily reference at any time.



In this PDF, I first provide some general guidance and practice advice for pianists of any level. These cover the **4 primary components of any good practice session:**

1. Warming Up
2. Technique work
3. Repertoire work
4. Sightreading (optional)

Additionally, you will learn about what kind of tempo to practice in (and the exact, different benefits of slow/medium/fast practice) as well as learning systems that professionals follow, such as the 7/5 or 20/10 systems.

Then, we'll get into the actual Practice Breakdowns themselves!

Every time you sit down at the piano to start practicing, all you will need to do is ask yourself, "*How much time am I committing to piano today?*" and you will be able to follow a template depending on these following options:

- 30 minutes (*Yes! You can see huge benefits even with such short amount of time!*)
- 60 minutes
- 2 hours
- 3+ hours

You can feel free to adjust these templates to taste, but they are all organized methods that are guaranteed to keep you on track, while moving across the core aspects of piano playing to **make sure your practice sessions are efficient AND well-rounded!**

Happy practicing and stay tuned for many more Practice Breakdowns from your favorite tonebase artists coming your way!

# General Practice Sections & Advice for Any Level

## 1. Warming Up

- Consider making sure that you are “literally” warmed up. Drinking hot tea, taking a shower, turning on a heater next to the piano, etc...It can all help!
- Stretch forearms, back, and neck
- Slowly stretch fingers across the keys
- *Recommended tonebase video: [Full Body Warm-Up with Penelope Roskell](#)*

## 2. Technique

- Always recommended to warm-up before technique work. Technical exercises, scales, and arpeggios are demanding on the body, so do not underestimate them!
- Depending on your level, feel confident that you can utilize: 1-octave, 2-octave, and 4-octave scales AND Arpeggios for different reasons:
  - 1-octave scales and arpeggios can be a great way to start learning your scales/arpeggios and cycling through them quickly
    - *Recommended tonebase video: [One Octave Scales and Their Importance](#)*
  - 2-octave scales and arpeggios are most recommended. They are not as demanding as 4-octaves, but still introduce the idea of “rotation in the thumb” (for slow/medium speeds), or “moving the hand” (for fast speeds).
    - *Recommended tonebase video: [Building Speed and Accuracy in Scales With Grouping Practice](#)*
  - 4-octave scales and arpeggios are the “highest level” and recommended for intermediate and advanced players.
    - *Recommended tonebase video: [Engaging Your Eyes and Brain for Four-Octave Scales](#)*
- Recommended Exercise Books:
  - [Hanon 60 exercises](#)
    - Exercises 1-38 are good for brief warmup.
    - Exercises 39 is where the main benefits exist (scale/arpeggio fingerings) and more
      - *Recommended tonebase video: [Hanon Exercises with Jeffrey Biegel](#)*
  - [Pischna Exercises](#)
    - Great exercises for developing finger independence

### 3. Repertoire

- Consider choosing and practicing from one of these 3 general tempo options. In addition, pay attention to the benefits found in each type of tempo practice.
  - a. Slow** (Best for Analytical, Visual Practice)
  - b. Moderate** (Best for Analytical, Visual, Aural, Muscle Memory Practice)
  - c. Fast** (Best for Muscle Memory, Visual, Aural Practice, and building confidence leading to performance)
- For Slow Pieces:
  - *(Practicing at Slow tempo)* Practice under tempo, even if it is extremely slow. It allows the brain to be analytical and track fingerings, harmony, pedaling, dynamics, articulation (and more) in a controlled way.
  - *(Practicing at Moderate tempo)* This may be close to “in tempo” but should be a hair slower than your desired tempo. This allows you to process information at a similar speed to performance but still have the extra amount of time for the brain to be very actively thinking about what is happening at the keyboard
  - *(Practicing at Fast tempo)* Yes, it is sometimes good to practice “slow pieces” at “fast tempos” – playing them faster than you normally would. It actually forces your brain and fingers to be sharp and fast thinking! It can also show the piece in a different light, illuminating structure, macro harmonies, and phrase lengths.
- For Fast Pieces:
  - *(Practicing at Slow tempo)* Practice under tempo, even if it is extremely slow. It allows the brain to be analytical and track fingerings, harmony, pedaling, dynamics, articulation in a controlled way.
  - *(Practicing at Moderate tempo)* For Fast pieces, it is GREAT and actually ideal to practice under tempo, at a comfortable tempo. This way you can develop confidence that you DO have a tempo that is comfortable and acceptable for performance!
  - *(Practicing at Fast tempo)* This would be “in tempo” practice or even practicing fast pieces at a higher tempo to build greater technical “bandwidth”. For example, if your goal tempo is 140bpm, consider practicing at 150–160bpm to push yourself, and then have 140 feel even more comfortable.

### 3. Repertoire (cont.)

- Consider using a “learning rule”
  - 7/5 rule: Practice a section for 7 minutes, take a 5 minute break, practice a DIFFERENT section for 7 minutes, 5 minute break, practice a DIFFERENT section for 7 minutes, etc...(you can revisit a previous section after cycling through 2 other sections)
  - 20/10 rule: Practice 20 minutes, take a break for 10 minutes. This is ideal for those that may be struggling with stamina, injury or looking for variety in their practice. After each break, try and start from a different spot in your piece!
    - *Recommended tonebase LIVE workshop: Reaching your practice goals: Systems and Routines*
- Consider spending time doing the following:
  - Record yourself during practice and listen back (either in excerpts or in “play throughs”)
  - Play for someone (friend, family, etc...)

### 4. Sightreading

- Consider using C. Schafer's Sightreading exercises for all levels
- Consider sightreading repertoire, hands alone. Try playing repertoire 2 levels below your current level for sightreading!
- Remember that after you have tried playing a piece more than 2 times...it is practicing, NOT sightreading anymore!
- *Recommended tonebase video: The Benefits of Sightreading With One Hand at a Time*

# Practice Breakdown #1 – 30 Minutes

With this short amount of time to practice, you should be hyper-focused in moving through all the below sections in this session! It can be very easy to spend too much time in one section (which you can still do if you really want) but consider that your brain continues processing information/developing even after you have moved on from something that you just worked on.

## 1. Warmup and Technique (5 minutes)

- Warm up before you sit down at the piano!
- Choose a scale/arpeggio in a major key, and perhaps also its relative minor!
- Consider looking at a recommended Exercise from above

## 2. Repertoire (20-25 minutes)

- With only 30 minutes of practice (overall) we need to get to your repertoire quickly!
- Tips:
  - Ask yourself which part you are most nervous or concerned about (That is a good place to start!)
  - Don't always start at the beginning of the piece
  - Consider sectionalized practice: spending 5 minutes each on 4 different sections (or any other division of time by section...this allows you to cover more ground and it is proven that your brain continues processing information/developing even after you have moved on from a passage). This is efficient practice.

## 3. Sightreading (optional 5 minutes)

- When only having 30 minutes to practice, it is typically recommended that you focus primarily on technique and repertoire.
- If you wish, you can spend 5 minutes on sightreading
- Consider recommended advice above in the "General" section

# Practice Breakdown #2 – 60 Minutes

This is the most typical practice routine for pianists. It is important to get good at maximizing this particular practice breakdown for great benefits!

## 1. Warmup and Technique (10 minutes)

- Warm up before you sit down at the piano!
- Choose a scale/arpeggio in a major key, and perhaps also its relative minor!
- Consider looking at a recommended Exercise from above

## 2. Repertoire (45 minutes)

- Tips:
  - Ask yourself which part you are most nervous or concerned about (That is a good place to start!)
  - Don't always start at the beginning of the piece
  - Consider sectionalized practice: spending 10 minutes each on 4 different sections (or any other division of time by section...this allows you to cover more ground and it is proven that your brain continues processing information/developing even after you have moved on from a passage). This is efficient practice.
  - If you have 2 pieces to work on, consider focusing on 1 today, 1 tomorrow, or bouncing between both pieces (around 20 minutes each)
- IMPORTANT: after practicing for 30 minutes take a 5 minute break! It will keep your brain fresh and allow you to be hyper focused when you jump back into practicing!

## 3. Sightreading (optional 5 minutes)

- If you wish, you can spend 5 minutes on sightreading
- Consider recommended advice above in the "General" section

# Practice Breakdown #3 – 2 Hours

This practice time is for intermediate to advanced students. The longer the practice sessions get, the easier it is to “waste time” and play “in circles”. In other words, getting stuck playing the same passage over and over with diminishing results, vs. working on many aspects of our technique and repertoire.

## 1. Warmup and Technique (20 minutes)

- Warm up before you sit down at the piano!
- Choose several scales/arpeggios in a major keys, and the relative minors!
- Work on different exercises as recommended above

## 2. Repertoire (90 minutes)

- It is assumed that most likely you are playing more than one piece! The breakdown of these 90 minutes could be:
  - i. all 90 minutes spent learning one new piece
  - ii. 45 minutes spent on each piece (2 total)
  - iii. For More than 2 pieces (or pieces of varying levels) break down the 90 minutes into prioritizing one piece (maybe the most difficult or weakest piece for you) for 45 minutes, and use the remaining 45 minutes on the other pieces.
- Tips:
  - Ask yourself which part you are most nervous or concerned about (That is a good place to start!)
  - Don't always start at the beginning of the piece
  - Consider sectionalized practice: spending 10–20 minutes each on several different sections (or any other division of time by section...this allows you to cover more ground and it is proven that your brain continues processing information/developing even after you have moved on from a passage). This is efficient practice.
  - Remember you don't have to play each piece, every day. You can focus on multiple pieces across multiple days!
- **IMPORTANT:** after practicing for 30 minutes take a 5 minute break! It will keep your brain fresh and allow you to be hyper focused when you jump back into practicing!
- Consider using one of the following learning rules, explained in the “General” section
  - 7/5 rule, 20/10 rule

## 3. Sightreading (optional 10 minutes)

- If you wish, you can spend 10 minutes on sightreading
- Consider recommended advice above in the “General” section

# Practice Breakdown #4 – 3+ Hours

For advanced or very serious pianists, this is a substantial amount of time! Remember Chopin's quote:

- “One day Chopin heard me say that I practiced six hours a day. He became quite angry, and forbade me to practice more than three hours.”
- According to other students, Chopin encouraged short practice sessions: “He always advised the pupil not to work for too long at a stretch and to intermit between hours of work by reading a good book, by looking at masterpieces of art, or by taking an invigorating walk”.

## 1. Warmup and Technique (20–30 minutes)

- Warm up before you sit down at the piano!
- Choose several scales/arpeggios in a major keys, and the relative minors!
- Work on different exercises as recommended above

## 2. Repertoire (2.5+ hours)

- It is assumed that most likely you are playing more than one piece! The breakdown of this time could be the following
  - i. all the time spent learning one new piece
  - ii. 45 minutes spent on each piece
  - iii. Any other time breakdown
- Tips:
  - Ask yourself which part you are most nervous or concerned about (That is a good place to start!)
  - Don't always start at the beginning of the piece
  - Consider sectionalized practice: spending 10–20 minutes each on several different sections (or any other division of time by section...this allows you to cover more ground and it is proven that your brain continues processing information/developing even after you have moved on from a passage). This is efficient practice.
  - Remember you don't have to play each piece, every day. You can focus on multiple pieces across multiple days!
- **IMPORTANT:** after practicing for 30 minutes take a 5 minute break! It will keep your brain fresh and allow you to be hyper focused when you jump back into practicing!
- Consider using one of the following learning rules, explained in the “General” section
  - 7/5 rule, 20/10 rule
- Remember: Work (sometimes) takes as long as you plan for it, try and practice as efficiently as possible!

# Practice Breakdown #4 – 3+ Hours (cont.)

## 3. Sightreading (optional 10–20 minutes)

- If you wish, you can spend 10–20 minutes on sightreading
- Consider recommended advice above in the “General” section

## Conclusion

We hope you get a lot of value out of this resource and find it useful for getting the most out of every practice session!

We at tonebase are committed to helping you achieve your musical goals and we are so excited about our recent launch: **tonebase Practice Plans**. Drawing from our library of 100s of videos, across repertoire, technique, and musicality lessons, we curate a plan that is specially designed for you, with a focus on improving BOTH your strengths and weaknesses.

Start your free trial of tonebase today to get your personalized Practice Plan and unlock access to 100s of courses from the world's best pianists!

A promotional banner for tonebase featuring a background image of a person's hands playing a piano. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

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