**Practicing Patience, Memorizing Methodically and**

**Empowering Students to Achieve Peak Performance**

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Suggested reference materials:

1. *Choke, What the Secrets of the Brain Reveal About Getting it Right When You Have To*, by Sian Beilock (Free Press)

2. *The Balanced Musician, Integrating Mind and Body for Peak Performance*, by Leslie Sisterhen McAllister (Scarecrow Press, Inc.)

3. The Landmark Forum ([www.landmarkworldwide.com](http://www.landmarkworldwide.com)) - workshops on maximizing your potential in your professional and personal life (programs for adults and teens)

4. *Practicing the Piano,* by Nancy O’Neill Breth (Hal Leonard)

5. Various books and materials by Don Greene: visit [www.dongreene.com](http://www.dongreene.com) E-book titles include *Performance Mastery, Reach Your Peak, Audition Success, Performance Success,* and *Fight your Fear and Win*

6. *The Art of Practicing:  A Guide to Making Music from the Heart*, by Madeline Bruser (Bell Tower Press)

7. *Practicing for Artistic Success, The Musician’s Guide to Self-Empowerment*, by Burton Kaplan (Perception Development Techniques)

Additional resources, recommended by other professionals, but which I have not read myself:

H. A. Dorfman:  The Mental ABCs of Pitching

W. Timothy Gallwey:  The Inner Game of Tennis

Gerald Klickstein:  The Musician's Way

Gary Mack:  Mind Gym:  An Athlete's Guide to Inner Excellence

David McGill:  Sound in Motion: A Performer’s Guide to Greater Musical Expression

Stephen Nachmanovich:  Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art

Eckhart Tolle:  The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment

Kenny Werner:  Effortless Mastery: Liberating the Master Musician Within

Rosamund Stone Zander and Benjamin Zander:  The Art of Possibility: Transforming

Professional and Personal Life

I. Introduction

Good morning everyone! Thank you, Aphrodite, for inviting me to give this talk today, and thank you to the NVMTA for hosting. The title that I submitted for this talk turns out to be a bit of a “bait and switch”. I most definitely WILL be talking about Practicing Patience and Memorizing Methodically! However, in light of the fact that our students are now returning to in-person performing, after more than a year of online/pre-recorded events, I thought it would be vitally important to also address the potential performance anxiety that many of them will no doubt have, in the course of returning to the stage after a long absence.

This issue was made very present to me when I was working with one of my students two weeks ago. She was about to do her first in-person competition in over a year. We were working through her pieces and something seemed really “off” about her demeanor. After about 10 minutes, she burst into tears and said she was so nervous about the event that she couldn’t possibly see how she could play her best. Poor thing! And this is a student who previously was a fearless performer. I took the opportunity to pass her the Kleenex, and to share with her my ideas and tools for empowerment in the face of anxiety. I have spent a great deal of time working on and thinking about this issue, with students and with myself in my own performing career.

So, the general context of this talk is going to be about peak performance, but I will definitely include my thoughts and ideas about practicing and memorizing, along the way. We will save some time for questions/comments at the end. I do want to say up front that I know how high the level is, of students in NVMTA, and I have the greatest respect for the teaching that all of you are already doing. So quite a bit of what I say this morning will likely be what you already know. Nonetheless, I hope it will be helpful moving forward into the post-covid world (hopefully “post”). I will send Aphrodite a copy of the talk, and if you would like a transcript, please feel free to contact her, or to contact me directly. I will post my email address in the chat. The transcript is preceded by a lengthy reading list of books that I have either read myself OR have had highly recommended to me by other musicians. So you don’t need to take notes this morning, because you can easily access the transcript.

I will be focusing on piano playing, because that is my area of expertise, but all of the key elements apply to all instruments, in case there is anyone here who is NOT a piano teacher! For example, the first book on the reading list, “Choke”, is mainly about athletes and academic students, but applies perfectly to musicians as well.

No doubt all of us, at some point in our teaching careers, have witnessed a young, fearless student, like the one I described, who once bounded onto the stage and reveled in performing, grow into a self-conscious, anxiety-filled teenager who, despite being well prepared, stumbles through their music and feels dejected afterwards. I believe that, in private teaching, we see this scenario play out repeatedly, because we teach students across that “transition age”. And if that student has multiple negative performing experiences, that can lead them to think that they aren’t “good at” performing. Sometimes they feel that this anxiety is insurmountable, and they simply give up performing entirely.

Don’t get me wrong: performing in front of people can be very, very terrifying, even for the most well-prepared musician! Surveys of the general population always reveal that public performance is right up there with death on most people’s list of their all-time fears!! On the other hand, it is most certainly true that some people just seem “born to perform”, regardless of their age. They adore being on stage and seem oblivious to nerves. I am happy for those people (actually I secretly hate them!! Just kidding…)! But most of us aren’t that way, and I feel strongly that, just because we aren’t that way, that shouldn’t mean that we can’t learn to perform well under pressure too.

Classical music performance in particular has the potential to be a very high-anxiety activity, with its emphasis on the perfection of a printed score (one note is right and another is definitely wrong, as opposed to improvising, for example). Add to that the high level of skill involved, and the requirement, since Franz Liszt and Clara Schumann started doing it, that pianists in particular play everything from memory. I will be talking more about memorization later on, and the written transcript will include three wonderful articles on this topic that I would strongly encourage you to read and reflect upon.

I find that students who are perfectionist high-achievers are particularly prone to performance anxiety. This makes sense when you reflect on it, because if a student is accepting of sloppiness in general, that student isn’t really going to be bothered by sloppiness in a performance!! By contrast, a student who is obsessed with perfection can be derailed by a tiny flaw in a performance, even a flaw that might not be noticeable to anyone else. And the role of parents cannot be underestimated in this equation. We all know parents who are too quick to criticize their own children, which I think only serves to add to the students’ performance anxiety. I once judged a competition in which both of us, the 2 judges, awarded first place to a student who had a memory slip, and that was because, despite the memory slip, that student was the only one who was really making music and being expressive. Apparently, several parents complained about us judges afterwards, saying that we couldn’t possibly have known what we were doing, if we gave an award to a student who stumbled. This, I think, is extremely sad, and is doing a disservice to our students and to music in general.

The end result is that many students who suffer from performance anxiety simply give up performing, or just play for themselves, or even worse, give up playing entirely. Now, if they freely choose one of those paths, fine, I have no problem with that. Heaven knows there are lots and lots of wonderful things to do in the world besides playing an instrument!! But if they choose those paths out of fear of performing, then I find that very sad. If someone truly wants to perform, but is afraid, I believe it is possible to enable them to perform well in the face of that fear.

Let me be very clear: there is no miracle cure! What I am talking about is a scenario whereby a student is very nervous, but is equipped with the physical and psychological tools to be able to perform well anyway, despite their nerves and doubts. Optimal practicing, and optimal memorization are of course essential to this process.

I do think it is very important, if we clearly see that our students are struggling with performance anxiety, to engage in positive, constructive conversations with them about it, rather than ignoring the problem, or trying to make it seem like it isn’t a big deal. It IS a big deal to them, and my experience is that they are very grateful to us for helping them deal with it. It is a vital life lesson beyond the world of music, after all. My own teachers never talked about this issue with me. I never had performance anxiety myself until I was in my early 20s, but then it hit me like a ton of bricks, and I had zero tools for dealing with it.

II. Laying the Groundwork for Success/Practicing/Memorizing

First, the student has to have their music very well prepared. This seems obvious to us, but many students don’t know what is involved in truly polishing a piece. Leon Fleisher used to say that in order to sound 90% polished in performance, he has to actually BE 150% polished! And that’s Fleisher, one of the greatest pianists of all time!! It is important to point out to students that if they can’t play their music without stumbling when they are alone and relaxed, they will NOT be able to magically do it in front of other people, when they might be nervous.

So, the first step is to be truly ready. Students (especially pianists) should plan their fingering when they first learn a new piece. Practicing patience: fingering is best done by playing small bits of the piece over and over IN TEMPO, figuring out what fingering works best for the particular student’s hand and tastes. Fingering changes can be made in the early stages, as they gain familiarity with the music and it starts to flow, but very soon (3 weeks into learning a piece, for example), the fingering should be set in stone and not changed. This helps enormously (again, especially for pianists) in securing memory of the music. Never, ever assume that the fingering “in the book” is what should be used. Some of the worst fingerings I have ever seen are in Henle editions.

Practicing Patience:

There are so many different ways to practice, and I think it is really important to constantly be curious about what works best for you personally, while always being open to new methods and ideas, of course.

I would like to share an approach to practicing, and specifically to learning a new piece, that I enjoy and that works well for me.

The steps I use are all about progressing as quickly as possible to the point where the piece is “in your fingers”, so to speak, meaning that there is a lot more work to do, but you’ve learned the score carefully and can play it reasonably well in tempo.

At that point, you can do more of what I consider the really FUN part of practicing: exploring ideas of interpretation, sound, shaping, rubato, architecture – all of the creative parts of what we do as Classical musicians. It isn’t that you aren’t doing these things while learning the score, but once you have the score in your fingers, you have more space in your brain for experimentation.

So, for pianists specifically, but this can easily be applied to other instruments, to learn a piece as quickly as possible, but also as thoroughly as possible:

1. Seek out the best possible fingerings, and try to stick to them once you have made your final decisions (always a work in progress…3-week “return” policy!). Don’t assume that the fingerings “in the book” are the best ones for you personally. Play small bits over and over in tempo to try to figure out what fingerings will work at your final goal tempo.

Once you have done that:

2. SLOW practice, incorporating absolutely everything that you want in the finished product:

Notes

Articulation

Dynamics

Voicing

Tone

Arm, hand and wrist fluidity and flexibility

Physical relaxation

The tempo must be so slow that you have enough space in your brain for every detail, without feeling overloaded or tense.

The ONLY thing that is “slow” about this is tempo. Your brain should be working very hard, focusing on every detail. Then inch the tempo up gradually and carefully, never going faster than you can play very well. Continue this approach on a daily basis, each day starting again at a very slow tempo, and continue to increase the tempo until you are at your final goal.

A few more tips:

3. Don’t practice wrong notes – this is obvious, but is actually very difficult to execute successfully!! We are all guilty of accidentally practicing wrong notes (playing something inaccurately several times, then accurately only once, and then moving on – not practical! I like to use a sports analogy here – if you play something wrong 4 times and right only once, that is like the opposing team scoring 4 goals and your team scored 1 goal. Good for you, but you still LOST!!). I have a friend who was a staff pianist at USC when Leila Josefowicz was a student there. My friend used to listen to Leila practice, and observed that she never, ever played out of tune, because she practiced so slowly and methodically that she was able to plan all of her physical movements ahead of time.

4. Control what you can control – prepare, prepare, prepare

Remember the Fleisher anecdote!!

5. Don’t leave things to hope or chance. If you can’t play a piece as well as you can possibly play it by yourself in your practice room, you can’t do it in front of an audience.

6. AGAIN with the SLOW practice!!!! I stress patience with this process. The journey of a 1000 miles begins with one step. Kaizen (continuous improvement). Once in tempo, make sure to play many times in tempo.

And then, hey, have fun!!

Back to the topic of Peak Performance:

Once students have learned and their music, they should have many different places in the music where they can start from memory easily. They should know what key they are in at all times, if the music is tonal, and if their theory knowledge is advanced enough for that information to be helpful to them. They should be able to play similar but slightly different passages of a piece side-by-side, from memory, to make sure they clearly know the differences (Exposition versus Recap, for example). Most students spend far too much time doing “linear” practicing – starting at the beginning and playing to the end. This leads to inflexibility in performance, if anything goes wrong. It also leads to the very common problem of the endings of their pieces being less prepared than the beginnings. I encourage “backwards” practicing, which means starting at the END of a piece and working back to the beginning, and/or starting at the END of a passage and working back to the beginning. Too often, students stumble in the middle of a passage and then immediately go back to the beginning of it to work on it. BAD idea! Instead, they should truly solve/address the issue that is in the middle/end, and only THEN go back to the beginning of the passage/section.

They should be able to sit down and play straight through the piece without warming up, when they are tired or distracted, on an unfamiliar instrument, when their hands are cold, etc. They should be able to play their music from memory at an extremely slow tempo, which takes away a lot of their physical memory and forces them to use their other forms of memory more. This is a great test of how well they actually do know their music.

I have even gone so far as to memorize the left hand alone of tricky passages. This is an incredible confidence-building tool. Memory slips almost always start in the left hand (and then spread!), because we have very limited aural memory of left hand passages, and therefore we tend to rely too much on physical memory. Have them try playing their pieces in the dark, which is a great test of physical memory (Jamie Parker story – he used to do this all the time).

I also encourage “active” memorization. We all know that when students are young (or maybe old too), they tend to practice their pieces until they have passively memorized them – they can close the book and play from memory. But for advanced students, I think this method is not particularly reliable, because it puts too much emphasis on purely physical memory. I think it is far better to do what I call “active” memorization, which I had to do so often in international competitions (we would be given a “test” piece, usually a newly commissioned work, 3 weeks before the competition, and we had to not only learn it, but memorize it as well). Active memorization can mean a number of things:

1) being able to play one particular bar from memory 2) actually actively knowing what chord comes in a particular spot, or what is different between one passage and another similar passage, and giving oneself mental “Post-It notes” in those moments” 3) transferring short-term memory into long-term memory, which involves playing passages CORRECTLY over and over again.

Perhaps most importantly, they should “practice performing”, which is different from regular practicing. Don Greene says musicians spend too much time “practicing practice”! They should do a real run-through, like a concert, playing straight through mistakes, instead of stopping to fix them. I always coach my students to keep going no matter what, and that that is a skill unto itself that one must practice in order to be good at. Of course we all want a flawless performance, and that can still be the goal, but in the heat of the moment, keeping the flow of the music is SO much more important! If we never practice playing through mistakes, and we always stop to fix things, we will NOT be able to keep the flow in a public performance.

Then, once all of that has been accomplished, students need to have run-throughs of their music in front of people (mock performances). Playing for family, friends, recording themselves (the pandemic has actually helped with this), even getting dressed up in their concert clothes and shoes, anything that simulates the actual performance, will help. Instruct them to run around vigorously for 2-3 minutes before a run-through, to get their heart rate up (simulating a performance situation), and then sit down and play through their pieces.

If they only get up and perform in front of people twice a year, of COURSE they are going to be nervous! Playing outreach concerts in retirement communities is another wonderful way to gain valuable performing experience, and is a good deed at the same time. Just like being in the stands is NOT the same as being on the field playing the game, playing your music only for yourself is NOT the same as performing. We ALL sound like Horowitz when we are by ourselves!

You know, when we go to concerts at the Kennedy Center, of famous musicians playing entire solo programs from memory, we tend to think of them as invincible gods, possessing some power that we can’t ever have. But when we look more closely, we realize that they are probably playing that exact same program for the 20th, or even 40th, time that year. I have had the experience, in my own performing career, of playing a program many times over and over in a short period of time, and I can tell you that you get less and less nervous the more you get up and do it over and over. So I would assert that playing concerts is LESS stressful for major performing artists than it is for students.

So, to summarize, the very best way to alleviate a lot of performance anxiety is to be extremely well prepared – to KNOW that you sound good and that you are confident in your abilities and in your preparation.

III. Welcoming the audience, and giving them a gift

This leads directly into a vital point I make to students about the audience, and about the whole point of performing in the first place. I tell them that we all tend to think that our performances are about us, but in fact they are not – they are about the audience’s experience. This makes logical sense when you think of the fact that, if the audience isn’t there, then you aren’t performing! Students often say, “If the audience (or the JUDGES) weren’t there, then I wouldn’t be so nervous.” Well of course that is true, but then if the audience isn’t there, you are just practicing, you aren’t performing. And so we, as performers, have a great responsibility to the audience, to help them understand the music on first hearing, and to be moved by the music, which is the whole point, of course.

So, have the student focus on the audience, and what the audience needs to get from the performance, and not how they personally feel. Have them think about how THEY feel when they are members of the audience themselves. Of course they will say that they want the performer to relax, have fun and do their very best. Of course they will say that the performer shouldn’t worry about little flaws and memory slips, and that the audience is totally supporting them all the way. Then, when you ask them to resume their role as the performer, their responsibility is to communicate the music to the audience, and to communicate their love of their music to the audience. I like to describe it as “making a difference” for the audience.

The result is that the performance becomes an act of generosity and selflessness, and the performer has more important goals than just trying to hit the right notes, or just trying to “get through it.” I am always so sad when I talk to performers after their concerts and they say, “Well, I survived!” Or, “I’m so glad it’s over!” My hope is for a performing world in which we enjoy our performances as they happen, and are actually a little sad when they are over, because we want to keep on playing.

A few ideas here to have students focus on, depending on the age/personality type of the student:

1. If they have this type of personality, have them create a story around their music, and have them think about communicating that story to the audience. For me personally, that never would have helped me, but I have had lots of students for whom it was very helpful.

2. Imagine that it might be the last time they ever play that piece for anyone, and wanting to make it the most special performance of all.

3. Remember that the piece is only 3, 6, 10 minutes long, it is not going to last forever! (my Juilliard audition story)

4. Have a goal to convince the person in the audience who might not like Classical music, that it is going to be their favorite kind of music after hearing the piece performed.

5. Adopt the role of being a musical “tour guide” – it is their job to show the audience every little thing that is special about that piece, and they only have one chance to do it! (I sometimes have them imagine sharing their favorite book or movie with someone who has never read the book or seen the movie).

6. Remind them that the WORST thing that can happen is actually for them to sound boring and uncommunicative. A truly expressive performance that has a few slips in it is SO much more satisfying for the audience than a reserve, inhibited performance.

7. Have them visualize the performance being OVER, and that they played fantastically well. Then ask them, “How would you play, knowing that you were going to play well?” Or to an athlete, “How would you play if you knew you already won the game?”

7. Think about making all the wonderful details of the piece FRESH, putting themselves in the shoes of the audience members who have never heard it before. This is especially challenging for students, when they have played a piece hundreds of times before the actual performance, and are often tired of the piece by the time the concert arrives.

If this is true for them, I love to relate an anecdote about hearing Rostropovich play his 1000th performance of the Dvorak Cello Concerto in Chicago years ago. Even though it was his 1000th performance, as advertised in the program, he sounded like it was his favorite piece in the entire world, and that he couldn’t have been more excited to play it than at that moment! I also use the analogy of Broadway actors, who perform in the same play over and over, in some cases for several years. But they have to focus on the audience that is there for that ONE night only – making it a special experience for those audience members who will only see the play that one time.

7. Give 100% of yourself – have nothing left at the end. I have a stated goal, for myself, that every performance I give is going to be the best one I ever gave.

This is all most especially helpful when students are being judged in competitions, because just like making the audience wrong for being there, they tend to REALLY make the judges wrong for being there. It is the judges’ “fault” that they got nervous and didn’t play well. Remind them that the judges are just like you – they want the students to relax and play their very best. And I think it is vitally important that we, when we assume that judging role ourselves, exude friendliness and compassion, even if we can’t talk to the competitors ahead of time. We all know judges who aren’t like this, and I think they do a disservice to our art. We want MORE students to enjoy music for their lifetimes, NOT less.

IV. Just before, and during, the actual performance

It is so important that they get off to a good start, and that is why mental preparation before the performance is vital. All of the reading materials I listed go into very extensive detail regarding advance mental and physical preparation.

Coach students on what to eat before a performance. No caffeine within about 3 hours of the performance. No sweets, most especially right before the performance. If they are extremely nervous for many hours before the event, try to have them observe when their nerves are at a low ebb (nerves tend to ebb and flow, and not be at one constant level). Instruct them that they should eat some protein and carbohydrates, vegetables, healthy foods, during that time. Being starving when you play only has the potential to make you even MORE nervous! About 15 minutes before a performance, a not-too-ripe banana and some water is the perfect food. Tell them that feeling nervous before hand is, while unpleasant, actually a GOOD thing, because it means they won’t have the EVEN MORE unpleasant experience of suddenly becoming extremely nervous when they start to play. I personally have given a name to my nervousness – I call it “Ted the Dread”!!!!

If they have to sit in the audience before they play, coach them to bring gloves to keep their hands warm, and to “sit loose” – constantly relax their hands, arms, shoulders – their entire body really, so that when they get up to perform, they are not physically tense.

If they are already tense, and then performance nerves add tension, at some point it becomes too much tension to bear, and the performance can’t hold up.

When they sit down to perform, again coach them to “sit loose” and BREATHE. Since we don’t need to breathe to actually play the instrument (unlike a clarinetist, for example), it is all too common for pianists to hold their breath, which again makes them very tense. Coach them to listen in their mind to the first few bars of the piece, before they launch into it. Nancy Breth has a great tip, which is to count down from 10 before starting to play, to focus and clear the mind of clutter.

More on listening: one of the keys to any successful performance is being present during the performance (not just “phoning it in”, “trying to survive” or “letting the fingers take over”). Active listening, truly creating the music as we play, even if we have played the piece hundreds of times, is key to effectively communicating with the audience. Coach them to really listen for every little detail they have planned; to ENJOY the music as it unfolds.

My teacher at Juilliard, the wonderful Herbert Stessin, used to come backstage before we performed, and he would always say, “Just enjoy the music!” At the time, when your stomach is in your throat, you really felt like grabbing him and saying, “Are you crazy? How can I POSSIBLY enjoy the music when I feel like I’m going to throw up?!!”

But in all honesty, “just enjoying the music” IS what there is to do at that moment. So Stessin was right – he distilled performing down to its essence with that one sentence.

IV. Staying in the moment, and not bailing out

Coach your students to separate the physical feeling of nervousness from the performance itself. It is unrealistic for them to “hope” that they will not be nervous. Being nervous before a performance means that you CARE about the performance, which is very important! It is actually a GOOD sign. It can be helpful to point out to students that ALL performers, even great artists, get nervous. It is NOT personal to them. However it is actually true that being nervous does NOT AUTOMATICALLY HAVE TO MEAN anything about how they play. We all connect the two in our mind (You hear people say all the time: “I didn’t play well BECAUSE I was nervous”). But it is vitally important that students understand and believe that there is NO inherent connection between the nerves and the performance.

This is very empowering!!!!

If we mentally throw up our hands when faced with nerves, we feel powerless. But if we simply observe our nerves, and commit to performing our best anyway, we can separate the nerves from the performance.

Have them recall a performance they gave when they WERE very nervous, but performed well anyway. This experience is clear proof that being nervous does NOT automatically mean anything about how the performance will go. It is simply human nature to dwell on and remember negative experiences more vividly than positive ones, and this has been clearly documented scientifically. In fact, when pressed, most of us can recall performances when we were very nervous, but we played even BETTER than we expected, because of the heightened awareness and focus that nerves can bring to the occasion. But we never attribute those successful performances to our nerves. We tend to describe those occasions as follows: “I played well, EVEN THOUGH I was really nervous!” But maybe we played well BECAUSE our nerves actually helped us!!

So, have students practice observing their nervousness, like a scientist observing a specimen. Everyone hates the physical feelings of nervousness, but it is vitally important to understand that we can detach our emotional reactions from those physical feelings. They are JUST physical feelings, and do NOT have any inherent meaning.

It is also vitally important for students to realize that they can’t control their thoughts, but they CAN follow negative thoughts with positive ones. They very well might think, in the middle of the performance, “What is the next chord??”, “I can’t do this!”, or any number of negative things, but again, those thoughts do NOT have to MEAN anything about how the performance goes. They are just thoughts. What students CAN do, though, is refocus on something ELSE instead, and that thing is the MUSIC and what they can do in the moment to make the music more beautiful (or exciting, or passionate, or whatever is called for). Again I think of Stessin here (“just enjoy the music”).

And what to do when a memory slip or mistake DOES happen? Coach them to stay in the present. The music keeps going. Don’t dwell on a past mistake. Usually mistakes are not even noticeable to the audience, and even if they are, the audience doesn’t care about the mistakes anywhere near as much as the performer thinks they do (again, remind them of how THEY feel when THEY are in the audience). Re-direct that negative thought and replace it with “Do something beautiful” (or exciting, or passionate…again, whatever the music calls for at that moment). I once heard Murray Perahia have a truly horrifying, long memory slip in Beethoven opus 110 in Carnegie Hall. Every pianist in the Hall was terrified for him, I am sure. But he kept right on going – the rest of the concert was fabulous (and even the memory slip was too!). He played 6 encores! No doubt, given human nature, that the memory slip is the ONLY thing he remembers about that performance though.

I also like to use a sports analogy here. If a figure skater falls down right at the beginning of their routine, do they just skate off the ice? No, of course not. They keep going, and make the rest of the performance the best it can possibly be. THEY DON’T BAIL. Again, this is our responsibility, as performers, to our audience. We owe it to the audience NOT to bail out on a performance, no matter how badly we think it is going.

V. The Elephant in the Room: memorization

So now we come to the elephant in the room, which is playing from memory. Again, I would encourage you to thoroughly read all three articles about playing from memory that I have included at the end of the transcript. Most, if not all, of pianists’ performance anxiety has to do with playing from memory. Just like some people seem “born to perform”, some people seem “born to play from memory”. They are not afraid of it, it is easy for them, and they actually prefer to play from memory.

Well good for them! But that is not true for most of us.

Since Franz Liszt and Clara Schumann started doing it, mostly just to show off (and Liszt didn’t play all his repertoire from memory, AND he didn’t do it later in his life), somehow playing from memory caught on and became a rule. And now all pianists have to spend ridiculous numbers of hours in practice rooms, going over and over and over the same passages, ONLY for the purpose of memorizing them, and feeling secure about that memorization. NOT for any greater artistic goal.

I played from memory all my life, because it was required by tradition, and none of us ever questioned it. It was, and still is, written into the rules of most competitions. When I think of all the hours I spent securing my memory of the slow movement of the Dutilleux Sonata, for example, so that I could play it in international competitions, I could have learned 10 Beethoven Sonatas in all that time. And I still had a few memory slips in that Dutilleux slow movement!

If we are honest, we all tend to have a very snobbish attitude towards lack of memorization. Our inner conversation goes something along these lines: “Well, she didn’t play it from memory, so she must not really know it.” Well, no one says that when pianists play chamber music with the score. Do they not really know their part? Of course they do. It is just that tradition dictates they don’t have to memorize that chamber music part. We are reacting based on our expectations and past traditions, and NOT based on the actual fact of the performance itself. Was it a truly moving, highly polished performance? If the performer used the music, and that enabled them to be truly free and give an astounding, moving and uninhibited performance, then how is that not as good as a reserved, careful performance without the score?

A moving, uninhibited performance without the score is great, obviously, but having or not having the score should not be what determines the quality of the performance.

I have come to feel very strongly that memorization should be optional, and performers should NOT be penalized or negatively judged if they use the music. Most especially, excellent performers who DON’T play in public because they are worried about playing from memory, should be welcomed to play with the score, and should not be stigmatized for doing so. We all know fine pianists who don’t play solo music in public, ONLY because they are afraid to play from memory, and I find this to be very sad. Or pianists who play only chamber music and contemporary music, where there is no memorization expectation. Tommasini has a section in his article about the very silly business of contemporary music being exempt from the memorization expectation – he points out how ridiculous it is that memorizing Bach’s Goldberg Variations is somehow supposed to be easier than memorizing a Ligeti etude. Not true!

The daily reality of MOST classical pianists in the world – not that tiny fraction I spoke of earlier who get to play their one or two recitals 30 or 40 times a year in places like the Kennedy Center, as that we do many different things: we play solo, we collaborate with other musicians, we teach, often MANY students, we have families to take care of, we have church jobs, we serve on the PTA, and on and on. Should we simply NOT perform solo music ONLY because we don’t have time to memorize it? I think not. And think of our modern students, who are inundated with homework every night, and often end up just giving up playing music, because they can’t devote enough time to it.

Having to play from memory also limits the amount of music you can play. Stephen Hough mentions this in his article, in support of using the score. If anything, our students should be playing the MAXIMUM number of different pieces and composers when they are young, rather than just a few pieces each year that they can memorize. And we all know of students who just play the same music for several years in a row, so that they can enter multiple competitions. When there is so much fabulous music to explore, this practice seems actually ANTI-musical to me.

I think that in this day and age, when a lot of long-held traditions are being questioned in our society, it is a great time to question this tradition in our field as well.

I don’t play from memory anymore, but I still play quite a few solo recitals every year. I recently played a concert at the Smithsonian American Art Museum with my wonderful Verge Ensemble colleagues, the pianists Jenny Lin and Lura Johnson. We played 4-hand and 6-hand music, and we each played a solo. We all used music for our solos, got a fabulous review, and the critic never mentioned the fact that we used the music.

Now, I DO still feel strongly that ALL STUDENTS should learn to memorize music, and I do currently require my students to perform solos from memory. I still memorize all my solo music, even if I ultimately perform with the score. It is a great ability to have. It builds brainpower, apart from music, and for the time being it is the industry standard, so if students don’t play from memory, they can’t compete. I do believe in being 150% prepared for every performance, of course. NO ONE wants people playing from the score simply because they didn’t really LEARN the music in the first place (see Stephen Hough again). But if having to play from memory all the time means that fewer students can participate, is that worth it, especially if we want to build participation in classical music?

There will always be the issue of what people think, and the people who judge us negatively tend NOT to be performers themselves! So we have that to deal with. But in the end, if we are really making a difference for the audience, and moving them in ways that only live performance can do, where is the harm in having the notes in front of us?

I played a full solo program several years ago, out of town, and I explained to the presenter, several months in advance, that I was planning to use music, and was she okay with that. She wrote back to say that she always thought playing from memory was a horrible burden on performers, and she never understood why it has stuck around this long!

I understand that, for now, this is sort of a useless point that I am making, because we are still requiring students to play from memory in all events. And being able to play well WITH the music in front of you is in itself a skill that must be practiced. Many students actually can’t read music well enough to have the score be helpful for them in a performance. When I first started playing chamber music, back in my early 20s, I was so used to playing from memory that I found looking at the score to be extremely distracting and not helpful! Students CAN get better this though, with practice.

I would just ask that, going forward, we all take some time to reflect on the idea that perhaps we aren’t doing a service to so many students who simply don’t have time to memorize music solidly. It really takes SO much time, and most of our students are already overloaded with schoolwork and stressed out in so many ways. Maybe, down the road, we might consider offering students more events to perform in that do NOT require memorization?

Articles on memorization:

1. Stephen Hough

*Liszt: the man who invented stage fright*

by Stephen Hough, Telegraph Blogs, June 8th, 2011

We are celebrating Liszt's 200th birthday this year and, amongst many other innovations, we have him to thank for the invention of the piano recital – the evening-long stretch when one person sits at that large box of strings and hammers in profile to a concentrated, silent audience. It is an enduring and wondrous theatrical event, and with the vast range of repertoire at a pianist's fingertips, it is one which is set to last at least until the Hungarian composer's 300th birthday.

But we also have Liszt to thank for the unwritten but firmly held rule that the pianist must play that recital without any score in front of him or her. Chopin would not have approved; he chastised a pupil once for playing a piece from memory, accusing him of arrogance. In the days when every pianist was also a composer, to play without a score would usually have meant that you were improvising. To play a Chopin ballade from memory might have seemed as if you were trying to pass off that masterpiece as your own. No wonder Chopin went on the attack. But from the late-19th century onwards, as non-composing pianists gradually became the norm, to use a score implied that you didn't know the piece properly and began to suggest a lack of professionalism.

It is a rich topic of many facets and people defend both sides of the argument passionately. What is for sure is that there have been pianists, maybe of transcendental gifts, who have failed to have careers because they felt ill at ease without a score. One of the most common comments I hear from audience members after a concert is: "How on earth do you remember all those notes?" It is well meant and not really a question but a sigh of perplexed admiration, but is memory really that impressive? Is it an essential part of the pianist's toolkit? Does it have an artistic dimension or is it more like sight-reading – a skill of no particular musical relevance. Some artists can sight-read anything but have nothing to say about the music, which races past under their accurate fingers; others (famously Josef Hofmann) cannot sight-read at all. Some learn quickly and others (famously Dinu Lipatti) take a long time to digest a new work.

I did an interview recently with James Naughtie, which appears in the July edition of the BBC Music Magazine and in it I discussed this topic for the first time. Following on from that, here are a few points that I have been mulling over:

**Some arguments for using the score** 1)  It takes away the fear of forgetting, liberating the mind to concentrate on the music itself. 2)  It enables the player to play what's really there – constantly to discover (to uncover) anew the message left in code by the composer. There is a parallel with a rabbi who, even if he knows the Torah backwards (or forwards, I suppose) still reads it from the scroll. It is a humble acknowledgement that life is too short to know a complex text completely. 3)  It allows for greater variety of repertoire. One of the reasons Sviatoslav Richter began playing from the score in older age was that it enabled him to play a greater number of pieces. There is no question that, unless your memory is freakish, you will not be able to play all the pieces you would like to if they all have to be memorized. 4)  It makes the act of playing totally focused on the music being produced, not on the skill (or not) of remembering. In certain works we have to find tricks to distinguish slight differences of phrasing or note patterns – these are often abstract issues having nothing to do with the content of the music. 5)  The fear of forgetting influences repertoire choices. I'm sure that Faure's glorious piano pieces fail to appear as regularly as they should on concert programmes because they are so difficult to memorize. 6)  Forgetting is not just the performer's embarrassment. A composer told me once about his mortification when he was a student, and a piece he had written was being performed at an important concert. A fellow student was planning to play it from memory but my friend tried to persuade him to use the score … to no avail. The pianist had learned the complex piece and was determined to prove he knew it 'by heart'. But in the concert he had a serious memory lapse and started faking and making up a whole section in his panic. The whole performance was a total mess. After the concert members of the audience came up to my friend to congratulate him on the piece. What could he say? He, like all composers, was grateful for the effort taken by the performer, so he just had to smile and accept the compliments for a piece he had not really written.

**Some arguments against using the score** 1)  It takes away the total physical freedom of simply walking on to the stage, sitting down, and playing. Now that pianists usually play other people's music (and no one pretends that the Schumann Fantasie is a newly-composed work) we do actually want it to seem as if something is being created on the spot. It's part of what makes hearing familiar music seem fresh. 2)  It risks someone playing something which is not properly prepared. When we memorize something we have to learn it 101%.  If we can sight-read well and the notes are not complicated, there's always the danger of presenting something half-baked to an audience. 3)  It spoils the theatrical event like a script in an actor's hand. Performing on stage is not just about what we are hearing, but is also about what we are seeing. There's no question that someone seated at a 9 foot concert grand, playing a ferociously difficult piece with no score in front of him, is an impressive sight. 4)  There are many practical negatives involved: insufficient light to see the pages; the need for a page turner (or electrical device); the inability actually to look at the score during an awkward passage, where the eyes are required to guide the fingers on the keys; the visual distraction for the audience of as many as 200 page turns in an evening's performance; the sound-blockage of the music desk.

The title of this blog post is, of course, deliberately provocative; there are many issues involved in nervousness in front of an audience, not just memory. But if you get a performer talking in a rare moment of complete honesty one of the principal reasons you will hear over and over again for stage fright is the fear of forgetting. The terror of suddenly not knowing where you are, an obvious wrong entry, that blackout, the orchestra and you in a train wreck of harmonic collision and confusion. It is one of the reasons some pianists start to conduct; it is one of the reasons others choose to focus on chamber music or accompaniment, when the use of a score is acceptable; it is one of the reasons still others go into early retirement and start to teach; it is one of the reasons some artists play the same repertoire season after season; and I often wonder whether Glenn Gould's premature move away from the concert stage to the recording studio had something to do with a gradually failing memory. Ironically, it may have been one of the reasons Liszt himself retired from active concert life. There is a letter dated December 1855 in which he replies to a request from the mayor of Vienna to play at his Mozart Festival:

*I have nevertheless one request to make – namely, that you would be good enough to excuse me from the performance of the Mozart Pianoforte Concerto which has been so kindly designed for me, and that this number may be given to some other pianist of note. Apart from the fact that for more than eight years I have not appeared anywhere in public as a pianist, and that many considerations lead me to adhere firmly to my negative resolve in this respect, the fact that the direction of the festival will require my entire attention may prove, in this case, my sufficient excuse.*

I think all pianists need to learn how to memorize and to play from memory. To go through music school and always to use the score seems to me to be missing an essential part of the formation process. Memorizing is part of the discipline of learning the instrument and learning the music written for it. But I do think there comes a point (and not just extreme old-age) when we should feel free to play with a score without censure or comment. The only guideline should be the quality of the interpretation. This coming Saturday I will give the world premiere of my Sonata for Piano (broken branches) at the [Wigmore Hall](http://www.wigmore-hall.org.uk/whats-on/productions/stephen-hough-piano-27446) and I'm going to use the score. Well, I wouldn't want people to think I was improvising, would I!

2. Susan Tomes article

*All in the Mind*

by Susan Tomes, The Guardian, April 19th, 2007

Play from memory and you might forget what note comes next. Use the score and you'll perform better. So why the snobbery about sheet music, asks pianist Susan Tomes…

I recently went to a party where our host regaled us with a compilation of concert recordings in which famous pianists had suffered from horrible memory lapses. Everyone fell about with laughter at the sound of celebrities going hideously off the rails, but, as a pianist, I found it an uncomfortable experience. The struggles of Curzon, Richter and Rubinstein with memorization had become a spectator sport. Playing from memory in public is a fairly recent fashion. Before the late 19th century, playing without the score was often considered a sign of casualness, even of arrogance. The custom of playing from memory developed along with the growth of a body of classics that everyone agreed were worth preserving exactly as their composers had intended. Teachers encouraged students to memorize them. Many young players memorize easily, but it gets harder as time goes on. As the pianist Charles Rosen put it: "With advancing age, memory becomes doubly uncertain; above all, what begins to fail is confidence in one's memory, the assurance that the next note will follow with no conscious effort."

Clara Schumann felt that playing by heart "gave her wings power to soar", but many musicians find it so stressful that they play less naturally than they would with the score. And the pressures are much worse today than they were in Clara Schumann's day. After a century of recording, the record-buying public has been trained to expect perfection, whereas earlier audiences didn't mind if things went occasionally awry.

The burden of memorization falls particularly on solo instrumentalists. I've always played from memory in solo recitals and concertos, but I play chamber music from the score. Chamber groups are not expected to play from memory; those that do - like the Kolisch Quartet in the 1930s, or the Zehetmair Quartet today - are regarded as spectacular exceptions. Nor are symphony orchestras expected to play from memory. And no one suggests that playing a chamber work or a symphony with music on the stand prevents a performance from being superlative.

Conductors sometimes conduct from memory, but they themselves don't have to make a sound, so many mistakes go unnoticed. Opera singers have to memorize, but they have the help of prompters, discreetly feeding them the next line. Songs have words, and because words are our everyday language, they help singers to memorize. Abstract music is also a language, but one whose immediate meaning is less clear-cut. Scientists now agree that memorizing music is more complex than memorizing words, and the challenge is multidimensional for those who also have to play instruments.

It's not as if composers require musicians to memorize. In Beethoven's day, his pupil Carl Czerny apparently had such a phenomenal memory that, as a teenager, he could play all his master's works by heart. But Beethoven disapproved, saying it would make him casual about detailed markings on the score. Chopin was angry when he heard that one of his pupils was intending to play him a Nocturne from memory. Others felt it would be inappropriate to play without a score, Mendelssohn, who had an amazing musical memory, was nevertheless modest about it. When he visited London and took part in a performance of one of his own piano trios, the piano part was missing. "Never mind," he said, "just take any book of music, place it on the music desk, and have someone sit beside me and turn the pages, and then no one need know I play from memory." Liszt, though gazing heavenwards in contemporary drawings of him at the piano, appears to have played only half of his repertoire from memory. And when he played his own compositions, he used the score to demonstrate that these were seriously worked-out pieces, not fleeting improvisations.

The growing taste for watching soloists play from memory has actually narrowed the breadth of the repertoire. Vladimir Horowitz, for example, played a huge number of works at home from the score, but only performed a small repertoire from memory in public. Today many soloists won't commit themselves to more than a handful of works each season, no doubt partly because of the burden of memorization. In the past few years, I've successfully memorized several solo recital programs, each lasting about two hours. Had I allowed myself to use music, I could have performed the programs much earlier, and with equal interpretative power. It was the sheer effort of memorizing that added months to the process. Secure memorization has several elements that interweave unpredictably for the player. There is analytical memory, an understanding of the music's structure. There's photographic memory, which enables the player to "read" the visualized page when it isn't there. And there's physical memory, perhaps the most dependable kind, but one for which there's no shortcut. In performance, muscle memory will carry you along when something distracts you, or when you have a moment of doubt. Indeed muscle memory can enable you to play the whole piece while thinking about something else entirely (as I discovered when putting in my hours of piano practice as a child). But to develop it you simply have to play the music over and over, for a long period of time.

I recently gave two performances of the Schumann Piano Concerto. For several weeks before the concerts, I privately played the piece by heart without problems at least once a day and felt very secure. At the first performance, however, with an orchestra of 60 musicians and 2,000 listeners, I had several terrifying moments of insecurity. Worse, they were in places in the piece where I'd never had trouble before. So the following day I hammered those places into my memory. At the second performance, I had another couple of nasty moments - but in completely new places. Must musicians waste so much of their time and emotional energy on memorization? If we've prepared the music thoroughly, does playing it from memory really add an extra dimension that is worth all the pain?

3. Anthony Tommasini article:

*Playing by Heart, With or Without a Score*

by Anthony Tommasini, December 31, 2012  (NY Times)

It would seem that the filmmaker Michael Haneke, who wrote and directed the wrenching and poignantly acted new French movie “Amour,” is swept away by the mystique of a pianist, alone onstage, conveying mastery and utter oneness with music by playing a great piece from memory. The drama of playing from memory is at the crux of a scene involving the elegant French pianist Alexandre Tharaud, who, portraying himself, has a small but crucial role.

The story revolves around an elderly Parisian couple, Georges and Anne, retired music teachers, as they cope with the stroke that has paralyzed Anne’s right side. In one scene Mr. Tharaud, in the role of a former student of Anne’s who has gone on to a significant career, makes an unannounced visit to his old teacher to see how she is faring. He can barely contain his shock at her condition. Anne (Emmanuelle Riva) asks a favor: Would Alexandre play a piece she made him learn when he was 12? It is Beethoven’s Bagatelle in G minor, the second of the Six Bagatelles (Op. 126), Beethoven’s last published piano work. At first Mr. Tharaud demurs. He has not played the piece for years, he explains, and is not sure he can remember it. Then, saying he will try, he proceeds to play the stormy bagatelle flawlessly, at least as much as we hear before the film cuts to the next scene. I suppose it would have been too pedestrian a touch if, when Alexandre said he was not sure he could remember the bagatelle, Anne had said, “Oh, I have the score, of course, right there on the shelf.”

Over the years I have observed that the rigid protocol in classical music whereby solo performers, especially pianists, are expected to play from memory seems finally, thank goodness, to be loosening its hold. What matters, or should matter, is the quality of the music making, not the means by which an artist renders a fine performance. Increasingly, major pianists like Peter Serkin and Olli Mustonen have sometimes chosen to play a solo work using the printed score. The pianist Gilbert Kalish, best known as an exemplary chamber music performer and champion of contemporary music, has long played all repertory, including solo pieces (Haydn sonatas, Brahms intermezzos), using scores. As a faculty member of the excellent music department at Stony Brook University, Mr. Kalish spearheaded a change in the degree requirements in the 1980s, so that student pianists could play any work in their official recitals, from memory or not, whichever resulted in the best, most confident performance. Yet there is still widespread and, to me, surprising, adherence in the field to the protocol of playing solo repertory from memory. This season Mr. Tharaud took a little flak for performing recitals in New York using printed scores.

In October at the Greenwich Village music club Le Poisson Rouge he played excerpts from his delightful new Virgin Classics recording “Le Boeuf sur le Toit,” taken from the name of the club that became a haven for Parisian cabaret during the Jazz Age. The next night Mr. Tharaud played a standard program at Weill Recital Hall with works by Scarlatti, Ravel, Chopin and Liszt. At each concert, rather than performing from memory, he used scores, something that Steve Smith, who reviewed Mr. Tharaud’s Weill recital for The New York Times, did not even mention. It was not worth commenting on. The news, as Mr. Smith made clear, was Mr. Tharaud’s absorbing and mercurial performances.

Yet the photo of Mr. Tharaud that accompanied the review clearly showed him playing from a score, and some readers were quick to react on social media. Somehow the idea persists that for a pianist to use a score in a performance suggests a lack of mastery or sufficient preparation. Not necessarily. Though it is exciting and even magical to see a pianist giving a triumphant performance of the demonically difficult Liszt Piano Sonata, or any work, from memory, there are different kinds of talents. The towering Russian pianist Sviatoslav Richter, by the time he reached his 60s, found it increasingly hard to play from memory. He started using scores in performances. No one questioned him. This was, after all, Richter, a titan of the keyboard. Yet if a Juilliard student can give brilliant and personal accounts of works like Elliott Carter’s daunting Piano Sonata or Chopin’s 24 Preludes but needs the scores on the music stand to do so, why should that matter?

The superb pianist Stephen Hough, in an article in The Telegraph of London last year, presented both sides of the case well. As he pointed out, it goes against history to perform works of early eras from memory. It was only when Liszt, partly out of showmanship, began playing everything, including monumental Beethoven sonatas, from memory that the mystique took hold. In earlier eras there was composed music, which was always played from the score, and there was improvised music. Since performers were almost always composers as well, as Mr. Hough explained, for a pianist to play, say, a Chopin ballade from memory would have been considered the height of arrogance, as if the pianist were suggesting that he had composed the piece.

At major performing institutions attitudes toward playing from memory have opened up. Today the artistic staff at Carnegie Hall would never think of compelling any artist to play from memory. This is a personal artistic choice. But organizations that foster student musicians still mostly insist on standard protocols. Young Concert Artists, which presents exceptional emerging artists in concert, hews to standard practice for its competitive auditions. The requirements state: “Concertos and solo repertoire for all instruments and voice must be performed by memory. Scores may be used only in chamber music, sonatas with accompaniment and contemporary works.” It has always amused me that contemporary music is exempted from the memorization requirement. I think some pianists might find the Ligeti études, which are so technically challenging that by the time you learn them you usually know them cold, a lot easier to play from memory than Bach’s “Goldberg” Variations.

This fall, in two programs just five days apart at the 92nd Street Y, the pianist Andras Schiff played Bach’s complete “Well-Tempered Clavier,” all 48 preludes and fugues, containing some of the most intricate contrapuntal music ever written. He played both recitals from memory, an astonishing achievement. Yet Mr. Schiff, a masterly Bach interpreter, has played this music for 50 years, since his childhood. In interviews he has said that playing from memory is not the hardest part for him in performing Bach’s keyboard works, and I believe him.

Around the same time at Alice Tully Hall, as part of Lincoln Center’s White Light Festival, the pianist Emanuel Ax took part in an intriguing program, whose main work was Schoenberg’s arrangement (later completed by the composer Rainer Riehn) of Mahler’s “Lied von der Erde” for chamber ensemble, played by members of the New York Philharmonic with Mr. Ax at the piano. But he set the mood by opening the program with two solo works: Bach’s Prelude and Fugue No. 8 from “The Well-Tempered Clavier,” Book 1; and Schoenberg’s Six Little Piano Pieces (Op. 19). He played the Bach work using the printed score and the Schoenberg from memory. Now no one who has heard Mr. Ax over the years could possibly think he has any difficulty playing anything from memory. But this was a collaborative program. It was inspiring to see Mr. Ax taking part as just one of 15 dedicated players in the arrangement of “Das Lied.” So beginning the program with the pensive Bach work was a musical gesture, not a time to showcase memorization. For me there was something touching about seeing a great pianist play a Bach prelude and fugue using the score. Every wondrous element of this complex music is right on the page. It looks almost as beautiful as it sounds.