

The Practice Game

The purpose of The Practice Game is to help musicians of all ages and skill levels approach practice as a fun and rewarding activity, rather than a chore. It also replaces the use of a timer and encourages deliberate practice.

After these instructions, you will find three choices of game boards, followed by a piano keyboard, which can be laminated and used as a dry-erase board by students studying music theory who need to identify keys or chords on the piano but do not necessarily own a piano.

The last page includes colored markers and the die, which you will need to cut out in order to play The Practice Game. You might want to print this page on cardstock to make the markers thicker and easier to pick up. The die will fold into a cube. Glue or tape the tabs to the under side of each face of the cube to hold it together. The die is much easier to roll if it has an object placed inside to add weight. Since this is a musical game, an object that makes sound, perhaps a jingle bell, is recommended.

What's wrong with timers?

For the past several decades, musicians have been taught to set a timer for a given amount of time and to practice until the time ends, often with no other instruction. There are a few reasons this is not effective.

1. The timer is distracting, especially if it ticks, but even if it is silent, it tempts the student to check the time.
2. If the timer ticks, the sound causes confusion if the student is practicing with a metronome.
3. It feels like time out, a.k.a. punishment.
4. Sometimes, the student doesn't have enough material to fill the time and lacks the training and initiative to review previous exercises without prompting.

5. There is nothing about practicing for a set amount of time that guarantees steady progress. The quality of practice is more important than the quantity.

What is deliberate practice?

When a student is told to practice but is not taught how to practice, this is what often happens:

- * The student plays everything they have been assigned from beginning to end, sometimes repeating in order to fill the amount of time for which they have been told to practice, with little to no understanding of what needs to be improved until the next lesson, when they play for their teacher and receive feedback.
- * In the next lesson, the teacher will often tell the student to review all or part of what they were assigned in the previous lesson and correct a list of mistakes.
- * The student takes the list home, or doesn't make a list and so doesn't remember everything that should be corrected, and they continue to play each assignment from beginning to end, hoping to fix some of their mistakes, but really only showing some improvement on the things they remembered to fix.
- * Because there is a limit to what short term memory can hold, the student forgets about some of the things that should be fixed when their mind is focused on something else.
- * The student begins to notice that when the next time they practice, they start making some of the same mistakes they thought they had fixed, but they assume this is because they have not practiced enough.
- * Repeated mistakes become muscle memory, making them harder to fix, and whether the student is doing well or not, they are not progressing as quickly as they could because they are fighting their own muscle memory.

Deliberate practice is different in that it considers how the mind and body work together to play the instrument and uses muscle memory as an advantage, rather than working against it. Also, it has an additional benefit in that the repetition often results in accidental memorization, so that if the student is required to perform from memory, they often do not need to do so as a separate activity from learning to play the piece.

The basic idea is to choose a set number of repetitions. The number that is chosen is not really important, except that some students feel they need a larger number and some need smaller numbers because they have shorter attention spans. The student will make progress regardless of the number they choose, as long as they are doing multiple repetitions. For the example, let's say that the chosen number is five.

The teacher assigns a student to learn to play "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." This piece has 12 measures with two-measure phrases and ABBA form. That means you have three levels in which you can divide this piece: Parts A and B, the phrases that make up those parts (two in Part A in one in Part B), and the individual measures.

First the student will work on the very first measure. They will play the measure slowly, five times in a row without error. If they make a mistake on the third repetition, the next repetition is counted as the first. False starts and stopping to make corrections as well as hesitation between notes all count as mistakes, just as an error in rhythm or intonation would. Also, it is very important that the student play at a slow tempo while carefully counting the beats, preferably with a metronome.

Next, the student does the same with the second measure. Once both measures have been played five times in a row without error, the student combines these measures, and the new goal is to play the phrase five times in a row without error. After the student has accomplished this, they set the first phrase aside and work on the third, measure, followed the fourth, and finally the combination of those two measures to form the second phrase.

The student must then put the first and second phrase together, in the same manner that they combined the first and second measure. This is Part A, which is both the beginning and the end of "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." As a result, the student is practicing Measures 1-4, but they are also practicing Measures 9-12. After Part A, the student learns Part B in a similar manner. At that point, they can combine the parts to play the entire piece.

In the example, the student is able to play the entire piece after only practicing half of it due to the fact that they identified phrases that occur more than once. Even with more complex pieces, there are usually measures and phrases that are used multiple times throughout the piece. Identifying these as shown in the example helps the student reduce what they should practice.

If the student must end practice before they manage to work through the entire piece, they need only take note of where they stopped so they can resume at that point in the next practice session. Once the student manages to learn the entire piece in this manner, then practice becomes a matter of identifying any passages that need improvement. The student should isolate those and practice them by dividing them into smaller part, just as they did when learning the piece initially.

This method of practice is more efficient because the student ideally never forms bad habits in the first place and therefore never has to stop making progress in order to correct those bad habits.

How To Play

Players proceed around the game board by completing tasks on their cards and rolling die as they complete each task. The cards might be shuffled randomly or arranged in a certain order before play begins.

Musicians should adapt this game so that it works with their personal practice routine. This will likely involve making some or all of their own cards at some point, but there are also cards available for purchase. If multiple musicians play together, they should each have their own deck of cards because two people will likely have different assignments and different skills to practice. This is intended to allow friends or family members to play the game together while each person progresses at his or her own pace.

The game includes a die marked with notes instead of numbers. Each note has the same value as the number of beats it would receive in common time. For clarity, the player moves one space if they roll a quarter note, two spaces if they roll a half note, and four spaces if they roll a whole note. Players take turns completing the task on their next cards. If a player fails to complete a task, they do not roll the die instead try again on their next turn.

The Game Board

The "Start" on the game board is identified by a clef symbol on a green background. In order to allow students to use a board relevant to the instrument they play, there are different versions of the board available with different clefs. Each player should begin by placing a marker on this spot.

Markers will move clockwise around the board. Because the clef space is located in the lower left-hand corner of the board, this means the second space is the blue space labeled "Tutti," the space above "Start."



"Tutti" means "everyone" in Italian. If you are playing with others, and one player lands on this space, everyone else gets to move forward the same number of spaces. "Solo" means "alone." When a player lands on this space, they get another turn.



A repeat sign means you should move backward, either to the previous repeat sign or to the beginning.



Repeat measure symbols are used as shorthand in music to indicate you should do the same thing again, so move the same number of spaces once more, but do not do as your new space indicates.



Landing on a quarter rest means you should lose a turn, which of course only applies if you are playing with others. However, if you are practicing alone, you could use this space to indicate that it is time for a short break.



"D.C. al Fine" means to return to the beginning, which in this case is the next square on the board, and then continue playing until you come to the word "Fine." If you want to make the game longer, you can continue moving around the board until you successfully move the exact number of spaces to land on "Fine," rather than simply passing it. If you want to make the game shorter, simply ignore the "D.C. al Fine" and consider the game finished when you return to "Start."



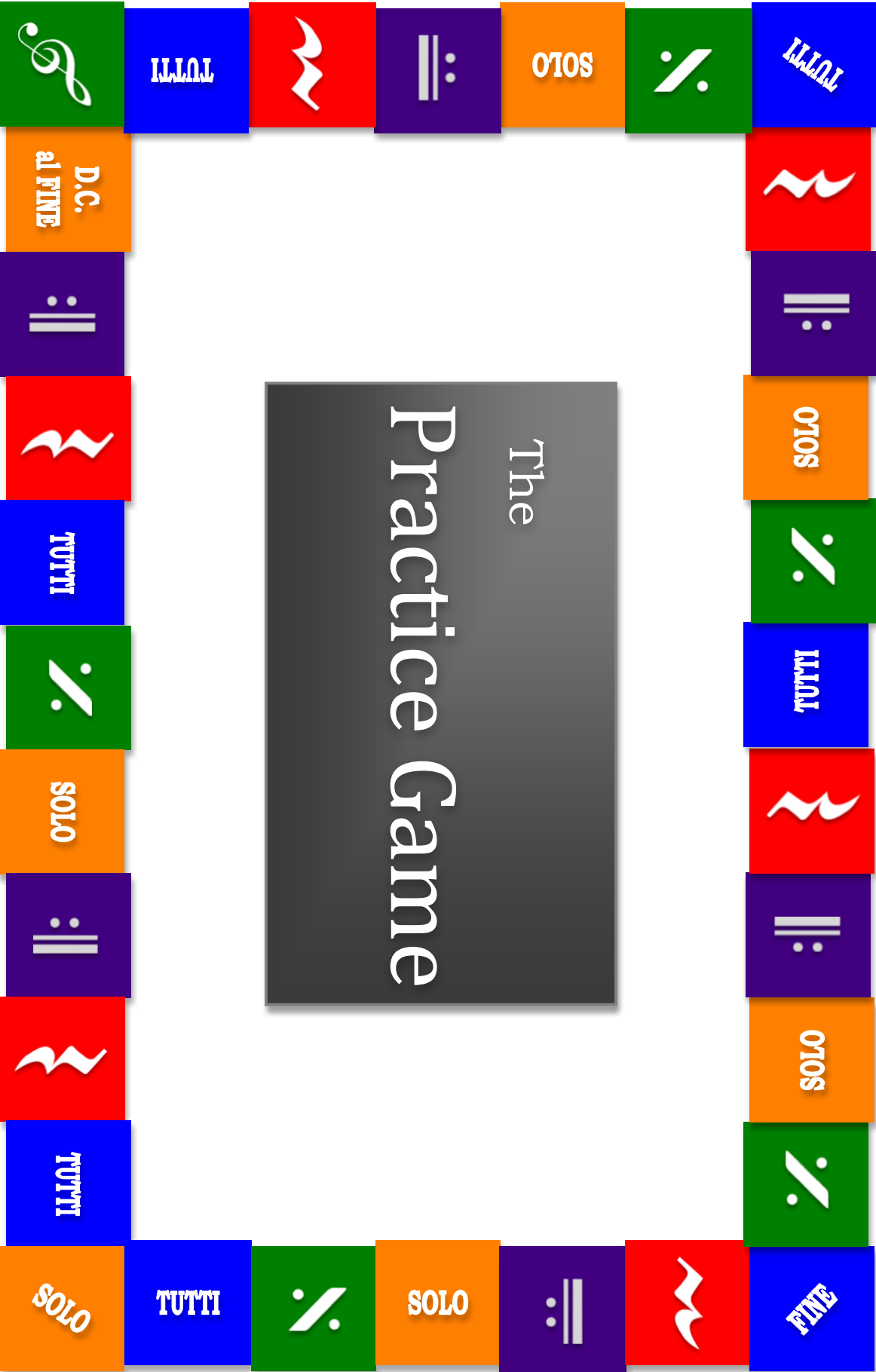
The purpose of the game is to practice, not to "win." It is possible to win the game when playing with others by being the first player to finish moving around the board, but this should not be your ultimate goal. It is also acceptable to end your practice session before you make it around the game board. If you like, save your place and continue playing next time your practice.

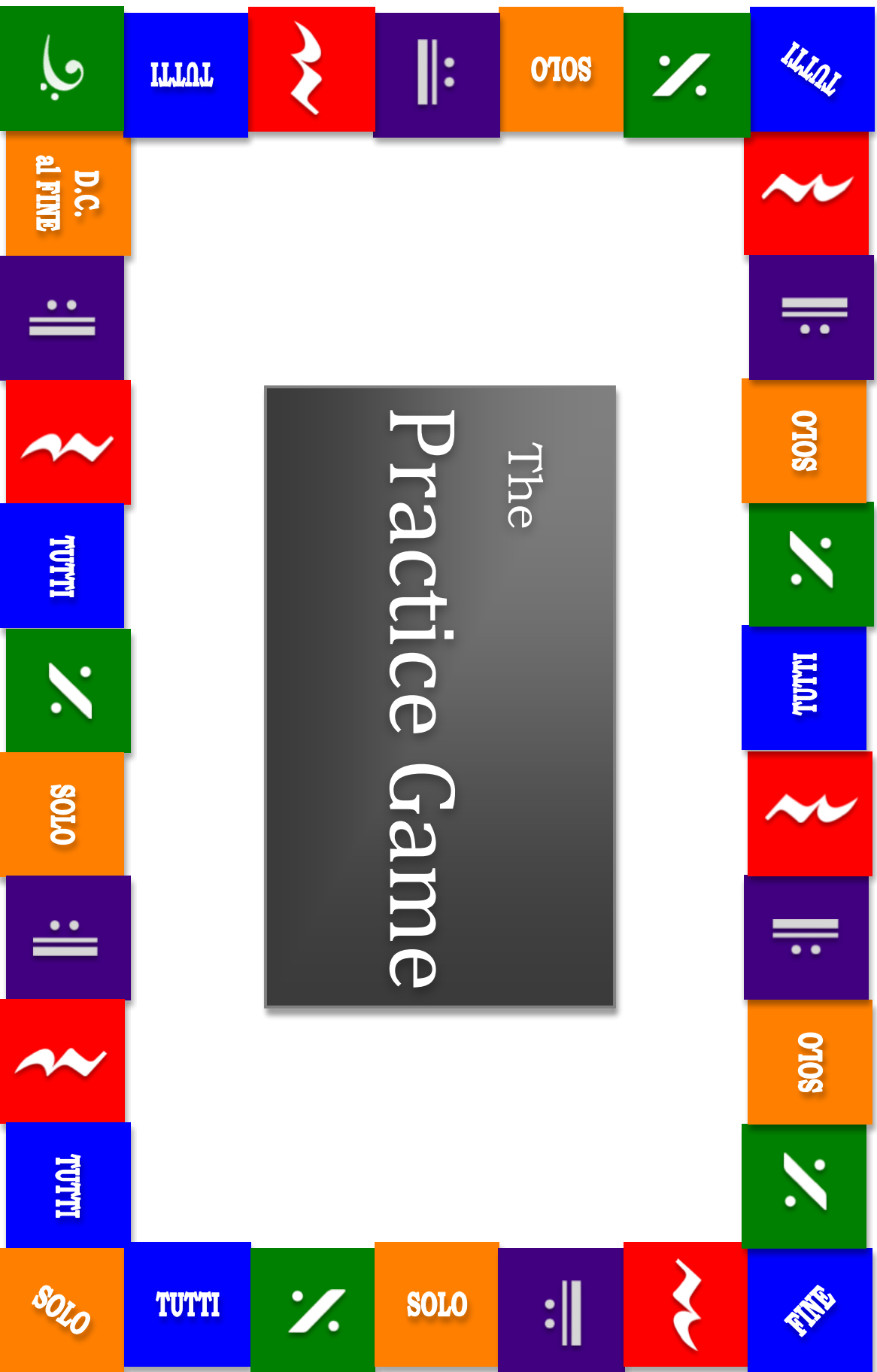
Variations

The Practice Game is designed to be adapted for those who are playing it. You are permitted and encouraged to make your own cards, change the rules, or develop your own system of rewarding yourself for practice. Here are a few suggestions:

- * If you are trying to memorize a piece, ignore the die and use the number of measures you are able to play without making a mistake or looking at your music as the number of spaces you should move.
- * If you are struggling with a particular technique, and your teacher gives you an exercise to address this, turn the exercise into a mini-game. Each time you land on a quarter space, do this exercise a certain number of times before you continue practicing.
- * Parents who do not play an instrument can still play the game with their children by simply rolling the die and moving when it is their turn.
- * Mix practice and homework. Using 3"x 5" notecards, make flash cards for the subject you are studying and mix them with your practice flash cards. You might also consider doing this with household chores and other tasks.

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