

HOW THE WORLD'S TOP PIANISTS ACTUALLY PRACTICE

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Introduction: It's Not About Practicing More

Practice is not time spent. **It's decisions made.**

Most pianists have a practice routine: scales, slow practice, metronome.

But that familiar frustration still crops up: sitting down with good intentions, and then repeating endlessly, zoning out, or “working hard” without a clear sense of improvement or what's actually changing.

This guide is purpose-built to fix that.

Try this now (30 seconds):

Pick a piece you're working on and circle the one spot you trust the least – the passage or phrase you'd hate to play cold for someone else.

This single choice is the beginning of real practice.

Inside the guide, you'll find **seven practice frameworks** drawn directly from tonebase videos with world-class pianists and translated into simple actions you can try immediately. Each framework ends with a short “**Actionable Takeaway**” so you're never left with inspiration but without a next step.

Introduction: How to Use This Guide

Here are three ways to make this guide work for you:

- Read it straight through in one sitting, or
- Skim the headings and choose the framework that matches your situation, or
- Keep it open on your phone and try “Actionable Takeaway” at the piano.

Most importantly: this PDF is designed to stand on its own. You’ll gain a set of tools that will serve you for years, especially on days when your time or energy is limited.

But if you do want to go deeper, [tonebase Piano](#) is where you can see these frameworks demonstrated on real repertoire by the artists themselves, with the same emphasis as this guide: clarity, efficiency, and enjoyment.



Framework 1: The Comfort–Zone Trap

Start where it's weak, not where it's pretty

Artist: Garrick Ohlsson

Winner of the 1970 Chopin Competition and one of the most acclaimed concert pianists of the last half–century.

The idea

Most of us like to practice the parts of a piece that already feel good.

It sounds nice, it feels reassuring... it reminds us why we enjoy playing.

And according to Garrick Ohlsson, this habit is exactly why progress can stall: it's playing, not practicing.

In one of his most pointed stories about practicing, Ohlsson recalls his teacher briefly leaving him alone to practice. When she returned, she wasn't pleased:

"She got quite irritated at me... She said, 'You're very good at that already. You should be practicing the parts you're not so secure at.'"

She wasn't saying this to enforce discipline, just simple efficiency.

Ohlsson's core message is simple:

**Practice time should be spent where the risk is,
not where the comfort is.**

Why this matters

No matter your age or level, your time and energy are precious.

Repeating secure passages doesn't usually hurt you, but there's a huge opportunity cost: it secretly steals the time you need to build confidence in more difficult passages.

Ohlsson puts it bluntly: we naturally gravitate toward what already works.

The problem is that those parts are rarely what fail first in performance.

What this means in real life

Instead of asking

- "What do I want to play today?"
- "What do I feel like practicing?"

Ohlsson suggests asking a different, more pointed question:

- "If this piece went wrong, where would it go wrong first?"

That spot, even if it's uncomfortable, boring, or frustrating, is the highest-impact place to start.

Importantly, Ohlsson is not advocating mechanical drilling. In fact, he criticizes slow practice that has no musical intent:

"If you play it slow... and there's no intensity in it at all, there's no music in it."

Weak spots need to be practiced musically, not punitively.



Actionable takeaway

Try this in your next session (10–15 minutes)

Step 1: Identify the risk

- **Pick** one piece you're working on.
- **Ask:** "Which passage am I least confident about playing for someone else?"
- Circle just **one** short spot (1–4 measures is enough).

Step 2: Practice it first

- Start your session there, before play-throughs (and even before warm-ups!)
- Don't proceed to other passages. Focus only on that spot.

Step 3: Practice it musically

- When practicing slowly, play with shape, phrasing, and direction.
- Imagine how you want it to sound at tempo, even while slow.

Step 4: Stop early

- After 15–20 minutes and it feels more stable (not perfect), stop.
- Then move on to a different tricky spot. The goal is to gain confidence without exhausting yourself.

If you do nothing else differently this week, just start your practice with the weakest 5% of your piece.

You might be surprised that once the weak links are stronger, the whole piece begins to feel easier. Escaping your comfort zone with clear intentions will strengthen individual passages while at the same time building your internal confidence.

Framework 2: The Intention Loop

Decide on a goal before you touch the piano

Artist: Dominic Cheli

Touring pianist, educator at the Colburn School in Los Angeles, and tonebase

Head of Piano, Dominic translates elite practice habits into clear, usable systems for pianists of all levels.

The idea

Ohlsson's "Comfort Zone" concept has a logical extension: a huge amount of practice time is lost before the first note is even played.

Not because of laziness, but because so often we sit down at the piano without a clear plan. The result is familiar: some scales, a shaky run-through, fixing a few things here and there... and then time runs out.

Dominic Cheli is very explicit about this: effective practice has a before, during, and after. Most people skip the first part. As he puts it:

"The most important thing you can do before you practice is to be organized... if you rely on just your memory of what to do, that's when things get disorganized."

By being intentional about what you do, you'll immediately see how each practice session builds towards longer-term goals: "play this piece in recital in 6 months," "learn these 3 pages for my lesson next week."

Why this matters

If you practice after work, between family responsibilities, or late at night, unfocused practice is exhausting. It feels draining and doesn't reliably produce results.

Cheli emphasizes that professionals practice with clear intent, even in short sessions. Without that, the brain spends most of its energy deciding what to do, instead of actually improving something.

He also warns against vague goals:

"Don't tell yourself, 'I want the piece to be better.' That's far too general."

Instead, give yourself something approachable to tackle.



What this means in real life

Before you play a single note, you should be able to answer this question in one sentence: “What am I trying to improve today?”

Not this week or this month. Today.

That single sentence acts like a filter:

- it tells you what to ignore
- it tells you when to stop
- and it prevents wandering.

Cheli also points out that self-reflection matters just as much as intention: Am I practicing too fast? Am I working on chunks that are too big?” Without these questions, the same problems will keep showing up week after week.

Actionable takeaway

Try this in your next session (10 minutes total)

Step 1: Write one sentence (30 seconds)

- On paper or your phone, write:
 - “Today I’m working on ___ because ___.”
- Example:

“Today I’m focusing on the left-hand jumps in the Chopin waltz because they feel unreliable.”

Step 2: Practice only for that goal

Every time you're tempted to switch tasks, ask:

"Does this serve today's goal?"

If not, skip it — even if it's tempting.

Step 3: Stop when the goal is met

- Improvement ≠ perfection.
- As soon as the spot feels noticeably more reliable, stop and move on.
 - You might return to it later in the day or week; this is called interleaved practice.

Step 4: One-line reflection (1 minute)

- Write one sentence at the end of your session:
 - "What improved?" or "What still needs work?"

That's the full loop: **intend → act → reflect.**

When you repeat this loop consistently, practice sessions become shorter, calmer, and far more satisfying, even on days when you only have 20 minutes.

Framework 3: Put the Horse Before the Cart

Technique serves a sound you already envision

Artist: Boris Giltburg

Winner of the 2013 Queen Elisabeth Competition and now an internationally acclaimed concert pianist and recording artist, widely admired for his clarity of sound and depth of musical thought.

The idea

When something doesn't work at the piano, our instinct is to do more: change fingering, tweak hand position, repeat the passage again and again.

Boris Giltburg suggests starting somewhere much quieter: the imagination.

In his tonebase videos, he emphasizes that many practice problems come from skipping a crucial step: deciding what the sound should be before trying to produce it.

"This step of the process lies mostly in the imagination... it can happen just by looking at the score."

Before mechanics, before repetition, before effort, there should be a vivid sonic image.

Why this matters

Pianists often see things in black-and-white terms (pun intended). When something doesn't work, we assume it's a technical limitation.

But Giltburg points out that without a specific goal for how it should sound, the hands are left guessing. You might stumble onto a good solution — or you might not. He frames the problem this way:

"If we just play the passage, we might by chance hit on a beautiful sound. But there's also a good chance we'll only have a generic kind of sound — not necessarily using all the colors this music implies."

Imagination gives technique a direction.

What this means in real life

Before asking, "How do I play this?", Giltburg asks a different question:

"Is this passage about sound? If so, what kind of sound could it be?"

Some passages are primarily about rhythm, articulation, or structure.

When a passage is about sound (in color, resonance, atmosphere), imagine what kind of sound you're looking for.

Only then does it make sense to experiment physically.

In other words: don't let your fingers dictate your choice of sound. Instead, let your imagined sound guide your body towards the right technical approach.

Actionable takeaway

Try this in your next session (7-10 minutes)

Step 1: Identify a "sound passage"

- Choose a short passage that feels vague, bland, or unsatisfying.
- Ask: "Is this mainly about sound and color?"
- If yes, continue. If not, save this tool for later.

Step 2: Describe the sound (out loud or in writing)

- Use plain words: warm, distant, bell-like, veiled, direct, heavy.
- Don't worry about being poetic. Clarity will help your hands interpret the instruction better.



Step 3: Hear it before you play

- Look at the score and imagine the sound internally.
- If helpful, try singing or humming a fragment to make the color more vivid.

Step 4: Touch the keys only after the sound is clear

- Play the passage once — slowly, so that you have time to prepare, play, and process.
- Notice how it differs from the sound you imagined. Is it too bright? Too muddy?
- Try again, adjusting your touch based on what you observed. Try at a slightly quicker pace if the music or color requires it.

Step 5: Stop early

- When the sound feels close to what you imagined, stop and let it sink in. Repeat it just once or twice more.
- Don't over-repeat. You're conditioning your hands to follow your ear, not drilling an exact realization.

Over time, this habit saves enormous wasted effort. Instead of hoping to find a suitable sound by trial and error, you're separating tasks efficiently: your imagination makes a decision and your hands follow.

Framework 4: No Task-Switching at the Piano

Let the piano be the testing ground, not the decision room

Artist: David Chang

NYC-based pianist and educator; a long-time tonebase contributor who frequently leads livestream workshops focused on efficient, modern practice habits.

The idea

A lot of practice fails not because we're working too little, but because we're asking ourselves to do **too many jobs at once**.

David Chang's core insight is simple and surprisingly freeing: the piano is a testing ground rather than a planning desk.

When you sit down and simultaneously try to:

- read notes
- decide fingering
- understand harmony
- remember structure
- and fix coordination

your brain is forced to task-switch constantly. Progress slows, frustration rises, and nothing sticks.

Chang puts it plainly in his teaching:

“If you’re figuring everything out at the keyboard, you’re asking your brain to do too much at once. The piano is not the place to decide things: it’s the best place to test decisions.”

Why this matters

We all like to understand what we’re doing, which makes it tempting to do all the thinking while playing.

But Chang points out a paradox: **the more thinking you do at the piano, the less learning actually happens.**

When decisions are made away from the instrument, your time at the keys becomes calmer, shorter, and more effective, especially if practice time is limited.



You might protest, “if I don’t practice everything, how will I play well?” But the surest way to solve all the problems of a piece is to **practice with fewer simultaneous demands.**

What this means in real life

Instead of sitting down and “working things out as you go,” Chang encourages a two-stage approach:

- 1. Decide first (away from the piano)**
- 2. Test second (at the piano)**

This might feel slower at first, until you realize how much time you save by not constantly stopping, re-starting, and second-guessing yourself at the piano.

This single shift dramatically reduces mental fatigue.

Actionable takeaway

Try this in your next session (10 minutes total)

Step 1: Pick one short problem spot

- Choose a passage that feels cluttered (many voices, complex pedaling, leaps).
- Limit it to 2–4 measures.

Step 2: Step away from the piano (3–4 minutes)

Look at the score and decide to work on one thing and one thing only:

- Fingering **or**
- Rhythm **or**
- Pedaling **or**
- (Try other individual parameters, such as articulation, dynamics, or phrasing)

Write it down or say it out loud.

Step 3: Sit down and test it

- Play the passage slowly with the predetermined fingering (or rhythm, or pedaling).

Your only job is to see whether the decision works.

If it doesn't, stand up again before changing anything.

Step 4: Repeat the loop once

- Adjust the decision away from the piano.
- Test again.

That's it.

By separating decision-making from execution, you reduce mental overload and make your practice sessions feel far more controlled, even on days when your energy is low.

Framework 5: The Hear-It-First Test

If you can't hear it internally, you don't fully own it yet

Artist: Nicolas Namoradze

International concert artist and composer known for his neuroscience research and emphasis on deep score understanding and internal hearing.

The idea

Many pianists judge progress by what their fingers can do.

Nicolas Namoradze suggests a different test, one that has nothing to do with speed, accuracy, or even the keyboard.

The real question is: can you clearly hear the music in your head?

In his discussion of mental work, he returns to this point again and again: the fingers are followers, not leaders. As he explains,

"Your fingers will follow your thought. And it is your thought that you need to train."

This is related to Boris Giltburg's pre-imagined sounds: if the musical data in your mind is vague, unstable, or incomplete, the playing will eventually be the same, especially under pressure.

Why this matters

Every pianist has felt this frustrating gap:

- “I can play it... but I don’t quite trust it.”
- “It works at home, but not when I’m nervous.”

Namoradze argues that this isn’t a technical problem, it’s an ownership problem.

He points out that when we play, many things happen on autopilot.

Patterns repeat, hand positions change, and the ear stops checking every detail. Mental practice exposes this immediately:

“The sections you can’t hear clearly in your head are usually the ones you don’t really know.”

What this means in real life

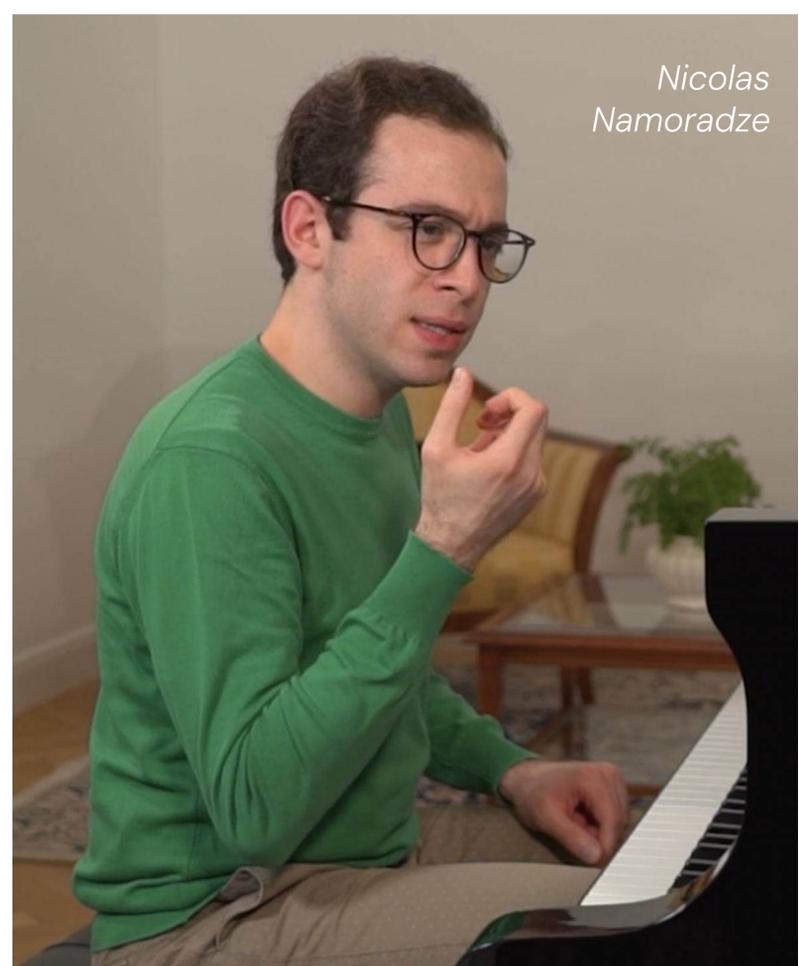
This is a diagnostic tool to test two things:

Do I know it mentally?

And do I know that I know it?

Instead of asking, “Can I play this?”

Namoradze asks, “Can I hear this?”



This means hearing the music play back in your head (even if slowly). This doesn't require photographic memory or perfect pitch, only a commitment to having the music in your ear.

When internal hearing is solid, playing becomes calmer and more predictable because the brain isn't guessing what comes next.

Actionable takeaway

Try this in your next session (8–12 minutes)

Step 1: Choose a short passage

- Pick 2–4 measures that feel “mostly okay” but not rock-solid.

Step 2: Step away from the piano

- Look at the score.
- Without moving your fingers, try to hear the passage internally.
- Go slowly. Even one beat at a time is fine.

Step 3: Notice where it gets fuzzy

- Don't push through.
- The exact spot where the sound becomes unclear is the real problem area.

Step 4: Rebuild the sound

- Hear just the melody.
- Then just the bass.
- Then imagine how they fit together (add back in the accompaniment when you're ready)

Step 5: Return to the piano

- Play once, slowly.
- Notice how much less "surprise" there is in your hands.

If you repeat this process regularly, something important changes: you stop hoping the fingers will behave and start **knowing** where the music is going.

This genuine internal confidence is what Namoradze means by ownership, and it's available to anyone willing to listen deeply before they play.



Framework 6: Practice with Stop Rules

Preventing bad practice from sticking

Artist: Marina Lomazov

Professor of piano at the Eastman School of Music, known for her holistic, efficiency-first approach to pianistic development.

The idea

Most pianists practice with a success goal: repeat until it works.

Marina Lomazov practices with stop rules.

Her belief is blunt and consistent: the body learns whatever you repeat, whether it's good or bad. So the most important skill in practice is not persistence, it's recognizing the precise moment practice turns counterproductive, and then stopping instantly.

She is explicit about this:

"Watch for these telltale signs, like a Voldemort sign in the sky... and stop yourself immediately."

In her framework, stopping early is the core act of professionalism.

Why this matters

Lomazov does not speak in abstractions like “tension” or “bad feeling.”

She names specific, observable signals that mean learning has stopped:

The most common stop signs she identifies are:

- rhythm becoming mechanical rather than musical
- effort spreading into the upper arm or shoulder
- the bridge of the hand collapsing instead of staying supported
- sound getting louder, but noisy or without precise articulation

When any of these appear, continuing to repeat is no longer neutral; it actively reinforces the problem:

“This type of practice is not going to promote evenness, and it’s not going to make you feel comfortable. It’s going to immediately tense up your entire arm.”

But stopping does not mean giving up.

It means choosing from a small, deliberate menu of responses instead of repeating blindly.

You might think that slower is always better. But as she puts it,

“Playing slowly but mechanically doesn’t help.”

Instead, it's essential to incorporate strong musical intent, even in technical passages:

"Play each phrase, even the most difficult passage, musically — like a melody."

This lets the ear guide the body toward a categorically more singing style.

Another healthy response to warning signs is to reorganize the music and tackle it from a different angle. Lomazov frequently changes groupings or emphasis, allowing accents to fall only on offbeats (on the second note of a group of 16ths, for example).

Over time, these stop signs will become less frequent:



"Eat your vegetables, take your vitamins... do 20 minutes a day with these strategies."

Short, consistent exposure over time beats a marathon-like struggle every time.

What this means in real life

Lomazov's framework gives pianists something rare: a legitimate reason to stop practicing without guilt.

Instead of asking:

- "Why can't I push through this?"
- "How many more repetitions do I need?"

Her approach asks:

- "Has a stop sign appeared?"

If yes, your responsibility is to pause a session when you reach the point of diminishing returns, which protects future practice by not ingraining stress.

Actionable takeaway

Try this in your next session (10 minutes)

Step 1: When practicing (especially etude-like passages), keep alert for the following stop signs:

- Collapsing knuckle bridge
- Arm tightening
- Mechanical rhythm or excessive accents

Step 2: If one appears, stop yourself and stand up.

Step 3: Choose exactly one response:

- Change rhythmic grouping or
- Shape it as a melodic phrase or
- Slow down with musical intent

Play it two or three times.

Step 4: End the session

- If it feels even slightly easier, stop.
- Come back after a break based on the stop sign:
 - Mild: 7–10 mins
 - Moderate: 30–60 mins
 - Severe: come back tomorrow.

Persistence alone is not a sure path to improvement. Improvement comes from never teaching the body what you don't want it to remember.



Framework 7: Divide and Conquer

Until each strand can stand alone

Artist: Garrick Ohlsson

The idea

For Garrick Ohlsson, divide-and-conquer is not a practice trick. It's a standard of readiness inherited directly from Rosina Lhévinne, legendary Juilliard professor of Van Cliburn and guardian of the pre-Soviet Russian pianistic tradition.

In a lesson on Chopin's Barcarolle — a piece where the left hand must navigate deftly while supporting everything above — Lhévinne stopped him and said:

"Please play the left hand of the climax by itself."

Ohlsson "already knew that was the biggest mess [he] had made in the piece," so when he started to play the left hand alone, she interrupted him immediately:

"My dear, I didn't say practice it — play it."

Crucially, Lhévinne was not asking for dry run: she was asking for performance-level command of a single strand, on demand.

Why this matters

Lhévinne framed it as a musical responsibility:

"If I conduct the New York Philharmonic and say to the cellos, 'Play letter B,' the cellos can't suddenly say, 'Oh, what are the notes here?'"

A strand you can't play alone isn't yet fully your own, and is an essential key to making your playing more confident.

"Playing slowly but mechanically doesn't help."

What this means in real life

After a week of preparing the Barcarolle left hand to that standard, Ohlsson describes what happened when he put the music back together:



"When I put the two hands back together, it was like I knew it three times as well as before."

That jump in security would never have been accomplished by simple repetition. It came from allowing the brain to learn each strand without interference.

Ohlsson explains it simply:

“Sometimes our brains know things incredibly well. You have to let them separate the strands.”

Division isn't simply about making things easier. It's about removing interference so the brain can start to connect the dots by itself.

A fundamental mindset

Ohlsson is one of several artists who support the same idea: learning stalls when too many things are asked of the brain at once.

Nicolas Namoradze frames it in terms of mental activity:

“If you can't hold it clearly in your head, it's still too much.”

Division reduces the material to a size the mind can fully represent, without approximation or the momentum of muscle memory.

David Chang makes the same point from a workflow angle:

“Every time you add another decision, you slow down learning down.”

Separating strands limits decisions so execution becomes reliable.

The message is consistent: clarity increases when simultaneity decreases.

What this is *not*

This kind of division is **not**:

- hands-separate drilling without musical intent
- slow practice as a default
- fragmenting music until it loses all coherence

Ohlsson is explicit about this distinction:

“Practicing hands separately is one thing, but not just as an exercise: it’s about learning to play the music.”

Each strand must:

- sound complete
- follow final fingering (except if temporarily simplifying)
- carry its musical role

Otherwise, separation won’t be easily reintegrated.

The real rule underneath all of this

Across Ohlsson, Namoradze, and Chang, the shared rule is not “simplify.”

It’s this:

If something can’t stand alone, it can’t yet be trusted together.

Division is the fastest way to test — and build — that trust.

A path to confidence

Many pianists only “know” passages:

- with both hands present
- with momentum carrying them
- with texture masking weakness.

Ohlsson’s approach removes those supports on purpose. For all pianists, this has immediate benefits:

- fewer repetitions
- faster certainty
- less anxiety in performance or run-throughs

Practice becomes a process of proof, not hope.



Actionable takeaway

Practice for independence (10–15 minutes)

Step 1: Choose one strand

- Left hand alone
- Melody alone
- Accompaniment alone

Step 2: Set the readiness test

- Ask: “Could I play this immediately and confidently if someone asked?”

Step 3: Play — don’t prepare

- No stopping or fixing mid-stream
- Musical from the first note

Step 4: Divide further if needed

- Fewer measures
- Simplified texture (block chords, single notes instead of octaves)

Step 5: Reintegrate

- Play once or twice with the whole texture.
- Notice if it feels different, and probably more secure.

If you keep one sentence from this framework, make it this:

Prepare what must stand alone — not what can hide in context.

About tonebase Piano

All of the insights and quotes in this guide were taken directly from courses and live sessions in the **tonebase Piano** library, where world-class pianists share not just what to play, but how they think about practicing, learning, and making music

tonebase is an online learning platform built around one simple idea: **real progress comes from learning directly from the best teachers and performers in the world.**

As a tonebase Piano member, you get access to:

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