

Fix Practice

With the 5X Method

Intro

Hi there! Welcome to a new idea!

I'm Ron, 38 years old, husband, father of 3, i work a lot, and love music. Disclaimer: I'm not a professional musician.

I've always wanted to get better at playing music but struggled until i found a reliable way to battle the stagnation of progress. This book is about that struggle and the method that has worked so well for me.

The progress has been incredibly exciting and i think it's time to share it. I hope it serves you well too.

If anything is unclear or you're finding any sort of trouble, feel free to reach out at @support. I consider this a work-in-progress. It can't get much better without your feedback, good and bad. And of course, i'm happy to help.

With that said, read on and enjoy!

What's this about?

Learning music, developing a style, practicing, and improving, all at a steady pace, can be difficult. Chances are if you're reading this then you already know that. :)

The 5X Method is 3 simple rules you can use to get around the common pains and make improvement habitual.

While it helps the learning process in practical ways like boosting productivity and alleviating boredom, Its biggest strength lay in helping you develop your own musical style, in a way that is easy. Like 'set it and forget it'.

Reading this may take upwards of 20 minutes, but you can learn the method in a just few. The entire concept is only 3 simple rules, which i'll summarize shortly. The rest of this text should give you the context: the 'why' and the 'how' it works.

The best possible outcome is becoming self-motivated, giving it a shot and finding a new path towards rapid growth and more control over your personal direction.

After reading this you'll know why the rules are what they are and what affect they'll have on your playing. This should be all you need to get started. The main goal here is to give you this info in a clear way.

Once the material is digested, depending on how often you practice, it can take from a few days to a few weeks to truly see for yourself. I trust if you make it that far you'll witness the new pace of progress and respite from boring tedium. And it will be exciting!

The 5X Method can be used at any pace and for any style. Consider it a tool for your artistry, it supports wherever you want to take it. A professional musician may use it to venture into a new style, a student may use it to bring their playing to a new level. Really, anyone at any level can use it to grow faster and more reliably into the player they want to be.

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If this doesn't sound like you, i hope this wasn't a total waste to read this far. If this does sound like you, that's great. Onward!

Background

Let me start at the beginning, the creation of the 5X Method.

I'm an amature jazz pianist, i love playing, absolutely love love love. But 'amatuer' is the operative word here. i can't hold my own in a professional setting, but hope to greatly some day.

Professionally, i build software based systems, products and companies. this has led me to spend many years finding problems and pains then conceptualizing systems to deal with them.

i started practicing piano regularly a few years ago, mostly with the motivation to play more as i grow older, maybe as a quasi-professional in some sort of half-retired-jazzing-up-Christmas songs in a hotel lobby type of way.

i took a few lessons w/ some pros i found online, they were helpful. And offered bits and pieces of good advice eg. what to play, some exercises, etc.. But as a parent and tech guy, it's just not in the cards for me to keep up with that.

At the same time, i wasn't even sure if i fully wanted to learn 'their way'. After all, i'd like to craft my own style, and felt like I was just going through whatever practice routine they come up with or were handed down from their teachers. I don't particularly want to sounds like another eighth-note junky chasing 3rds and 7ths endlessly.

I love Bill Evans, Thelonious Monk, they had style and their music is beautiful. Bill sounds like Bill, Thelonious sounds like Thelonious. And I know they're in a league of their own and have dedicated their lives to it, so i don't expect to get anywhere close, but at the least i can sound like Ron, for better or worse.

So this went on a few years, i'd hammer on the handful of tunes i knew, occasionally going through some of the exercises they showed me, but progress was slow at best, with plenty of long stagnant pauses that lasted months.

Meanwhile, in a recent product-building endeavour, i've had to delve deeply into behavior change, which has taught me a bit about hacking personal growth.

The big take-away for me, interestingly, our nature often works against us.

We're actually built to forget! It turns out that evolution wants us to worry more about tigers that can eat us, then half-tone-whole-tone scales.

But luckily we live in a time where there is enough science out there to trick ourselves into steady growth more easily then we may be aware of.

Let's take a minute to break this problem into some parts.

Say I'm working backwards from my goal of being an old man cranking out songs in a hotel lobby for a few bucks. It becomes clear that progress needs to be consistent.

So what is in the way? why do i keep getting in ruts? What is it about the nature of practicing music that makes consistent progress so difficult? What i found is people everywhere suffer from the same reality.

1: for starters, it's not fun. how can playing music be so great while practicing music is such a snooze-fest?

2: It requires regular guidance. I know how i want to sound, but not necessarily what to practice. This alone can kill your momentum.

3: everything out there is curriculum based. I don't want that baggage, i have taste dammit!

In a nutshell, we need to make it more fun, never leave you without some sort of guidance as to what to do next, and make it flexible enough that you can sound however you want.

A solution slowly started to come together...

My only real practice was occasionally running through some exercises. I had a whiteboard i used for work, and started using it to log how many times i did each exercise in an effort keep track. Everytime i sat down at the piano, i'd look to that board and pick something to play. Easy enough.

But the above problems remained. I'd always lean towards the 'fun', but quickly saw i was avoiding the harder stuff. The exercises that made my head hurt, like where i'd need to think about the root note where Ab was the sixth. Bb!? anyways.

it became a balancing act between pain and fun on the whiteboard. then some patterns emerged.

i had this idea to auto-magically balance some of these important aspects with some simple rules. i knew once in place, if it worked, i could go on autopilot and just get better, finally.

What i came up with was a game-changer in my longstanding struggle to improve, and it is what the rest of the ebook is all about.

the 5X Method: A simple set of rules governing what you can play when you sit to practice that do all the balancing of fun and growth for you, so you can stop wondering what to play or how to get better, and just get better. And the curriculum, you build it on your own based on what YOU like.

Let's take a look at it.

TLDR / The Rules

DISCLAIMER: Don't worry if the rules below don't totally make sense yet! It's just important to give you an early taste so you have a mental reference to them going forward, where it will all hopefully come together..

Rule of 5's:

A *block* is a set of any 5 musical exercises you want. The goal of the method is to create 5 blocks. Once you've done that, you've fully completed the cycle and are free to start over. Note this can take weeks, months, etc..

What does this mean?

- 5 blocks is 25 exercises
- That's quite a bit of material, depending on how much you practice

Lock Rule:

You can't play from locked blocks. A block becomes locked when its exercises have been played *5 X the total number of blocks*.

What does this mean ?

- If you have 2 blocks, A and B, and in block A each exercise has been played 10 times, you can only practice from block B for now.
- If you have 2 locked blocks, each exercise has been played 10 times so both blocks are locked. Then you create a third block, those 2 locked blocks are no

longer locked, until you play each exercise in each block 5 more times ie, 15 times (3 X 5).

- The 5X method gets its name from this concept, playing each exercise a dynamic number of times, 5 X the total number of blocks. .

Creativity rule:

You must create a new block when all existing blocks are locked.

What does this mean ?

- If you have fill up 3 blocks (played each exercise 15 times), you're next task is to create a new block of 5 exercises.

Guidance by Blocks

Practice is all about discipline right? We think to ourselves, if we could just sit down and practice every day we will get better and better. There's a few problems with this oversimplification. In the army discipline works great, but we don't all have a drill sergeant to tell us, "drop and give me a II-IV-1 without bass notes in all 12 keys!"

Even if we did have that internal drill sergeant, who's to say we'd be practicing the right things? the things that will maximize our potential. And when we do practice new things, what should they be? Without reliably and consistently knowing this, we just plateau.

There's just too much uncertainty that can hit you when you're not in the right mood, then BAM!, it's been weeks since you've focused on anything new and you're officially not getting any better. Does this sound familiar?

We have to hack our minds into new habits. Then live out those habits. Real change requires a burst of motivation, a clear and defined path, and continued guidance until we're running smoothly.

The ideas in the block system draw from best-practices for behavior change to do just that.

Think of some of the most effective diet programs, they tell you what to eat, when to eat, how many calories, and if you follow, they usually work to some degree.

The best ones let you feel unconstrained while constraining you ie. just enough choice, but not so much you have to think too much, or make bad decisions.

As humans, we can't rely too much on our brains to be constantly thinking of the best next step for us to drive the best actions. We're not really wired that way. Yes, every now and then we take steps back and adjust our lives, sometimes coming to glorious epiphanies, etc.. but most of the time they fizzle out because for the most part, we're living out a series of habits, some good, some bad.

The quality of our lives is ultimately driven by our choices. Sadly, this is a mostly unconscious process. We don't focus much on choosing our habits and finding concrete ways to bring in good habits and remove bad habits. But these are all still choices.

According to Rush, "if you choose not to decide you still have made a choice"

Our minds and body have been fine tuned to survive, which requires conserving energy, mental and physical, and avoiding danger. This leaves us with a strong unconscious inclination to: find a good rut, go on auto-pilot, and live it out.

Thousands of years ago this was a good idea, you'd avoid a lot of tigers this way and stay near clean water and food.

To really change and incorporate a new habit, we need motivation to start, guidance to keep us in the right direction, rewards and reinforcement to keep us on the rails

We need this guidance not so much when we are fired up about something new, more in our most mindless moment. And it needs to tell us, "play this now". And whatever "this" is, should always be relevant to our goals, enjoyable, rewarding, etc...

With 5X, Guidance is achieved through the combination of rules.

For example, because of the 'lock rule', you're free to play anything you want that isn't 'locked'. this insures you're playing is balanced between both outside and inside of your comfort zone. You can't practice anything too much, too fast, you have to move over to the hard stuff and do that too.

With the creativity rule, this insures your continually re-accessing where you want your playing to go, and your practice is following suit.

When 'hard' becomes 'easy', you're making progress. When 'easy' becomes easier, you're making progress. When everything is getting kind of easier, you're forced to choose your next direction.

Recall, Recall, Recall

One of the most exciting things i noticed as i transitioned into this system is how regularly some musical concepts that were very hard at first, were becoming easy and moving into the realm of muscle memory.

I really knew i was onto something when these musical concepts were popping up out of nowhere when i was playing freely, way more so than in the past. And at this pace, i could reliable guide my playing in any direction i want.

This is like an engine of exhilarating progress, but different than regular practice in a major way. There is a secret sauce to learning with 5X. Well, not so secret, i'm about to tell you.

Repetition has always been key to learning, but it's usually applied bluntly. A teacher may say, "play this with a metronome, get it to 120 BPM then 100 BPM then 80, etc..". then you get it there and move on forever.

The block system takes advantage of a technique called "Spaced Recognition", which is very useful in tasks where a large body of knowledge needs to be retained indefinitely, such as a massive catalog of combinations of musical notes to achieve sounds or styles. Ie it's perfect for music.

Spaced repetition is what it sounds like, you repeat something a certain number of times, but then you space out the next time you engage that memory in your mind, and continue this at gradually increasing intervals.

A not-so-fancy scientific explanation is that you're training your brain not to recycle that space for more ideas (like where to find clean water, we now know that comes from the faucet), but to keep it for indefinite storage. Everytime you engage after differently spaced intervals, you're strengthening the ability to quickly recall it.

Let's look at how this is achieved through the block system. In totality you'll have 5 blocks, each containing 5 exercises that you'll play 25 times through varying degrees of comfort..

The gradual increasing comes in due to the 'lock rule' and how that forces you to continually go back and play a growing set of exercises. Each time with a bit more space between then the last time.

For example, when you start your first block, you may play a single exercise 5 times easily in a day or two, but when you're on your 5th block, you have to go back to 4 unlocked blocks and fill them in with more practice. And when you play each one of those exercises, which equate to accessing concepts in your mind, it is more 'spaced out'.

The spacing and timing of the blocks and theirs exercises insure you're navigating different mental pathways to get to the concept in your mind. Since you're mind is always changing, new ideas entering, old ideas leaving, you're solidifying a concept over a range of mental states.

What this means is you will be able to retain a wider body of knowledge for a longer period of time then if you were following the traditional routine of practicing something then moving on.

And when you play freely, you'll see it and feel it, the concepts are more easily accessible. The rewards of your efforts are more tangible. It's an engine of exhilarating progress.

Fun with freedom

i think one of the best things about music is it's a pure gift that you can enjoy endlessly. Few things in life are like that. if i over enjoy food, i'll get fat, if i drink too much or do drugs, plenty of ramifications there. but music, which has the similar dopamine delivering fun-blast to the brain, can be indulged in over and over throughout your life, producing nothing but joy to you and those around you (hopefully).

Practicing, though, isn't usually fun. there are some elements to practice that sort of hurt, and have to in order to make you better, whether tonal brain buster, finger twister or muscle flexer

So how does the block system address this necessary pain? By fully embracing the philosophy embodied so well by Mary Poppins, " a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down".

Anytime you sit down to play within the block system you have some great choices in front of you. This flexibility allows your practice to jive more with your mood.

Let me illustrate this with a real-life example from a block i'm working on now, with a few exercises.

1: the first exercise is a two bar riff from a Bill Evans solo on Stairway to the stars.

I love this one, it sounds so nice and i've played it 7 times. If it's after a long day of work and i just want to get in my minimum 10 minutes of practice for the day, i'll just bang this out before i head to bed.

2: An oddball riff i made up using the half-tone-whole-tone-scale

This one was hard at first but really starting to pay-off. I can hear it when i play freely, that on dominant chords it adds so much flavor. So maybe i'll play this one and keep the momentum going, especially if i'm feeling 'jazzy'.

3: A right hand voicing of stacked 4ths, then move up a step

This one requires very little mental effort, i learned it quick but it's reinforcing some great go-to voicings in my hands and adding muscle memory. If i really don't want to practice, i'll just bang this out and call it a day.

4 : A really high tension dominant chord voicing

This one is still a little fuzzy but goes great with the oddball riff from #2. Is definitely worthwhile and i'll play it if i have some energy but maybe not if i don't.

5: A really spacey sounding diminished 2 -5 transition voicing i found on youtube

This one is hard, i just learned it. Maybe it's Sunday morning and i just had my coffee, i'll go for it. It definitely sounds amazing so i'm more than motivated to keep chipping away at it.

As you can see the options grow with the block, and my comfort level on each dictates what i may want to jump into. If i've somehow leaned too much on the easy stuff, i have to start get my brain moving and do some of the harder ones. Luckily this is all dynamic, the harder ones are always becoming easier ones! And my feelings towards the exercises are always changing.

Once i've fulfill my exercise requirements in all current blocks (5X total number of blocks), and have reinforced all past material for the Nth time, i get to my favorite part, creating a new block.

Now i get a reward, i get ask myself, how do i want to grow next? Maybe i want to learn 'locked-handed technique', or find some higher tension chords for 2-5-1 progressions.

Let's look more at the countless forms of inspiration for creating blocks.

Creating blocks

I love creating blocks. It feels like both a reward for practicing previous blocks and sneak peak at what my next chunk of progress will look and feel like.

At first, my blocks were filled with exercises i found in youtube videos, books, or learned from a teacher. But now i take a more creative approach. i grab them straight from the music and sounds that i love.

i'll listen to a Bill Evans record passively while i'm working or making dinner, and notice some string of notes that just hits me hard, and i mark the time in the song. maybe it's 1 bar or 4 bars, at some point i'll transpose it.

Once i have it, i record myself on my phone so i don't forget. Then it's officially a new exercise.. It's on my phone so i can't forget, and i'll give it a name suitable on the whiteboard.

At some point i'll try it in exercise form, for me that's usually playing it in all 12 keys. This first time is the hardest, taking up to 5 minute sometimes as i think hard about the interval involved and playing them in different keys. By the second time i try to play it through, i don't need the reference video i made anymore, it's in the early stages of sinking in.

I don't have to keep playing it, i could if i want to, but i still have 4 more exercises to invent if i'm feeling creative. At this point i'm in some sort of creative respite, mapping out the future of my style.

But if you're not feeling creatie, there are many other great sources of inspiration, youtube, reddit (woodshed subreddit is great!). if you know the name of a technique or just a song you love, there's likely some lesson on how to play it. BTW, there is no rule that an exercise can't be a song :)

Maybe you're working on your ear, there's also no rule that an exercise can't just be an ear training thing, like randomly transposing something that's on the radio for 5 minutes.

One thing i learned, take your time and create awesome exercises, you'll thank yourself later. And this is where you'll really start to sound like you, and less like the output of someone else's curriculum.

Look for inspiration in the outside world, always be on the lookout for where you want to take things next.

Staying on track

Everyone's a little different so feel free to use what works for you, but note the importance of two things you'll need to stay on track:

- Some way to anchor it into your life's schedule - a trigger
- Some way to track that is easily visible

I use a whiteboard and just mark each exercise with a slash each time i do it. I've found it's incredibly helpful if it's always in your view, right near your instrument, wherever/whenever you practice. Maybe for you this is putting a piece of paper on your fridge.

If you keep it in a notebook, in a drawer or on a spreadsheet, you may find it too easy to forget. If it's always in view when you sit to play, you'll look at it and be like, "oh, let me just bang out this one real quick".

Truth be told, i'm a lazy guy but at least i know it. I've made progress just by practicing a few minutes here and there with this system, some days more some days less. How well you can work it into your life will determine your pace.

Some triggers are obvious, maybe set a phone alarm at a reliable time when you can play. A really neat trick i learned is based on the Fogg method.

The Fogg method consists of 3 tenants: get specific about what you want to do, make it easy, set a trigger. The block system handles getting specific and making it easy, but doesn't account much for a trigger.

The trigger is some automatic way to trigger yourself into this new behavior.

What i love about it is it's so reliable. A phone alarm can be a trigger, but that's also kind of new to your life, what about existing habits you can anchor on?

Here's a great example. Do you drink a cup of coffee in the morning? Why not trigger 5 minutes of practice once you finish your cup. Literally, as soon as you put the cup down in the sink, head over to your instrument and bang something out.

Or what else, what do you already do in your life that you can use as an anchor? Early day activities are best because you're not tired yet. Do you work out? Do you read the newspaper? Kind of gross but why not do something after everytime you go number 2?

Anyways, this the point: **Make it reliable by anchoring on your existing habits. Find a way to your instrument then follow the block system rules.**

Summary

That's it! That's all there is. I hope you liked it.

Here's a quick summary:

- the block system is a simple methodology, 3 simple rules that you can implement to super-charge your growth, put more fun into practice, and guide your own musical style in any direction.
- Use tricks like Fogg method to work it into your life and finally make practice and growth habitual.
- Be creative, focus on sounds you love and create your own exhilarating engine of progress.

Getting started is as easy as creating an exercise to start with. Write it down. Find an existing and repeating habit in your current life to anchor your next steps to. And let the block system rules take care of the rest.

Best of luck and happy playing!