

ON MUSIC STUDY AND PERFORMANCE

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Music Study

A purpose of playing music is to be in touch with something outside of oneself, and at the same time something deep within. Music allows us to transcend our mundane burdens and cares and, in a world of animosity, stress, and discord, to be put in touch with a realm of love, peace, and harmony. Music can have a healing and spiritually uplifting effect on us, as well as a transformative effect on anyone with whom we share music.

Despite the many benefits which can be derived from music, serious musicians endure a great deal of frustration and discouragement on their personal musical journey. It is a perpetually humbling and daunting experience to be a musician. There are no shortcuts, and no ways to avoid the constant mental and emotional challenges. Therefore, above all, musicians must develop patience. They must learn to accept that their goals will never be fully reached, and that their progress toward those goals is a slow, never-ending process. I once thought that I would arrive at the answers. But I have discovered that in this endeavor one never arrives. Everything is always in a perpetual state of evolution.

After patience, the most necessary qualities for a musician are determination and perseverance. Musicians are not born—they are made—made by their own hard work, education and stubborn persistence—over many years and many decades. One may envy those born with much innate talent. However, the world is full of talented people in every field who never harnessed and converted their talent into significant accomplishment. As with everything in life, in music it is the one who diligently applies him/herself who achieves. We must all accept the fact that we have limitations and determine to make the most of whatever we have. Artists in every field in their early years learn by imitation. But as we grow older, we should not try to emulate someone else. We should always have the courage to embrace and be our own unique selves.

We must aim to always remain in a positive state of mind and retain optimism that our persistence will enable us to improve. Progress WILL occur if we persist. We can also be encouraged that none of us will ever reach a ceiling and can keep growing every year. One of my sports heroes, the Hall of Fame baseball pitcher Greg Maddux, who after 744 major league games over 23 seasons said that he learned something new in every game he pitched, right to the last game of his career. Playing the piano is no different than pitching a baseball and many other activities in life – the learning never ceases. A world-famous pianist was reputed to have said “I really only learned how to play the piano after the age of 80.” Robert Schumann wrote : “Some things only became clear to you when you are old.”

To grow most effectively, it is important that we not only work hard, but “work smart.” We need to plan our practice. We need to problem solve. We first imagine what we seek to hear come out. “First think, then play” and “First hear, and then play” are wise admonitions, rather than just playing without specific intention. Then we experiment and evaluate whether we are achieving what we internally hear.

Much can be accomplished by studying our music away from the piano, which has been termed “mental practice” – hearing the music, analyzing the music, and visualizing our playing. Glenn Gould said that his practice time was equally divided between time studying the music away from the piano, and time at the piano. Mental practice can solve many problems more effectively than when one is at the keyboard. The great virtuoso Jorge Bolet said, “I’ve never solved a major mechanical or interpretive problem at the keyboard. I have always achieved it in my mind.” Sergei Rachmaninoff and Artur Schnabel both said that they received many of their best musical ideas while taking walks.

I myself wish I had spent more time in practice away from the keyboard. Much can also be accomplished by taping one’s playing and analyzing the result. This is an extremely effective way to teach oneself and teaching oneself is what we all need to do, even if we have a teacher. Practice sessions, while consisting of problem-solving in many ways, should also prove to be stimulating as one explores how the music is put together. They should also be uplifting and energizing as one creates expressions of beauty and vitality at the keyboard.

I regret having missed many entire days of practice in my life. If we all touched the piano every day, our lives would be enriched, since doing so provides personal fulfillment, as well as also enabling further growth as musicians. Even 15 minutes a day can be very meditative and therapeutic. We can’t ever have back those days in which we never got to the piano.

Performance

CPE Bach wrote that “a musician cannot move others unless he too is moved,” and he urged musicians to “Play from the soul, and not like a trained bird.” Since musical performance is about communication it might seem that the more emotionally involved a player is with the music, the better the performance will be. However, this is not the case. Excessive emotional involvement can destroy a performance and sabotage the music. Excessive emotional involvement of either joyous enthusiasm or passionate intensity can result in uncontrolled rushing, break downs, harsh, angular tone, and the loss of the musical line. It can, in slower pieces, result in self-absorbed, over-sentimentalized realizations. Instead of inviting the listener into the composer’s world, performances can seem to be about the player and not the music, and the listener can be robbed of the opportunity to experience the greatness of the music.

To create great art, one must balance the dichotomy in human nature between the Apollonian (rationality, order, calmness, poise) and the Dionysian (irrationality, disorder, ecstasy, rhapsodic intoxication). Music, being composed of drama and lyricism, is both Apollonian and Dionysian. Balancing these two contrasting forces is a fundamental challenge in performing. It boils down to the issue of abandon versus control. Balance is not only an aesthetic ideal—it is a practical necessity. We cannot hear the music when our emotions are clouding and obscuring our map of our intended journey through the music. I well know this from personal experience.

When performing one must have a clear head, and without a clear head, a player is not able to hear what is actually emerging from the instrument. Life is full of ironies and one of them is that the successful performer and communicator must be, to an extent, in a state of detachment. The answer is

not to be devoid of emotions when playing. There are those players who seem robotic, cold, mechanical, and completely detached, and they should not be emulated. The ideal, as well as practical solution, is to aim to always achieve a state where the body is still, the mind is still, the emotions are present but in the background, and the music is speaking for itself and is allowed to flow naturally through us. We are the conduit, and Debussy pleaded with performers to be the “vessel through which the music passes.”

When performing, one should be like a ship captain who only needs to make minor adjustments as the ship sails onwards on its journey, or like the rider of a horse who lets the horse do the work. Rather than feel that we are playing the piano, our motto can be, “the music plays us.” The most effective way to be “into” the music is to aim for a state of being where we are not aware of ourselves. This state is usually more achievable when one has reached the later stages of life and attained the mellowness to sing naturally at the piano, which I believe should be the primary goal of piano playing.

They say that success in real estate is due to “location, location, location.” To me, what piano playing is about is “singing, singing, singing.” It is about creating a musical line and allowing the music to breathe. It is about seeking the magic in music--seeking to make every note and every phrase expressive and meaningful. After all, the player’s task is to illuminate and highlight for the listener the details of what is special in the music and what to especially listen for. As Artur Schnabel wrote, “The space between the notes is where the artistry lies.”

It is about aiming primarily to be a beautiful pianist and beautiful musician, a more noble goal than to be an exciting pianist or a dazzling one, as so many pianists are promoted today. It is about casting a spell and making time stand still for the listener. It is about playing with love in one’s heart--love for the composer, love for the music, love for the sound of the piano, love for the listener, and love for the highest ideals of beauty. These ideals can be sought and encouraged by teachers, from early in music study.

Music is not only a serious and profound endeavor. Music contains much playfulness and humor and performers who are not adept at reflecting humor in music are not total musicians. As Schumann wrote “he who cannot play with the instrument cannot play it at all.” Some music was intended to make listeners internally laugh and much more music was written to at least make them smile. Music also is frequently representative of charm, elegance, and gracefulness. Therefore, lightness is an essential quality for all pianists.

Despite the joy which music can reflect, performing for others can be a terrifying experience, even for those who have been performing since childhood. If you have never done it, you cannot imagine the fear it engenders in all human beings. It takes immense courage for anyone to play for others. Even Chopin, the most sensitive pianist there had ever been, and perhaps ever was, found it very stressful to perform: “I am not fit for giving concerts. The crowd intimidates me, its breath suffocates me. I feel paralyzed by its curious look and the unknown faces make me dumb.” It may come as a surprise that even many internationally acclaimed pianists feel this same way before and during the start of every performance. The legendary pianist, William Kapell wrote: “The first ten minutes of every concert are

lost to me. . . . I suffer agony because even if it is a heavenly piece of music, I can't feel deeply about it as I am still in the process of getting over my embarrassment and discomfort."

I remember that one of my students, who had done a significant amount of acting, told me that it was far easier to go onstage as an actor in front of 1500 people, than to play the piano for only a few people. The difference was that one could become someone else when acting a role onstage, whereas one feels incredibly exposed and vulnerable when playing the piano for others.

While a solution for the nervousness of performing musicians has never been found, and I do not believe ever will be, there are a few thoughts one can keep in mind.:

1) One should not try too hard. It is ironic that those who care the most, frequently have the most difficulty in performance. Trying to be perfect is the worst thing a player can do, and all conscious effort is counterproductive. Our goal should be to allow a performance to unfold, and not to make it happen. Our goal should be to not think of ourselves at all. Performance is about the music, and not about the player. Our goal is to have our attention on the music, so that other thoughts do not intrude. If they do intrude, which they frequently do, the best course is not to fight them, but rather to allow them to float away on their own.

2) One should have realistic expectations. This means not expecting to be as relaxed as when playing at home alone.

3) We must learn to accept that every detail in performance is not going to occur as we intend. The legendary tenor Placido Domingo once said that he went into every performance with a plan of exactly how he intended to sing everything in that performance. Yet never once in his several thousand performances spanning 60 years was he able to realize all of his intentions. The magnificent conductor, James Levine, in the same interview, then added the thought that it is amazing that as many things go as right as they do in any performance! It is sad but true that the more one knows, the more dissatisfied one usually is with his/her performances. It is the price one pays for knowledge.

4) We must accept ahead of time that perfect accuracy is not going to occur. There are many awkward passages in piano music with which a pianist can never feel 100% secure, even after much diligent practice. Note perfection should never be a primary goal in performance anyway. Once in a master class, the teacher, an internationally acclaimed artist, said to the student who had played overly cautiously, "You missed some notes." As the student began to apologize, the teacher interrupted him and said, "You should have missed more!" Listeners noted that Beethoven "let many a note fall under the table" in his performances. Some of the most communicative artists in history were well-known for their abundant wrong notes. But as the saying goes, "some musicians' wrong notes are more beautiful than some others' right notes."

5) When we have done the preparation, our expressive concepts and intentions WILL be heard by our listeners. Our suffering ahead of and during playing, is the price a player pays to provide listeners the gift of inspiration and uplift. There is much that we express and communicate to others when performing which we are unable to appreciate due to our not being as relaxed as at home. Just as

teachers never know the impact that they have had on their students, players can never know the impact which their playing has had upon their listeners. Hearing music live is a meaningful event for listeners. Although there is an abundance of music on the internet and on recordings, the spontaneity of live performance is what classical music is really intended for and what listeners crave.

6) We should attempt to have the attitude that we intend to enjoy sharing our pieces with others. When we perform, we should have the attitude of "I love this piece. and I want you to like it too!" We have done our homework with the piece and sharing for others gives us the opportunity and goal to spontaneously make the music come alive. Players, especially students, often don't realize that in many respects they frequently do their finest playing in front of people. Despite some missed notes, performing can bring qualities out of us which are not as evident in practice or in lessons. Menahem Pressler used to tell his students to "Smile with your fingers" when playing joyous music, and I have seen many of my students accomplish this more in their performances than in their lessons. They have also very frequently in performances dug deeply into their souls to convey their depth of feelings in ways which they never did in lessons. Despite the internal jitters, performances truly can bring out the best in a player. We should keep in mind that, along with the disappointments we inevitably feel regarding our performances, there are those occasions in performance when we are able to feel the indescribably beautiful, almost "out of body" sensations when we sense that the music is just flowing through us, and that we are just observing the beauty of the music and allowing others to feel those same transcendental sensations.

7) The longer we play on a given occasion, the more our stress will diminish. The more times that we play for others, the more we realize that we are able to play communicatively despite our nerves, which are never actually as visible as we think they are. The more times that we can play the same piece for others, the more successfully it will go. The first time playing a new piece is always the biggest hurdle, and something which all musicians, including professional players, dread.

8) Players of all levels should select pieces to perform which do not exceed their technical abilities. Earlier level students and amateur pianists are especially prone to want to perform pieces which are beyond their comfort level. When this occurs not only do the difficulties become evident, but the expressivity of the player cannot be fully in evidence. What can be successfully played at home alone is a different question from what can survive the pressure of being performed in front of people.

9) Our performances will be improved if we simulate performing in some of our practice sessions. Our normal state of mind when we practice does not prepare us for our state of mind when playing for others. It is beneficial to, ahead of time, put ourselves in the performing mindset, don the clothing (including shoes) in which we will perform, turn on the tape machine, and simulate the upcoming performance. Vladimir Horowitz referred to some of his practice sessions not as practice, but rather as "rehearsing." We would all be wise to do more rehearsing as performances draw near.

10) It is important that a player exude an impression of enjoying playing. Stage presence is a crucial ingredient of live performance. The audience does not only hear us – it sees us. They want to see the performer look pleasant and provide the listeners the feeling that they are wanted and welcomed. Being

nervous, the performer may not feel like radiating pleasantness. However, it is necessary to act and appear as if enjoying playing. Performances are enhanced and players, and the music, receive more respect when the player is dressed to reflect the greatness of the music. Being able to talk articulately to an audience is a valuable asset in performing. There is much more to success in performance than simply playing the music.

11) Few of us ever play for other people as often as we should and could. When I was in school, a somewhat older colleague gave me the following advice: "Never turn down an opportunity to play for someone." I regret not having followed that advice. Partially I did not because my standards were unrealistically high, and as a result I deprived others of hearing great music, and myself the opportunities to gain additional experience playing in front of people.

Another reason for the relative paucity of my performances throughout my life was due to my own insistence that I only play from memory. Performing exclusively from memory is a complex and controversial subject. I believe that young students should play from memory on student recitals and other occasions as they grow up. They will discover that after memorizing a piece they will know and understand the piece much more thoroughly, and that they will usually perform the pieces they know well more expressively without the music. However, they should not be brought up to believe that for the rest of their lives they can ONLY play for someone by memory. Some people are able to play some pieces more successfully with the score on the music rack. It is interesting and significant that the great pianist Sviatoslav Richter, who after only a few days of practice, could memorize and perform some of the most demanding works ever written, opted to use the score in his later years, saying that doing so would allow him to illuminate more details of the music.

It is a common practice for professional pianists to use the score in some 20th- and 21st-century music. Yet it is Baroque music of which many students, and even experienced artists, are especially fearful because of how easy it is to lose one's place and how difficult it can be to carry on after a slip. I have come to believe that Baroque music should be performed from memory only by very experienced performers who are extremely comfortable and prefer doing so. Harpsichordists and organists do not play from memory, and Baroque music in its time was certainly never intended to be played by memory.

Beethoven angrily opposed the performance of his works by memory, which his student Czerny had done as a novel stunt. Beethoven stated that part of his reasoning was that if one played from memory, the player was more likely to fail to bring out the important details of the music. Performing music in public by memory was never expected or employed until Liszt, who, by the way, was blessed with an extraordinary memory, did so in the later 1830's. The determining question should always be: will the player perform the music more expressively with the music, or without it? The answer can depend on the given person, the given piece, and the given occasion. To eliminate the need for page turns, a player can use scores which have been reduced in size.

Much more repertoire could be learned by advanced pianists if they did not feel compelled to perform 100% of the time without a score present. One could learn and perform many more Bach Preludes and

Fugues and Suites, and more Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert sonatas if playing with the music on some occasions. It is one of my regrets that I have not learned a larger repertoire. Several decades ago, one of my friends pleaded with me to play with the score at least sometimes so that I could present many more recitals in a year which he could then attend. Of course, I told him I only performed for memory. I now see that he was right, and I was wrong. The cause of music would have been better served over the past decades if I had heeded his advice. I hope younger readers will contemplate these ruminations of an older musician who wishes that he could have another chance to have done things differently.

One cautionary note: having a score present is not a panacea for nervousness, as some might expect it to be. In fact, if a player is not used to performing solo music with a score present, the process can prove quite disconcerting. Memory slips can still frequently happen, and some experienced pianists, to their surprise, actually perform less well with the score present. This is a very complex issue, and as with many aspects of performance, there are no simple answers which apply to everyone on every occasion.

Many thoughts are provided in these essays so that pianists can perhaps have more tools to insightfully interpret and execute their pieces. The essays are intended to articulate and summarize the craft of making music at the piano – to share useful aspects which can be taught to and applied by anyone.

All great artistry rests upon a foundation of a mastery of the tools of the craft. One cannot be a great artist without first being a master craftsman, although one can be an expert craftsman without being a great artist.

Great artistry transcends craftsmanship. It is elusive and not easily attainable. It will never be there just for the asking.

Great artistry never comes only from the mind – it never seems calculated. Great artistry stems from the subconscious. It comes from deep inside a person – and yet it seems like it comes from out of nowhere – from an unknown source. Great artistry results from inspiration, intuition, and spur of the moment instincts.

Great artistry is arresting – it takes chances and takes risks. It dares. It gambles and sometimes falls short. However great artistry is so powerful that it possesses a conviction that at that moment things are as they simply must be.

Great artistry is actually partially a product of the irrational. But it must be built upon the rational. The craft is like a cake and great artistry is like the icing.

Great artistry cannot be taught. However, teachers can encourage it and aim to draw it out of a student. We can all aspire to reach it and these aspirations are what keeps us perpetually coming back to strive to discover it more consistently.

Great artistry can occur when we are alone. But it is more profound when there is a listener to share the experience with us. That rarefied state does not happen in every performance and often it cannot be sustained for very long. But when it is present, it transfixes listeners and also transfixes the player.

When these rarified states occur, it makes all the craftsman--like study and preparation, and all the frustrating emotional ups and downs, worthwhile.

In these essays I have tried to share aspects of the craft. It is up to each of us to dig deeply and master the craft so that the latent great artistry inherent in each of us may be able to fully blossom.

The reader is urged to consult the discussions regarding the performance of the piano music of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Chopin, Liszt, and Debussy found in the texts of the "Exploring the Great Piano Composers" lecture-concert series [Exploring the Great Piano Composers Lecture Concerts \(dersnah-fee.com\)](http://dersnah-fee.com). The 28 pages dealing with performing the music of these great composers contain not only thoughts specific to the music of these composers, but also many practical thoughts regarding performance in general.