



FOSTERING FLUIDITY

A PRACTICE GUIDE FOR MUSICIANS

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the Fostering Fluidity Practice Guide for Musicians. This short guidebook will give you the tools you need to reduce stress and move with ease using a research supported practice process called variable practice. This guide includes an introduction and a chart of practice strategies to keep near your instrument as you put this method into action. Whether you're a beginning or an advanced player, the Fostering Fluidity Practice Guide will help you develop effortless, economical, fluid movement to bring your playing to the next level.

FOSTERING FLUIDITY WITH VARIABLE PRACTICE

The best way to foster fluidity in practice is by using a **variable practice process**. Repetition is an essential part of learning, and variable practice is the simple approach of intentionally creating variation upon each repetition rather than aiming for the same outcome each time. A commonly used application of variable practice is to take a passage of music, like one phrase of the sixteenth note runs in Mozart's *Rondo alla Turca*, and play it in dotted rhythms.

Rondo Alla Turca, bars 35-39



Rondo Alla Turca, bars 35-39, written in dotted rhythms



Playing passagework in rhythms is standard procedure for many musicians, but there are endless ways to create variation to enhance our understanding of a piece of music. By choosing to switch things up we explore the emotional, interpretational, aural, visual, and physical elements of playing on a deeper level. This multi-sensory exploration strengthens our connection to the music and helps us play with more nuance and expression.

SENSORY LEARNING

We learn music through our sense of physical feeling, hearing, and vision, thus for a passage to feel fluid, these sensations must be crystal clear. When each repetition is performed with a novel change, the brain naturally uses the subtle differences in sensation to refine movement and solidify musical understanding. Ultimately, we learn by feeling differences in sensation. A variable practice process allows us to become more sensitive to nuance and improves overall faculty and musicianship. The novelty of each variation captures our attention leading to rapid integration, fluency, and ease. The ultimate question to ask in the practice room is, "How can I alter the music in order to improve my sensory understanding of this piece?" Variable practice is one answer to this question!

THE RESEARCH

Practicing with variation is highly effective, supported by research, and is a popular topic in the music world at the moment. In recent studies, variable practice has been shown to improve accuracy in execution and produce longer lasting results. Variable practice also encourages a greater variety of physical gestures in playing and a greater variety of movement is known to protect musicians against repetitive motion injury. For a more in-depth discussion of the research, please check out the **Fostering Fluidity in Practice Course**.

ADDING VARIETY

The chart at the end of this document lists nearly fifty ideas of variations to use in practice. Variable practice can be as subtle as changing the dynamics of a piece, or as profound as improvising a new melody over the chord progression of a piece. It can be as simple as turning on the metronome or as challenging as transposing a passage into every key. The options for creating variation go on and on and the chart certainly is not exhaustive. I encourage you to think of some of your own. A big benefit of this approach is that it encourages a highly creative approach to playing.

Treat the chart of practice suggestions like a menu of options. Choose the strategies that best suit your mood, level of attention, and energy level in every practice session. This is not a checklist, and it's okay if you never utilize some of these suggestions. Start with the things that feel easy and approachable and ask for support if you are looking to explore unknown territory. For more detailed explanations, **The Fostering Fluidity In Practice Course** includes a video demonstration of every strategy on the guide.

KEY INGREDIENTS

This approach to practice works best when a few key ingredients are included! A **playful** and **curiosity driven** learning process reduces stress and this is highly advantageous for learning. **Rest breaks** are important because with each variation, we need time to digest the new information. Research has shown that pauses between repetitions lead to better execution.

The variable practice process itself improves precision and ease so there is no need choose the "correct" variation or to play everything perfectly. That being said, a comfortable amount of **precision** is better for learning. It is worthwhile to **thoughtfully sequence** tasks from easy to difficult to keep accuracy as high as possible. If you are struggling, choose a variation that makes it easy to get it right. This might sound silly, but choosing an easy objective is truly the quickest method of finding ease. Elimination of unnecessary struggle paves a path toward rapid growth.

FINALE

FOLLOW FEELINGS OF EXCITEMENT, JOY, AND CURIOSITY!

By using a creative and playful approach, you will build a new relationship with time spent in the practice room. By enjoying the process rather than focusing on immediate results (which can happen quickly) you will find you have achieved long-term improvements. Your enjoyment of the process is also more important than immediate results! Sometimes to access a feeling of effortless, we simply need to stop making an effort. The quickest way to do this is to seek pleasure through light-hearted fun, and to have fun sometimes we need to veer off the beaten path.

Variable practice provides an opportunity to foster ease, pleasure, and fluidity in playing, while also getting solid results from the time spent at your instrument. Have fun and enjoy the creative journey that lies ahead!!

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**QUESTIONS,
COMMENTS, MORE?**

If you have questions or comments about this guide or anything else, please drop me a line at katie@awarenssthroughmusic.com. Visit <http://www.pianowithkatie.com> for current course offerings!

FOSTERING FLUIDITY IN MUSIC PRACTICE

EXPERIMENT WITH INTERPRETATION

- Create new articulations
- Change dynamic markings
- Experiment with phrasing
- Add rubato, ritardando, or accelerando
- Vary tone quality, color, and texture

FOR TACTILE AWARENESS

- Play chords blocked and broken
- Omit chord tones, e.g. only play lowest note of chord
- Play hands separately
- Play only one voice. Try using intended finger numbers as well as using any fingers
- Play a mirror image of one hand
- Play a passage in reverse
- Transpose octaves
- Pause consistently on a beat of your choice
- Experiment with different physical and musical groupings
- Change the rhythm or meter (e.g. turn eighths into dotted sixteenths)
- Practice starting at the beginning of every measure. Try starting anywhere in the score
- Play, but don't allow the sound to come out. How do you accomplish this?

FOR DEEPER LISTENING

- Sing different voices
- Sing using solfege
- Add lyrics or words
- Play on a different instrument
- Play along with a recording
- Listen for every leading tone
- Listen for every cadence

FOR YOUR NERVOUS SYSTEM

- Observe your breathing patterns as you play
- Breathe in and out following an intentional rhythmic pattern (Ex. out 2 beats, in 2 beats)
- Play with your eyes closed
- Focus on the sound only, minimizing mind wandering

USE YOUR IMAGINATION

- Tap fingers while reading the score and imagine the sound. Can you imagine the sensation of the white vs. black keys?
- Without moving, read the score and imagine the sound
- Without moving, imagine the sensation and sound of playing. Can you imagine the score? Play from memory. What do you visualize?

INTERNALIZE RHYTHM AND PULSE

- Tempo – faster or slower
- Count out loud
- Tap beat in one hand, play the other hand
- Conduct one hand, play the other hand
- Set metronome to different beat divisions
- Circle clap the rhythm
- Step the rhythm
- Clap and step combined rhythm
- Tap right hand and left hand combined rhythm
- Create simple movements or dance moves along to a recording of your piece

UNDERSTANDING THE STRUCTURE

- Improvise in the style and key of the piece
- Transpose to a different key
- Practice a difficult passage in every key
- Cycle through the circle of fifths, or move chromatically
- Analyze the harmony
- Practice scales in the RH while playing a harmonic progression in the LH of your piece
- Add color to the score to enhance dynamic markings or voicing
- Create a chord chart or lead sheet
- Rearrange the layout of the score to reflect the form of the piece

FOR POSTURE

- Sense your torso movements, aiming to keep the body calm
- Sense feet on the floor and sit bones on the bench
- Sense the length and line of the spine

KEEP ON LEARNING

I originally created this practice guide for a presentation to the Seattle Music Teachers Association in 2018. It draws on my experience as a movement educator, bringing what I learned during my four years of training as a Feldenkrais Practitioner to music practice. I use these strategies in my own practice and I teach them to my students.

The best way to foster fluidity in your daily practice routine is through hands-on experience. This is why I offer weekly **Awareness Through Movement** classes for musicians as well as other resources to learn directly through experience.

If you're looking to dive deeper into the strategies outlined in this guide, I suggest you sign-up for the Fostering Fluidity In Practice Course or join the weekly Awareness Through Movement class!

WEEKLY AWARENESS THROUGH MOVEMENT CLASS

Move comfortably and confidently with Awareness Through Movement® Classes:

- Approach music-making in a holistic way
- Enhance awareness of how you move
- Partake in an enjoyable, curiosity-driven process
- Overcome limitations and increase resiliency
- Gain greater ease, efficiency, and competency at your instrument and in life
- Develop essential life skills like non-judgment, self-regulation, and introspective awareness

In an **Awareness Through Movement** class, the teacher guides students through a learning process that employs variable practice to develop greater ease in movement. Through movement exercises that emphasize mind-body awareness, we explore learning strategies, playing-related body mechanics, and mindfulness practices that enhance both the experience of making music and the success of our playing itself.

Awareness Through Movement classes are an integral part of the Feldenkrais Method of Movement Education. Inspired by yoga, martial arts, as well as the movements we make in our daily lives, these classes are accessible to all people, regardless of mobility and expertise. This class is safe for individuals with movement limitations and injury.

Classes meet on Zoom each week for approximately sixty minutes. Recordings are available immediately following each class. Check out pianowithkatie.com for current class offerings!

ABOUT KATIE



Katie O'Rourke offers piano lessons and movement classes in the Seattle area and online. After years of experiencing chronic pain, Katie began working to improve her own health as well as deepen her understanding of movement function. In 2021 she completed a four year training, becoming Guild Certified in the Feldenkrais Method of Somatic Education. Since then Katie has been busy presenting on the topic of musicians' wellness to universities and music teachers associations.

Katie is also an Oxygen Advantage Advanced Breathing Coach and has seven years of experience studying Taubman Technique. Katie runs the Awareness Through Music Blog which is dedicated to providing resources on injury prevention, musicians' wellness, and mindful approaches to teaching and playing.

In her free time Katie enjoys cooking, going to the beach, and spending time with family and friends!

