



Compound Interest, Every Day Practice and Review

By Tom Yang

If a parent of a newborn child were to invest two thousand dollars in a reliable mutual fund that grew ten percent a year (the average historical return of the Dow Jones) and if that child did not access the fund until he was seventy-two, that child, by then a retiree, would have \$1.9 million in that fund—an almost 1000-fold increase on the original investment and a very nice windfall. Now suppose for some reason, out of every seven years, the caretakers of the fund would have the money “rest” for two years—that is, for two years they would pull the money out of the mutual fund and just let it sit. At the end of the seventy-two years, twenty years of growth would have been lost, meaning that instead of \$1.9 million, the owner of the mutual fund would have a bit less than \$285,000. Further, if the child were allowed to spend some of the money so that the effective average interest rate were nine percent instead of ten, we would be talking about \$177,000 or one-tenth of what he would have had if he had left it alone – still a lot of money, but when you think of what could have been, it makes you think.

Substitute the seven years for seven days of practice and the two “rest” years for two days off per week, with its attendant deterioration of skills, and you can see where we’re going. Missing practice can be very expensive in terms of the musical skills that you ultimately attain.

The example illustrates how spectacular results can be achieved, given consistency and time. The idea that big things can happen as a result of daily diligence is a valuable lesson to teach to a child. We teach this lesson when we teach our children to practice in a manner that is regularly consistent, deep and unhurried. The payoff for learning this lesson can be, like the money example, spectacular.

Consistency: Consistent learning always entails consistent practicing. This means practicing is an every day event (notice that I said “every day” not “all day”). This also implies that we don’t take long hiatuses from practice (i.e. summer vacation). This does not mean that practicing needs to consume your life—it means that for growth to happen, a daily investment (however small) needs to be made. The starting point for developing your child’s practice habits is *frequency*, not length. If your child is not used to practicing every day, I would suggest using shorter sessions. The important thing about a young person’s practice is not that it is long but that it is daily (and preferably at the same time

of the day). Once this habit is established one can gradually add more time.

Consider two beginners, Bob and Jane. Bob starts out practicing a manageable skill for five minutes every day. Jane practices thirty minutes, four days a week. This means that Bob is playing thirty-five minutes a week and Jane is playing 120 minutes. Because Bob is playing such short sessions, he works on a small amount material. Jane, who has to fill thirty minutes, almost necessarily needs to begin with more material—so at the beginning she is “further along” in the book. Because Bob’s sessions are short and because the material is limited, he learns that practicing is not a hard thing. Since the sessions are short, Bob also learns that it is less work to just go ahead and practice then to spend time trying to get the day off. After a while, Bob learns that practicing is something that he does every day and he even initiates the practicing sessions in order to get the day going. For Jane, on the other hand, thirty minutes a day can feel onerous. Since playing every day is not an expectation of Jane, she will frequently argue that this should be a “skip” day or that she “needs a break.” Because the sessions are longer, she will more willingly put up a fuss to skip. Further, because she will probably have more material to practice, she will find a larger part of her practice session to be challenging. For Jane, practicing feels burdensome; for Bob, practicing feels easy.

Bob finds that the small material he has to practice gets easier and easier, so new challenges are very gradually added to his practice regimen. There is a pleasure and sense of power that he gets because he can play his small bits very well. After a few weeks, his parents quietly lengthen his practice session from five minutes a day to eight minutes a day. Bob, now accustomed to daily music making, hardly notices the time difference. Jane, who is already chafing at her four thirty minute sessions a week, stays at the same level of practice time. Bob’s parents continue to raise his practice time to ten, twelve, and eventually fifteen minutes, so that by the time he has been studying music for a half of a year, he is playing 105 minutes a week. Jane is still doing 120 minutes. But Bob, because he has been trained to play every day, finds his fifteen minutes every day much less cumbersome than Jane does her thirty minutes four times a week. He has been trained to overcome the inertia of starting a practice session. Further, because he doesn’t skip days, it is easier for

him to pick up where he left off. Jane has to spend more of her practice time “getting back into it.” Bob’s 105 minutes a week are now probably significantly more productive than Jane’s 120 minutes a week.

Now suppose after about a year and a half, Jane sees Bob (who by now is playing a half an hour a day) play and is motivated to see what she can do by practicing more. Even if she wants to practice more, she may find it difficult to practice another day a week. It is harder to add new practice sessions than it is to add more time to the practice sessions that you already have. If Bob wants to increase his practice time, he has already established the everyday habit and it is not a big deal to add a couple minutes a day. He has overcome the biggest obstacle to practicing—inertia—and has developed the habit of daily practice.

Depth: Learning a skill well requires practicing that skill repeatedly over a *long* period of time. This is why reviewing is vital to growth. A person who spends a great amount of his learning time reviewing and maintaining previously learned skills adds robustness to his playing. Consider the following benefits of reviewing:

1. **Reviewing teaches ease and comfort in playing while reducing frustration.** One of the most gratifying things your child can do is to sit at his instrument and effortlessly reel off piece after piece at a high level of performance. This comfort level or physical *élan* only comes when one has lived with a piece for a long time—you may cover notes correctly in a short time, but that is a far cry from the joy of playing a piece easily. My older daughter, who claims that she does not enjoy cello, had to admit to my wife, “Well, my head doesn’t like playing the cello, but my body does.” The physical enjoyment of playing your instrument means that you have lived with the *same* notes for a substantial amount of time.
2. **Review means not reinventing the wheel.** Music is an art form that contains many repetitive patterns. If I have a student who can play London Bridge with both hands, I will ask her if she can still play the left hand without the right hand. If she can, I will ask her to play the left hand while I play the right hand. When she does, I will “accidentally” play the right hand of Go Tell Aunt Rhody—illustrating the point that in practicing London Bridge, she has been practicing the first two phrases in the left hand (which is almost exactly the same as London Bridge) of Go Tell Aunt Rhody. In fact, the left hand of London Bridge is pretty much the same as the left hand of the opening of Mozart’s Sonata, K. 545 in Book Six, so in practicing London Bridge we are not only practicing Go Tell Aunt Rhody, we are actually preparing to play a Book Six piece. The longer we stay with a piece, the more likely it is that we will be able to transfer the skills we develop in learning that piece. Too often, by not staying long enough with the pieces we learn, we end up relearning skills again and again until

we reach a piece whose size and scope overwhelms us. Reviewing makes learning future repertoire easier and makes it far less likely that the student will hit a wall.

3. **Review is the only path towards realizing musicianship skills.** When a piano student is able to put his hands together to play the Alberti bass version of Lightly Row, that is a cause for great celebration, but it is not a cause to stop practicing Lightly Row. The next step is to deepen this new skill so that we can use it in future pieces. Only after the notes have been learned can the student begin to focus on the *skill* (in this case Alberti bass playing) that the piece entails rather than on what notes to play. The student who continues to practice Lightly Row long after he has learned the notes will learn to play the Alberti bass with a better legato, with a better balance of the left hand against the right hand and with a better sense of how the melody is supported by the harmony. This means that the student has done more than learned to play Lightly Row, he has developed a skill that will give him a head start on the pieces that follow it.

We learn to recognize high levels of artistry through listening, but we physically realize these skills through notes that we can play easily. Playing more in tune, acquiring a better vibrato or a better legato, developing better phrasing requires that we spend time with the pieces we learn. This means that the path to truly artistic playing *must* come through review. Only complete familiarity with a piece can lead to insights that allow the musician to play securely and expressively.

Three things to keep in mind when you review: 1. Aim for higher levels of performance in your review pieces. If your student has just performed a piece, take advantage of the familiarity that he has of the piece to aim for higher levels of musicianship—better intonation, better sense of rhythm, better tone. Allow students to consider personal touches such as a broadening of tempi at phrase endings or slight delays at the tops of phrases. 2. Remember that reviewing is not about touching old pieces, it is about polishing and staying with the same old pieces long enough to get something of them. One of the mistakes I think I’ve made in assigning review was to rotate pieces in and out of the review lists too quickly. Review lists should be short enough (or better, review time should be long enough) so that all the review pieces are worked on every day. You will get more out of one of set of pieces maintained every day rather than having two sets of pieces that are maintained every other day. Review lists will change according to your student’s needs, but they need to change very slowly in order to provide your student the stability he needs to learn deeply. 3. Build your review lists gradually. Start by bringing back a piece that is well below your student’s playing level and pledge to work on this piece every day. When this piece can be easily played bring back another piece. Add more review pieces to your review list if *everything* on the review list can be easily played.

Keep in mind that maintaining the pieces already on the review list is more important than adding to the list.

Taking time: In the monetary example that opened this article, saving money and collecting interest was shown to have big long-term effects. When looking at the accumulation of wealth from the perspective of a year, however, one might wonder if it saving money really matters. In economically challenging years, one might even be tempted to give it up. So it is with learning music. We may be tempted to skip review or short standards to get to the next book. Going back and playing old pieces with higher standards in mind can almost seem like you're going backward. If there is a single reason why people give short shrift to review, it is because it seems to delay advancement in the books. We tend to think that better intonation, better rhythmic sense and better sound automatically come with more advanced repertoire. The fact is if we don't stop to work on better sound and rhythm on pieces that are easy, we will be even less likely to do so when the notes are more challenging. It helps to look down the road. Will it really matter if a violinist first plays the Mozart A Major Violin Concerto when he sixteen instead of fourteen? No. What will matter and frustrate the player in such an undertaking is if he approaches such a piece without having developed a good sense of rhythm or without being able to play his sixths in tune. If you want your child to find joy through beautiful music making, you cannot hurry the process.

My wife and I decided that our older daughter should add piano to her musical studies after she had been studying cello for some time. What started out as a postscript to her cello practicing has grown into a separate discipline. Through trial and error (my errors and her trials) we have developed a daily practice session of about twenty to thirty minutes a day. My daughter is fairly independent in her practicing. One of the reasons she can be independent is that she does exactly the same thing every day. Every morning she opens with *Lightly Row*, then *London Bridge* and *Cuckoo*, reviewing about fifteen pieces (the exact same set) out of *Piano Book One*. If she stumbles or rushes any of the review pieces, I usually ask her to play the left hand alone on the piece and then hands together at a slow tempo. When new material is introduced, it is a small amount and it is done only after we have checked and maintained all her current repertoire. I try not to introduce new material until everything on her review list feels secure and easy. When new material is introduced, it is small enough so that it does not much change her practice routine. In her learning sessions, developing clarity, security and musicality in the pieces that she already plays is a higher priority than starting new pieces. The newest piece (which is the last piece in *Book One*) uses about five minutes of her time. The rest of the session is spent playing, maintaining and improving the pieces that she already plays. Sometime we will spend extra time to focus on a particular skill, such as the left hand scale passages in *Little Playmates*. When we do this kind of focus, it is usually on a piece that she has already acquired all the notes. That is, we develop skills on

her *old* pieces. The result of practicing this way is that she has about fifteen pieces that she could put on a recital in a week's notice. Because she spends most of her time playing older, more secure pieces, most of her practice time is spent playing at "recital level." Time will tell the ultimate result of managing her learning this way, but I'm encouraged by the results. It is probable that she could be further along—"more advanced" some might say—if more emphasis were put on new repertoire, but her playing would be a lot less secure, a lot less beautiful, and she would probably be a lot less happy. It seems that we should introduce new music the way we would introduce new privileges to our children. Make sure that they have proven themselves up to the task of handling the old privileges and they will likely take the new ones with grace and ease.

We live in an event driven culture—students put out bursts of energy preparing for the big track meet, they worry to distraction about their final exams, they suddenly increase their practice time for spring music competitions. Events are wonderful things and useful measuring sticks of accomplishment, but those who are motivated only by events will find the results of their efforts to be lacking and the benefits to be temporary. Ultimately, quality work and lasting benefits come from the habits of doing things well and regularly over a long period of time. If we teach this to our children through their music lessons, we will impart habits that are vital to a lifetime of learning—and that is something worth far more than any Book Ten graduation. ☞

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Thomas Yang joined the ASC faculty in 1999. Born in New Jersey, he did his undergraduate work at Bucknell University where he received a Bachelor of Music degree in Music History. Following his studies at Bucknell, he went on to earn a Master of Music in piano performance at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and later to do work towards a piano performance doctorate at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Tom's varied experience has included teaching in a private studio in Marshfield, at the Wausau Conservatory of Music and at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. For the twelve years immediately prior to joining ASC, Tom worked as a computer programmer for the Marshfield Clinic in Marshfield, Wisconsin.

An active teacher and performer, Tom has taught at the American Suzuki Institute since 2002 and has given workshops, talks and performances in Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri and Wisconsin. One of the things that he really likes about being at the Aber Suzuki Center are the opportunities it provides for him to perform with his favorite clarinetist and narrator - wife Jenni, favorite cellist - older daughter Olivia and favorite clapper - daughter Megan, age two.



Keeping the Ball Rolling

by Rochelle Pearson

Lately I have had several discussions with parents who are experiencing the frustration of trying to get their kids to practice. I would like to share a few thoughts on this important subject. First of all, if your child is resisting you about practicing, *this is normal*. Rare is the child who naturally wants to pick up his/her instrument every day and practice without any prodding from the parent. If you have this kind of child, you're blessed. If you don't, it is normal.

I feel that music should be a part of every child's education. Back in Greek times there were three disciplines: Math for the mind, Gymnastics for the body and Music for the soul. Nowadays music is often looked upon as a fun extracurricular activity. I believe it should be part of the curriculum, as important as math or science. It has been proven that you use more of the brain in playing music than you do in any other activity. It incorporates emotion, mathematics, history, language, etc. Children who play an instrument tend to perform better academically. Therefore, it should be part of a child's daily activity, like doing homework or brushing teeth. There should be no negotiation, just like there is no negotiation in having to do homework or brushing teeth—it's just something that must be done every day. I have had to tell my own son every day of his life from age three to get his cello out and practice. I go with him, help him set up, help him get started (which by the way is the most difficult thing of all). Again, if you don't have to do this, consider yourself lucky. After five years of hard work I can honestly say I see some pride and enjoyment in him when he plays. It did not come easy, let me assure you. Many times I wanted to quit because it was so frustrating. Most children don't naturally migrate to the things that are good for them in life. (Have you ever read *Lord of the Flies*?) If left to their own, they would likely want to watch TV and/or play video games most of the day. I believe our job is, in a sense, to "save them from themselves," as one author put it.

That being said, of course it is important that we approach practicing with a positive attitude, encouragement and constructive criticism. There is no reason why practicing can't be enjoyable. I always try to find the positive first, then look for what can be improved with my students. They are more likely to listen if I do that. Go to concerts, listen to recordings ... do whatever you can to make the love of music an integral part of your lives.

I have never in all my twenty years of teaching had an adult come up to me and say sadly, "Why did my parents force me to take violin lessons?!" I've only heard adults say to me remorsefully, "Why did my parents let me quit?!" I have heard the same over and over from other teachers as well. Then when the adult tries to get back into it later in life, it is often not very successful. Any fine art form like dance or music must be developed young, when the muscles are developing and the mind is quick to absorb new information.

Remember that it doesn't matter whether or not your children go into music professionally in the future. What matters is that they develop mentally, physically, and emotionally as they mature, and that they develop a true love and appreciation for music for the rest of their lives. I once heard that Nadja Salerno Sonnenberg was

once told by a doctor that while she played music, he saved lives. To his comment, she replied, "You may save lives, but I make life worth living!"

I have used many "tricks" to get my son to practice at different ages. I used to do the star system, which was basically that he practiced ten sessions without one complaint, receiving a star each time, and after 10 stars he got a little prize. Now I use video time: he doesn't get to do screen time until all homework and practicing is done. Find your own system of what works best for you. Hang in there—it takes time to get into a groove. Just as with the laws of motion, once you get the ball rolling, it will continue to roll, but once it stops then it takes extra effort to get it rolling again.

Just be assured that your efforts will not be in vain. ☺

Rochelle Pearson received her M.M. in Music Performance from the University of Akron and was a member of the New World Symphony in Florida. She is currently a member of the Tacoma Symphony. Rochelle is a Suzuki Violin and Viola teacher and resides in Issaquah, Washington, with her pianist husband Harry and cellist son, eight-year-old Benjamin.



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