FINDING FLOW IN PIANO PRACTICE

by

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With infinite gratitude toward my parents,

who recognized and supported my unending fascination with the piano

before I recognized it myself.

To Dr. Benjamin Caton,

for always reminding me that we also play music with our ears and minds.

To Peter Takács, Jean-Louis Haguenauer, and Menahem Pressler,

all of whom I have been privileged to call my teacher and inspiration.

Preface

Maybe I was and always will be somewhat of an odd hybrid, the subject of a two-fold "Mozart effect"—I was, perhaps deliberately, exposed as a child to LPs of both Rachmaninoff concerti and Motown in equal amounts. This musical dualism is part of my own nature as a musician; I adore equally the complexities of both Bach and African Diaspora music. I go even a step further with my love of both the great jazz and classical pianists, and the difference here is also striking; while many of the great pioneers of jazz piano were far from pianistic perfection, the classical greats were mostly well-oiled machines at the keyboard. Though both jazz and classical require great creativity, individualism, and genius, I always had the feeling that the demands of each genre seemed to head in very different directions, especially in their respective relationships toward a restrictive sense of perfectionism. The "jazz path," the "freer" one, has always had its allure to me—I prized that creative feeling, and it was my antidote to the stress of replicating the demands of written-out music.

Highly trained classical musicians are often especially familiar with the anxieties and complexes that can plague our work as performing musicians. Stage fright often takes the character of an unfailingly irritating uncle during the holidays—we know it's coming, we know it will be an unpleasant experience, and the best of us are those who learn to let the whole encounter pass with as little tragedy as possible.

Our very livelihood as performers hinges upon our ability to transmit and foster joy in the audience, but joy is often the least of our concerns. Though many aspects of piano playing have taken the rigor and fanaticism of an Olympic sport (and not without excellent reason), piano performance also remains a golden opportunity to share the wondrous bliss of centuries of European musical innovation. Yet, more often than we might realize, our own insecurities find their way into the attention of the listener, who might start to wonder if our grimacing conveys something more than an unsubtle dramatic acting. But is it any wonder? Anxiety is what we

practice. Too often our practice falls victim to worries over this or that interpretation, perceived technical shortcomings, internal and external deadlines, competition with our peers, or worst of all—direct comparison with the greatest pianists in the world, so readily available at a moment's queueing. We habituate these anxieties hour by hour, day after day, until the sheer magnitude of our various perceived inadequacies becomes the principal *affekt* of our performance.

There are many resources available for dealing with the pangs of performance anxiety. But I will try to address the more basic anxieties of simply *being* a performing musician, anxieties that are often reinforced by the way we work. If we fail to confront these basic assumptions about our own profession, no amount of green tea or breathing routines will really solve the underlying psychological problem. Therefore, I aim to provide a pianist's perspective on the concepts of intrinsic motivation, flow, and performance psychology, suggesting tailor-made techniques to reduce the mental disarray of our practice sessions. Armed with this information, I hope that we will be able to perform a practice-room version of cognitive behavioral therapy on ourselves, identifying and gradually reconditioning whatever aspects of pianism haunt us the most.

If we can learn to rid ourselves of unnecessary negativity, we can re-learn to approach music—especially the music that we fear the most—with fresh mind and fresh ears, conditioning ourselves to tackle even the most technically challenging works with a relaxed, optimistic method of creative problem-solving. We fell in love with playing the piano for the joy it brought us, and it is imperative to maintain and protect that sense of joy. When we do, we will be better able to experience and communicate the pleasures of music making to both our audiences and to a new generation of students. And even if this whole process does not render us one of the world's celebrated performers, we will still be able to enjoy the creative freedom of music making—even in classical music.

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Chapter 1: A GARDEN OF EDEN

Quite a few critiques from the inestimable violinist and pedagogue Mauricio Fuks take some form of the following: as a professional performer, it is your sacred duty to entertain your audience, captivating them to the point that they forget the unbearable drudgery of their own lives. If you do your job well, they are transported. If you instead remind them that life is difficult and is something that must be endured—usually through a great display of discomfort during the cadenza of a particularly thorny concerto—they want their money back. The truth in this sentiment is something that we often forget amid our constantly expanding repertoire of concerns: performers are indeed entertainers, and it is by the historically conditioned mercy of our finely cultivated audience that they refrain from throwing rotten tomatoes at us when we fail to entertain them.

Perhaps one ground for this forgetfulness are the preoccupations of the conservatory. Principal teachers love to stress the symbolically communicative aspects of music to craft a student's performance, referencing classical music's rich representations of emotional states. Play more *Allegro,* play more *giocoso*, play more *scherzando*! We almost forget that *Allegro* is etymologically the opposite of "stressed." During the proto-Romantic moping of my teenage years, I was often told to simply "cheer up," and such a comment was equally ineffective—many pianists are far too preoccupied with their shortcomings to feel *scherzando* about anything.

There are yet deeper worlds of musical meaning to explore. Romantic and Impressionistic character pieces paint landscapes of harmony, mode, and timbre. We can completely lose ourselves in the fantastical bipolarity of Schumann, also running the risk of fostering a bipolar piano technique. And all this is to say nothing of the various deeper theories that delight musicologists and music theorists, who find compositional correspondence between the musical works and life events of the great composers, spending countless hours musing over the veiled messages coded within Western counterpoint.

However, despite the wonders of these academic occupations, audiences often have different priorities. Ask them what they think. Academic or symbolic understanding of classical music requires of a huge level of experience with the symbols involved, but how many donors have ever heard of developing variation? Even music majors have trouble distinguishing instances of the Neapolitan chord from an augmented sixth. Consonance and dissonance may be immediately audible, but most of the complex "narrative" workings of harmony require a great amount of training to hear.

In contrast, empathetic understanding is a much more universal vehicle for transmitting emotion through musical performance,[1] providing an immediate and subjective pathway to understanding a performance through basic and universal emotional mechanisms. In short, the audience reaction to a performance of any kind answers the implicit question "How does it feel to be that?" This is the mechanism in place when we witness the joy of a spectacular gymnastic landing. Those who are experts in gymnastics understand the difficulty of the preceding maneuvers, while the rest of us appreciate the transfixing incredibility of the motions. For most of us, the real emotional impact comes when we see a teardrop form in the eyes of the successful gymnast. We feel her relief and elation, and we are overwhelmed with her just by watching. Following the same principles, if the gymnast is less than pleased with herself, her reaction can be very uncomfortable to watch.

This empathetic understanding is more important than many performers like to think. While pianists often celebrate the technical achievements of Hamelin and the like, and such feats will always have their public, less "enlightened" audiences often gravitate toward those performers who play Mozart with a twinkle in the eye, or toward those who can toss of entire sets of etudes with the glee of someone who were telling a slightly inappropriate joke. Many people can play fast, but how many can play fast with joy? To witness a performance of this character

[1] I am a fervent disciple of Arnie Cox's wonderful work on Embodied Cognition, and it is one of the core assumptions throughout.

inspires the same elation that the performer herself feels, just as it brings a smile to watch anyone who loves what they are doing in the moment.

Likewise, one of the most wonderful qualities of a performance by a piano prodigy is not simply the unbelievability of the technical achievement. It is indeed stunning to see an 11-year-old performing a Mendelssohn concerto in front of an orchestra, but the sheer joy of the performance itself is infectious. A prodigy can play with a pure, unadulterated enjoyment of playing itself, an innocence that few adults can manage to maintain; in a sense, they still live within their own musical Garden of Eden.

The Game of Music

In its purest essence, playing music on an instrument can be the ultimate game. The process of learning a musical instrument easily meets psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's classifications for the highest level of enjoyable activity; unless acted upon by outside forces, the budding musician can

(1) maintain reasonable goals

(2) invest full attention

(3) receive immediate feedback concerning success

(4) control their own performance

(5) find unlimited ways to improve

(6) derive a non-egoistic sense of wellbeing at each small success.[2]

Of course, not all those who begin piano have this level of positive experience; pedagogical horror stories involving nuns and punishing wooden rulers used to be prevalent. But learning music *can* afford these positive circumstances, and those who experience music in this positive way are likely to pursue it with much greater enthusiasm. Their constant improvement feeds an

[2] Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*, 49.

investment of energy and attention toward goals of increasing difficulty, and the sheer satisfaction of this continued self-improvement can be addicting.

If music is one of the more perfect games for beginners, the piano is arguably the king of the instruments in this respect. The relatively simple nature of producing a passable sound at the piano, with its finite and predictable user interface, quickly makes a decent-sounding performance a very reasonable goal. The right-note/wrong-note nature of playing makes feedback instantaneous and obvious even to the untrained ear—a beginning pianist normally has no difficulty hearing the clunk of an unintentional cluster of adjacent notes, while advanced string players struggle sometimes with intonation. This visual and sonic clarity of right and wrong on the piano, combined with the physical ease of tone production, creates an activity where the early stages of improvement are usually a perfectly straightforward matter. It gets better when it sounds better, and whether it sounds better is a fairly straightforward question. Wrong notes? Do it again.

When the student is ready for greater challenges, musicality is thrown into the mix. The piano also offers ample opportunity for nuance, creativity, and even success—the highest echelon of pianists achieved stardom. A major legitimization of many similarly competitive yet enjoyable endeavors (sports, music, acting, the arts in general) is the prospect of turning the passion into a profession. Can it pay the bills—actually, yes, it can. It's a game with prospects, a game with purpose.

Like all good games, it becomes addicting. In the case of piano, it comes from a sense of self-betterment, a sense of pride. It's no coincidence that young pianists compare their repertoires against each other—"oh, you're playing the Moonlight Sonata? I played that last year!" Though such silliness can come forward as arrogant, it also belies the sense of honest pride in one's accomplishments. After the initial sequence of beginner method books is completed, the student will probably embark upon *Anna Magdalena* excerpts, followed by simple Bach; then come sonatinas, then Mozart, all the way until Chopin, Liszt, and Rachmaninoff—the piano literature

has maintained a relatively clear progression of pedagogical order that is to a large extent visible on the page. Darkening clouds of sixteenth notes and thick chords on the score can excite the intermediate student, not to speak of the pride upon mastery.

I remember that my father printed out Beethoven's *Pathétique* sonata for me to stumble through before I had finished my tenure with Mozart, and while this might be pedagogically unsound, it gave both of us a great deal of enjoyment. It takes far less training to slowly read through the rich harmonies and swirling rhythms of the Romantic repertoire than it takes to master these pieces, so the intermediate student often lets themself dream of specific pieces far on the horizon. But when one has achieved the physical ability to play through the more advanced works, the nuances of expression and pursuit of beauty can keep us preoccupied for a lifetime. As a result, piano playing can become a game of incredible beauty and infinite stages.

According to Csikszentmihalyi, there is a reason that the most complex and rewarding games have been mainstays in our cultures. Games with more complex rules can be more intrinsically rewarding in the end than the ones that are easily learned. The complexity of tactics in American football or chess require a higher degree of understanding than checkers or the backyard games of children. However, to the initiated, the complexity brings variety and newness. Not only are these games less likely to become boring to those who understand them, they afford a real thrill in a hard-won victory. The established rules and limited options of complex games are the very parameters that offer nearly limitless opportunities to improve one's nuanced abilities within the parameters themselves—in both chess and American football, a great deal of respect is given to those who can sense and predict the intentions of the opponents. The limitations themselves make clearer what is to be improved—try making pencil drawings every day for a year, and your perception of a good pencil drawing will change.

Furthermore, when we improve in our musical skills, this improvement can be an essential core of the enjoyment that we can take from the complex activity—the improvement itself is reason enough for pride in our accomplishments. Within the set parameters of style and

the score, we can be proud when we create satisfactory realizations of oft-played musical works. It may be purely creative and pleasurable to freely improvise at the piano, but the constraints in classical music interpretation—technical difficulty combined with certain predetermined expectations—make a beautiful and fresh performance priceless.

This process of improvement highlights Csikszentmihalyi's vital difference between enjoyment and pleasure. Personal improvement in skill and the subsequent sense of accomplishment separates enjoyment from the more basic sensation of pleasure.[3] Said otherwise, pleasure caters to the senses, while enjoyment caters to the mind. To compare music to food—many do!—I may derive enormous pleasure from eating a piece of pizza, but I cannot gain consistently undiminished enjoyment from the act of pizza eating unless I am aware of the pizza in a different way. To enjoy eating in this sense would require developing the ability to pay attention to the various tastes and sensations, identifying them with increasing precision. This is the mindset of the "foodie," those either create or explore various new cuisines. Foodies too maintain reasonable goals (finding and ingesting food is rarely the difficult part, excepting budgetary issues) and receive immediate feedback during their tasting, and the whole rarely becomes an egoistic activity unless social media or blogging is involved. For the whole process to result in increased personal achievement, a significant amount of mental effort is required. This attention enables the increasing complexity of the palate, and as the palate's detection of subtlety increases, so does the sense of pride in the accomplishment. A further enjoyment derives from concocting these new cuisines in your own kitchen. While pleasure may come automatically, hardwired into our body's responses, attention is required to reap the enjoyment derived from personal growth.

Armed with the powerful and precise tool of attention to personal growth, various people go about exploring their passions, whether in sport, study, video games, or at the piano. But the

[3] Ibid., 46.

pianist has every opportunity for enjoyment that these other types of games offer—the incredibly nuanced perception of the aural "palate" coupled with the uncanny insight of the chess master—and additionally offers a clear-cut agenda for personal progress. Though the sounds of well-played piano music are pleasurable to the listener and enjoyable to the advanced ear of the connoisseur, it is the pianist who has every opportunity to enjoy the process of creation the most.

Chapter 2: GOALS AND EXPERIENCES

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,

courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.

AMERICAN THEOLOGIAN REINHOLD NIEBUHR, 1933

One does not have to be religious to appreciate the wisdom behind this prayer. Csikszentmihalyi's *Flow* gives the example of two factory workers in the same assembly line in Chicago.[4] The first, named Julio, can barely keep track of his work soldering the connections within electronics. Though his job requires skill and finesse, his mind is elsewhere: on troubles with his car, his worries over the future, or anything else besides the work of his job. However, Rico, who works in the same factory, loves his work—to him, the day is a constant attempt to challenge himself, finding new ways to become more efficient and complete his complex work with increasing finesse. For Rico, his improvement is a source of pride, while Julio is there simply because he desperately needs the job. Objectively they are completing identical work, but who is happier?

Now that we are reminded in the last chapter why piano playing *should* be an activity enjoyable simply for its own sake, we can acknowledge that it often is not. While all performing pianists ostensibly perform the same functions—we choose repertoire, we learn it, we perform it in various capacities—intrinsic enjoyment varies widely from one pianist to the next. Notwithstanding psychological issues (some of which will be addressed in Chapter 3), some of the simpler reasons for this stem from misplaced motivation; since music is a discipline where individual achievement is highly prized, many people enjoy the elation of admiration and cannot bear to be judged critically. Especially when the stakes are high, criticism can feel like damnation. In the interest of putting some of these situations in a more objective perspective, I

[4] Paraphrased from Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*, 36-40.

will reframe some of them within a system of motivation, self-efficacy, and goal-theory taken from educational psychologists.

The issue also rests within our process of practice itself. Practice often feels like necessary evil, the omnipresent hurdle to a polished product. With this all-too-common mentality of practice as an end to a means, we forget that practice itself is time at the instrument, minting our relationship within it from day to day. This may seem a bit basic and Pavlovian, but it isn't necessarily so—if your boss shows up to a dinner party, doesn't that put you back on edge? This relationship with the instrument should be cultivated. Instead of trudging madly forward in the quest toward more and more presentable and impressive repertoire, we should remind ourselves enjoy the journey.

It's like a Catch-22. You'll never get to Carnegie Hall unless you practice, practice, practice. But then, once you're on stage, you can't continue in practice mode. If you practice letting go and performing, you'll be great at performing, but you might not get to Carnegie Hall.

In the hope that a bit of perspective can remedy the seriousness of the task of practice, his chapter will discuss Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow more deeply and relate it to music-making in the practice room. Most musicians have a sense of the qualitative subjective experience of flow, a related but not completely identical concept to "being in the zone." Flow is more like a complete, positive immersion in an activity, and it can happen without the cognizant elation of a basketballer who, fully in the zone, makes a miraculous string of 3-point shots. Musicians of widely varying levels pursue music careers because they instinctively know flow: while making music, they happily lose track of time. They feel completely immersed in the motions and sounds, marveling at their creation. The external pressures of competition and allure of the quantifiable in music that cause us to forget that beautiful feeling in our daily practice. Let's try to find a way to get it back.

The Locus of Control

As painfully trite as it may sound, positivity plays a large role. In this case, however, positivity is not blithe optimism—we don't need to believe that our memory lapse in the development was *good*. We need to believe that we have the power to fix it. Absolutely essential in improvement at the instrument is that right foot steps forward—the belief that, given our current goals, we have the ability to achieve them.

It is no mystery to teachers in public schools that a motivated student is far more likely to be happy in their study than an unmotivated one. To stay authentically, intrinsically motivated, the learner must hold the belief that they, themselves, hold the power to affect change on their own situation. They must believe that they have the power to pass the test with study; otherwise, studying is a waste of time. This basic importance in this locus of control is developed in educational theory by Julian Rotter, who states:

> When a reinforcement is perceived by the subject as following some action of his own but not being entirely contingent upon his action, then, in our culture, it is typically perceived as the result of luck, chance, fate, as under the control of a powerful others, or as unpredictable because of the great complexity of the forces surrounding him. When the event is interpreted in this way by an individual, we have labeled this a belief in external control. If the person perceives that the event is contingent upon his own behavior or his own relatively permanent characteristics, we have termed this a belief in internal control.[5]

Rotter's distinction between internal and external control is vital to our confidence and progress as pianists, and our own psychological perceptions of control are far more unrealistic than we sometimes realize. These perceptions can easily be distinct from the reality of the situation—a long history of frustrated practice may convince a pianist that they cannot do one

[5] Rotter, "Generalized expectancies for internal versus external control of reinforcement," 1.

specific technique (what goal-theory psychologists call a *learned helplessness*[6]) when the perceived inability could be easily fixed with patient and positive-minded work. The extent to which a pianist, or anyone, believes that improvement is within their power directly correlates to their ability to "weather the storms" of small failures or disappointments that will likely occur during their progressive journey.

Very early on—too soon, really—young musicians learn to equate the frustration of slowed progress with personal inability. "Can't" then quickly becomes the norm, sparing one from the continued embarrassment of failed attempts. With the added constraints of time and competitive survival in professionals, these frustrations morph into complexes. We often convince ourselves that we simply cannot perform the activity. "I can't play Rachmaninoff," someone once told me, to which I replied that I could not play Mozart. In fact, neither of these complexes is usually rooted in reality—more often, they represent mental blocks born in the frustration of failure, representing hours of struggle and a learned apathy, avoidance, or helplessness. In the case of Rachmaninoff, the pianist is likely experiencing a high level of anxiety at the mere thought of having to manipulate a nuanced and highly contrapuntal texture while simultaneously competing with the astounding level of Rachmaninoff playing in the world. Meanwhile my anxiety regarding Mozart is not that I did not know *how* to play it—Mozart is in one sense far easier than Rachmaninoff. Rather, at some point in my youth I had decided that Mozart was too easy for me as an ambitious young pianist, and that I needed to focus on Beethoven instead. I had simply failed to maintain my ability to play crystalline, transparent textures with a perfectly relaxed demeanor.

The locus of control that inspires a good work ethic can color one's relationship to the outside world, especially to those who do the same work we do. Ideally, a pianist who views musical improvement as a matter of non-competitive personal achievement is generally more

[6] from Schunk et al., *Motivation in Education*, 183-197.

positive about their own progress and less threatened by the brilliance of others.[7] Within competition, however, opinions swell into moralistic bludgeons, quite effective at bashing the playing of others. These opinions offer us a metric by which we can maintain yet more of a sense of control—if we convince ourselves that we (or perhaps just I, alone!) are the holy purveyors of "good taste" in music, we really have done a service to our feeling of control, perhaps at the expense of our perception of reality. Admittedly, though, this feeling does help one's motivation.

Pianists whose motivation stems from the desire to outperform others (or, conversely, from fear of seeming publicly amateur)[8] can be more negatively affected by such quasi-moralistic criticisms as "too slow" or "not correct." They might give up more easily in the face of repeated frustration at achieving this standard of performances, since this metric of "correctness" is often set by the greatest players of the past and present, and these standards easily become the main competition themselves. Thus, these competitive pianists, frustrated and impatient, may eventually convince themselves that they cannot play this or that piece or technique. And with that admission, the locus of control shifts to an external source, and the pianist loses motivation to try.

Often what is initially perceived as an internal ability is eventually proven to be outside of our control. This can yield a devastating blow to motivation. External motivation in some young pianists begins when they realize the effect that their performance can have on others—especially adults. Pleasing one's parents is important but relatively easy in many cases, since a loving parent is pleased with both Beethoven and stick-figure sketches. However, if the young pianist garners the respect and admiration of adults, even strangers, the feeling can be intoxicating, and it can become a disorienting goal. True, the ability to influence others is an essential facet of our performing existence, as we are hoping to provide love, joy, relaxation,

[7] Ibid., based on the discussion of "Mastery orientation" and "Performance orientation," and although these terms may be somewhat technical, their similarity to piano-student archetypes is clear.
[8] Ibid.

excitement, and all the other reasons for the existence of concerts. But this transmission is entirely contingent upon a receptive and ready set of ears. If we pursue this as a singular end— "I play so that others can feel joy!"—our success and failure is contingent upon the external, and sooner or later the illusion of our complete control over this phenomenon will be broken. Stories tell that Glenn Gould, with all his phenomenal prowess at the keyboard, gave up all public performance because he could not bear the thought of an audience member being more preoccupied by, for example, what that person was going to have for dinner. This experience is often true to various degrees for many performers—negative feedback (even from one person!) can retroactively ruin a performance. But this is a lesson we all learn sooner or later; no matter how much love we put into the music, each member of our audience does in fact have to make the choice to pay attention, let alone appreciate the subtlety of our phrasing. For those whose motivation rests on their ability to move others with their playing, it can become a dangerous game.

A high level of success can be one of the most dangerous of all motivating external conditions. Our aiming for the perfect performance often operates under the assumption that enough long hours of intense work at difficult repertoire will guarantee acceptance into Juilliard, impressing the judges of the Chopin competition, and a long and fruitful performing career. A high level of perfectionism does not *seem* to be detrimental to us, since it is usually maintained under the fervent belief that perfectionism yields results—no one in this situation wants to admit that their fate might be outside of their own hands! And, as children of the scientific method, we assure ourselves that the quantifiable are what matter: Did we hit the right notes? Did we do the markings in the score? Was our tempo the fastest, with clarity and a precise strike on every note? Did we win?

What these parameters fail to address is *how* these results are achieved. One can impress others with an "objectively perfect" performance, and one will as a result be accepted into the great conservatories of the world. But a focus on the objective measurements of music can cause

us to forget that mythical piano careers rarely happen without piano playing that has a true lightness; physical ease can be achieved through devout repetition, but the most amazing manner of playing has an affective ease as well. It truly belies the difficulty of the works played. Yes, it may be amazing that she played all those notes, but how did she play all those notes while not having a care in the world?

Lightness is freedom from worry. It cannot occur in the face of worry, whether about your audience, your abilities, or your income. To achieve an unshakeable focus on what you can control (internal locus of control), you must free yourself from external worry in performance and practice. Though rejections and failures can fuel our desperation and drive for the success,[9] these motivations are incompatible with a true lightness.

Our persistence as improving performers relies on an internal sense of control over what is possible. This sense of control must be rooted in realistic expectations—we cannot expect that our hands will grow a few sizes, or that we will gain the ability to control minds, or that we will always have a fantastic piano at our disposal. But what we *can* control is an honest and important source of motivation. Naturally there are competitions to enter, teachers to impress, and fame that might follow us, but any investment in these aims brings returns as volatile as the approval of others. In contrast, the most effective and persistent motivation is the unyielding internal belief that we can always improve ourselves, for ourselves, as musicians and performers. Whether that results in competitive success should be taken in a limited context, as icing on a cake. My teacher Menahem Pressler often says, "I never wanted to be the loudest or fastest pianist; I simply wanted to play as beautifully as possible." This is a perfect example of the ideal intrinsic motivation: it requires no uncontrollable external conditions for success, and it is one of the few things in music that is truly within our own power.

[9] Hays and Brown, *You're On!: Consulting for Peak Performance*, 76.

Flow

We must also believe that we have control over a condition called flow. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the author of *Flow*, describes the phenomenologically optimal experience of flow:

> They are situations in which attention can be freely invested to achieve a person's goals, because there is no disorder to straighten out, no threat for the self to defend against. We have called this state the *flow experience*, because this is the term many of the people we interviewed had used in their descriptions of how it felt to be in top form: "It was like floating," "I was carried on by the flow." It is the opposite of psychic entropy—in fact, it is sometimes called *negentropy*—and those who attain it develop a stronger, more confident self, because more of their psychic energy has been invested successfully in goals they themselves had chosen to pursue.[10]

Though it manifests as visible symptoms (since it is quite easy to see when observing others), flow is an entirely subjective experiential state while we engage with an activity. Therefore, we can rest reassured that we can have quite a bit of control over it—after all, these states of mind are entirely internal, so the real locus of control for them is internal as well.[11]

Flow occurs only within an absence of psychic disorder. What the Czikszentmihalyi means by disorder is not necessarily clinical mental disorder, but the presence of nagging distress or discomfort. We are all too familiar with these worries, usually the result of our own inability to usher out the small anxieties that detract from optimal experience. Many instances of this psychic entropy in pianism stem from a misplaced locus of control: we often think we cannot control our own improvement of abilities, and we let that inability nag us, or we worry over the

[10] Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*, 40.

[11] The ability to completely restrain one's own thoughts seems to go in and out of fashion with cultures throughout history. Contrast, for example, Zen Buddhism with the promises of happiness in today's consumerism. More pragmatically, however, assuming the locus of inner control to be entirely internal spares one from the demotivation of futility, and that can make all the difference.

reactions of a teacher or audience. These preoccupations not only demotivate us; more immediately, they detract from our ability to focus the task of the goals and priorities in front of us. They waste our efforts. Worrying during practice over the negative consequences of a less-than-stellar future performance is as harmful as the worries that crop up during a bad performance. True, the worries during a performance may have more immediate consequences with the press. However, both types of worry detract from the ability to focus, uninhibited, on the here and now, and both "train" this sense of detachment from the act of playing. To be able to practice in flow requires that we practice with full attention toward the pursuit of our goals. To do that, we must rid ourselves of psychic entropy in our work.

Flow is an experience, and one's experience relies on perception. A crucial component in this formula is the day-to-day perception of one's own abilities, which are more mercurial than one's actual physical abilities and can vary with many psychological factors—confidence, distress, or good and bad days. The perception of ability is often quite independent of the reality. We may feel out of flow on a bad day, though our playing is nearly the same as the day before, since our confidence is low, our hands feel sluggish, or we may even be preoccupied by an unpaid bill. In the opposite manner, an extraordinarily good turn of events in some other area of our life may provide us with the necessary morale boost to forget our other worries for a moment, helping us achieve flow in our practice. To be sure, many pianists can grossly overestimate their own abilities, either through habituated confidence or a failure to listen critically to their own playing. They may find it easier to achieve flow. All other things equal, however, even a mistakenly overconfident performer can achieve an enviable bravura through flow in performance, and this itself is an excellent quality.

In fact, flow is an oft-unspoken requirement of a good performance. One of the worst impressions of any concert is that the chosen repertoire seemed too difficult for its performer, a feeling which usually results as much from the notes missed as from observed under confidence, fear, or visible struggle. If the performer misses a note with a smile on her face, we assume that

the notes are simply a fluke. When we see visible unease before the octave passage in the Tchaikovsky concerto, we have the urge to leave the hall. This flow in performance is so important that its presence or absence can change the entire color of a concert experience, both for performer and audience.

But flow is also an element of good practice—this experience is not a magical blessing endowed upon us by the god of recitals; it is a skill that we can cultivate. It is true that basic practice adages ("Don't practice too fast!" "Stay relaxed!") reinforce many observations about flow—within is an innate understanding that flow cannot coexist with discomfort. But having a more complete understanding of the emotional states that result from various balances of skill and difficulty enables us to regulate and repeat the experience of flow in our daily practice.

Flow can be had by all, and it is a factor of both perception and the task at hand. A child playing Mozart and virtuoso playing Godowsky can both achieve flow provided their perceived skill level is equal to the challenge before them. The professional has the added responsibility to ensure that their perceived skill level is equivalent to their actual skill level (for their own sake!), and in doing so must adjust their perceptions to account for the highest awareness of sound, efficiency, and muscular coordination. For any given skill level, if the perceived challenge is too great, the result will be some type of anxiety or frustration; on the other hand, if the challenge is not great enough, the result often will be some type of boredom. The illustration of these conditions is given in the figure below:

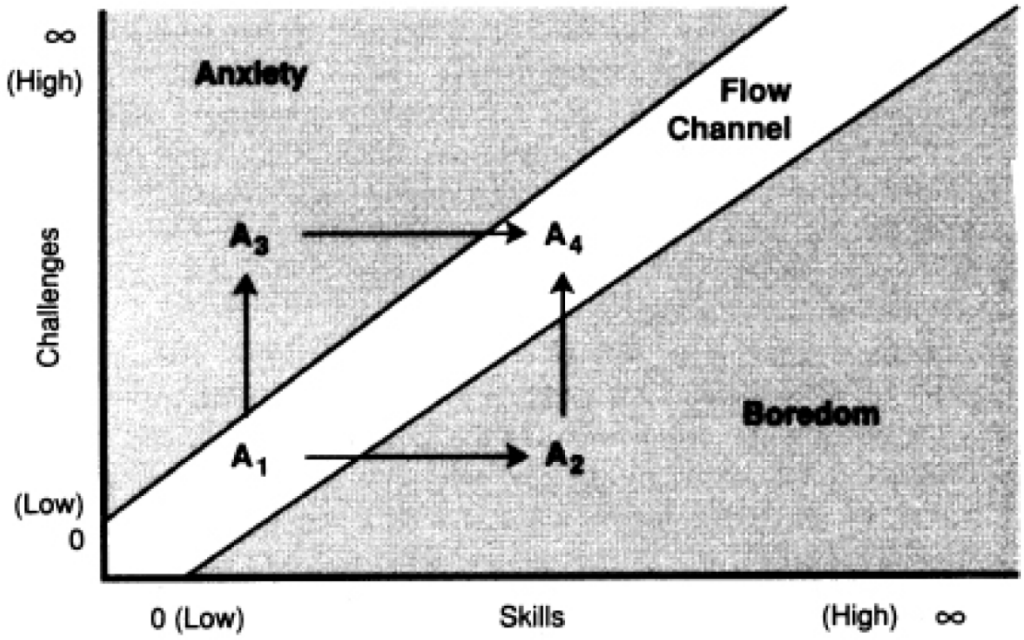

Figure 1: The relationship of skills and challenges to flow[12]

Perception of skills occupies the left-right spectrum, challenges the spectrum from top to bottom. The move from position A_1 to A_2 represents something like my childhood experience with Mozart; as my skills increased over the years, I began to think of Mozart as boring. At that point, moving from Mozart to Beethoven was perceived as a move from A_2 to A_4. If I had started a difficult Beethoven sonata before I had become bored with Mozart, my progression would be more aptly described by a movement from A_1 to A_3, producing anxiety, and at that point an increase in skills would have been necessary to restore the flow at point A_4. Note that this graph only accounts for the subjective perception of challenges and skills—the specific challenge of a piece may increase only with the demands of a high-profile performing career. A child may not grasp the true difficulty of Mozart K. 488. But ignorance is bliss.

As some psychologists might protest, a little bit of stress or anxiety is a healthy response to a desire to improve, and it can sometimes work wonders by increasing motivation for optimal performance.[13] However, danger arises at the point when the anxiety is out of control, when it

[12] Ibid., 74.
[13] Hays and Brown. *You're On!*, 132.

ceases to motivate us, instead consuming our attention with worries and frustrations. In fact, both sides of the flow channel—both anxiety and boredom—both can be equally disastrous to our piano playing if too much time is spent in those states. Practicing pieces that are perceived as too difficult is demoralizing, and it the surest way to induce stress-related tension into one's own playing. I may well have given up in learning too-difficult Beethoven as a child if the related anxiety rendered me unable to acquire the requisite dexterity. On the other end, boredom attenuates attention, which can either demotivate or create sloppy habits. If enjoyment stems from the self-aware perception of improvement, as stated earlier, improvement of this type is made possible by attention.

This is where common wisdom holds—ascertaining the right practice tempo is essential to great practice. But how slowly is meant? According to the above principles, we can reformulate the problem. For optimum flow, one should generally practice slowly enough that all anxiety from the physicality of playing fades away, yet not so slowly that boredom takes hold. Yes, we may still worry over interpretation, or even what we want to have for lunch, but the physicality of execution at the instrument should not be a cause for anxiety itself. This practice-tempo mantra is surely common knowledge when it comes to practicing Mozart, but how many of us can genuinely say the same for our practice of Rachmaninoff? Do we find the physicality of it truly relaxing? Do we execute our jumps, leaps, and complicated voicings with the same patience? Romantic works do require a sense of *pathos* in the execution, but many of us forget that this suffering need not be in our shoulders.

This requisite slowness can be a tedious process for some, especially in the early stages of learning a piece. In this case, the flow diagram counterintuitively suggests that we might counter boredom and restore flow by increasing the challenge. However, increased challenge does not and should not necessarily result from increasing the tempo. Rather, we could strive to find every possible beauty in the sound of the music, to be aware of our physicality in a new and precise way, or to be as creative as possible with our nuance without violating the stylistic

constraints of the music. In doing so, we find limitless ways to increase the challenge—a challenge of perception, of movement, or of listening—without increasing the tempo past the limit of physical comfort. A rather elegant internal solution, I would like to think that time spent in the pursuit of nuance, comfort, or beauty in music is time well spent.

These practice techniques attune us to face some of the physical challenges inherent in practicing itself. But flow is unfortunately not only a simple matter of balancing physical skill and challenge. Our perception of our abilities can be heavily influenced by mood, positivity, or confidence level. The challenges we perceive sometimes stem from our own prioritized goals, circumstances, and beliefs. Thus, we can easily put ourselves in the physical conditions necessary to achieve flow, but if our anxieties are chronic and insistent, we must face the sources of our stresses.

Chapter 3: FIGHTING THE FIRE

Do not believe in anything simply because you have heard it.

Do not believe in anything simply because it is spoken and rumored by many.

Do not believe in anything simply because it is found written in your religious books.

Do not believe in anything merely on the authority of your teachers and elders.

Do not believe in traditions because they have been handed down for many generations.

But after observation and analysis, when you find that anything agrees with reason and is conducive to the good and benefit of one and all, then accept it and live up to it.

SIDDHĀRTHA GAUTAMA

Even if our motivation to play is intrinsic, and our practice full of flow, as serious pianists we cannot avoid the external pressures of the music world. Human beings can be competitive, petty, jealous, self-righteous, or hurtful, and some musicians are no exception. Sometimes in our quest for flow (or simply keeping our own ego afloat), we make assumptions that belittle the opinions and abilities of others. The world of musicians is full of those who do the same, and sometimes these are the people we need most to appreciate our playing. But whether the individual insecurities and anxieties we feel originate from within or without, from perception or reality, they are things we must learn to work out of our mind, out of our concern, and out of our practice. For the most part, these thoughts and feelings can pass in due time, and we can move on and get right back into the flow of things. But when the thoughts are chronic, repetitive, insistent—that is when we have a real problem.

I will begin by describing a general chronic high-anxiety mentality, one that does not respond to criticism, feedback, or even technical suggestion. This state of mind may seem very familiar to aspiring performers—in it, real progress is a tenuous ordeal, and one's confidence seems ready to crumble at any moment. I make the argument that giving pianistic feedback to

this kind of mentality is like fighting fire with fire. I further argue that the common remedies to performance anxiety—general self-help, physical exercise, deep breathing, thorough preparation—are like efforts to fight fire with water. External, holistic remedies may have great effect on the ability of the mind to perform and enjoy music in the moment; however, I believe—because I have experienced it—that lasting improvement only comes through extinguishing the sources of the fire. These sources are fundamental assumptions about pianism that make us feel anxious, defensive, and insecure. To highlight a method of dealing with these sources, I will present a modern issue and reframe it in the terms of flow factors, aiming to overcome this issue in a mindset than can be implemented on a day-to-day basis.

This may seem simply pragmatic. In this case, though, a healthy sense of pragmatism is likely the best we can do; after all, ignoring conditions of the outside world does not make these conditions disappear—music requires a listener, and most listeners can think for themselves. We shouldn't try to stop them. Thus, it's often best to refocus—for example, choosing to maintain a sense of internal control rather than an external one gears us to be more resilient and motivated. Reconsidering your own expectations can turn insurmountable challenges into realistic ones.

Likewise, the complexes that can become obsessions during our practice are often related to faulty assumptions regarding the external world; if we can reduce the harmful focus on these facts and eliminate the assumptions, we will have a much better chance of being happy in our work. After all, happiness itself is a subjective experience, and achieving flow and healthy focus is only the beginning of happiness—like the Hindu achieving *samadhi* through meditation, the mind is still eight stages from the yogi's unearthly bliss. These psychological theories provide a representation of the fertile conditions for happiness, but it is our responsibility to habituate the process putting ourselves there, freeing ourselves from the beliefs that provoke external anxieties and pressures. Then we may practice our happiness.

Fire and Fire

As a young student my teacher used to proudly say to me that I did very well in responding instantly during masterclasses. I never thought of it as anything special, mostly because I thought of playing piano as an act of *doing*. So, if the visiting teacher asked me to do something else, I did it. What was the difficulty in that?

Now I understand what he meant. Many pianists think of performance as an impossible balancing act, obsessing over dynamic choices, this or that articulation, fidelity to the score, audience reaction, and our own survival. All of these are fully legitimate concerns, but it is the manner of considering them that makes them impossible. When the mentality is that of a series of commands to execute, considerations to uphold, and futures to maintain, these concerns can far outweigh our own perception of our abilities. We do all we can to remove the uncertainty of performance through diligent work, but any negative feedback or setback can destroy our confidence as if it were a house of cards.

Some see specialization in this or that genre, with all its merits, as a convenient answer. While specialization itself is a wonderful thing for the overall economy of music making, it can in young pianists be used as a defense—if a pianist's audience has no prior expectations to the highly obscure works on your program, the pianist often feels "safer," with one less challenge to manage. There's no Argerich recording in the back of their minds, no overpoweringly musical predecessor to outdo.

Instead of controlling the leveling the playing field, specialization controls the field on which the game is played. The alternative is no easy choice. In an attempt to compete with the greatest Chopin players all time, for example, we may resort to cloistering in the practice room, working obsessively toward unnecessary goals of ridiculous difficulty or toward improvement at a ridiculous rate, intent on proving ourselves against insurmountable odds. We may obsessively pursue various techniques and schools of pianism in a constant hope of discovering a simple fix

to our unrealistic expectations. We may avoid feedback out of fear of hearing something incongruent with our current beliefs or working methods, fearing to challenge what little self-confidence we have. In the worst cases, we may avoid performance entirely, instead channeling our energy into odd projects. Or we may simply give up.

Teaching or advising a performer with this level of anxiety is also tricky. If the performer is stubborn, they may have developed a strong mechanism for ignoring or dismissing the feedback, internally insisting that they're right anyway. If the comment's strength exceeds their ability to dismiss it, the comment can damage their self-confidence, thus reducing even further their own perceived ability to deal with the increasing challenges of high-level performance. To those who are imbalanced from anxiety, any additional considerations become part of a longer list of challenges and considerations, putting more fire on the fire, bringing the mind the farther from its desired perfection. Every bit of self-confidence becomes a precious resource. Within this frame of mind, however, no amount of self-confidence is ever enough.

Fire and Water

This anxiety can easily become a perpetual state. Constantly surrounded by recordings, aspects of our modern culture seem to value quantifiable result over process, and, as a result, an "Olympic sport" mentality becomes a quasi-objective metric to gauge one's performances. If it is quick, even, and well-representative of the score, that is usually enough—this alone is difficult enough to do! If it is the quickest, most even, and impeccably representative of the score, the world had better watch out! If this result is achieved despite a small degree of physical tension or large degree of psychological tension, that fact usually remains relatively unimportant in consideration of the quantitative achievements.

However, left unchecked, psychological tension can gradually begin to manifest as physical tension. This is generally when the pianist begins to realize that they need a bit of help.

Various published methods exist for dealing with this situation, generally presented in methods for coping with performing anxiety:[1]

- "Perform often!" This can help relieve quite a bit of stress due to the idea of performing itself, as any amount of public exposure can eventually become routine if the exposure is not too negative.
- "Learn the music well!" This goes without saying, as one should also know to memorize their speech well if they intend to speak well without notes. Minimizing the uncertainty of performance is a method of dealing with stress.
- "Breathe!" This is meant both in the immediate sense and practical sense, as deep breathing is a timeless (literally!) Eastern technique for controlling the symptoms of anxiety. Deep, diaphragmatic breathing tricks the mind into attenuating its own fight-or-flight stress responses, putting one in a state of mind conducive to calm creativity.
- "Picture a happy place." Naturally, the stresses of performance are less severe if one pretends that one is not actually performing or only in front of good friends. And constant visualization of optimal outcomes refocuses the mind away from negative ones.
- "Exercise!" Good care of the body through a healthy diet, rest, and exercise are essential for emotional health, too. Musicians often forget its importance, especially given the example of addictive rock stars and some of our overly mercurial idols.
- "Please get help…" Psychological problems are usually readily apparent to those around us, often far more so than to ourselves.

All these techniques are undeniably useful in lessoning the symptoms of anxiety, but often they do not address the fundamental beliefs underlying its source. For example, I may perform often, and that will make the act of performing easier, but it will do nothing to battle my insecurity that I am *unable* to perform as powerfully or beautifully as I wish, or that even my

[1] These are paraphrased from psychologist Sandra Harris' article "A Study of Musical Performance Anxiety," but all of the abundant advice I could find in music educator journals is very similar.

most successful performances do not achieve the success and acclaim I had imagined for myself. And performing does nothing to address the problem of *why* I more generally feel anxious about performing, ignoring the aspect of self-worth that is tied to circumstances that are often largely external. Likewise, mental trickery, confidence, or good exercise reduce symptoms of anxiety like a pain reliever reduces inflammation—they are, again, not a cure. Mental trickery is only as successful as successful adherence; the old saying "don't look down" is only useful until one looks down! Confident perception of our own ability shatters easily—especially if this confidence is rooted in comparison to others.

Psychiatric help is by far the most invested of these "water" techniques. However, for it to work, we must have the willingness to let it do its work. Therapy proceeds based on what we believe ourselves. If we tell a therapist that we have no qualms with our playing, and that is what we consciously believe, the therapist may not have the specialization or influence to effectively help us to challenge our beliefs. For those of us who suffer less from acute performance anxiety than a more general "performer's anxiety," our demons can be quite deeply rooted within the general, seemingly unshakeable assumptions of our own profession.

Fuel of the Fire

It struck me once, sitting in a literature seminar, that I might be a different type of pianistic animal. A recording of Artur Schnabel had been played for the class, and the atmosphere in the classroom was on fire. However, to my surprise, it wasn't quite positive.

"How could he do that to Beethoven?" asked one of my peers, completely aghast. "None of that was in the score!"

I wasn't sure how to respond, since the majority of what I had just heard seemed to me a natural, almost speech-like interpretation of op. 109. Sure, the phrasing could be accused of being mannered, but for me it was pure poetry in the reading.

This issue at deals with deeper currents within academia, within music publishing, and within the genre of music teaching—but it's not at all a new issue. Every Baroque treatise on music-making eventually cedes ornamentation or rhetoric to the "good taste" of the performer, and in our attempts centuries later to codify and compose cure-alls to poor taste—*zurück zum Urtext*—we perhaps have lost some of the creative spark of the Schnabel generation. Never mind that the young Beethoven, and Mozart were quite famous for their improvisational powers and spontaneity, that *rubato* existed long before the Romantic era, and that entire traditions of Western music have evolved from swung dances and poetic recitative.

The motivation to conform is understandable, while careers can be made or broken through competitions, connections, or an unforeseeable stroke of good luck. When you've finally got an audience with that one great idol of yours, whether critic, mentor, or sponsor, the last thing we want is to be dismissed as indulgent or lazy interpreters. We may try to avoid poor taste through a clinical interpretation, but such a choice may render our interpretation itself tasteless. More importantly, the entire question draws the focus away from ourselves to external loci of control. Such a preoccupation with "taste" can emphasize factors outside of our own judgment, and more importantly, our control. Such external factors are dangerous, while they are potentially demoralizing.

Without indulging arguments of rubato and nuance themselves, we can explore the issue of "good taste" as one illustration of how the factors described in Chapter 2 can be reframed in non-destructive ways.

Locus of control. Do I trust myself to know a tasteful interpretation when I hear it? If not, how can I learn this ability? Constant fear that an individual interpretation may be more or less subject to criticism indicates either a distrust in one's own ability to judge or a preoccupation with the external. But the matter cannot become a hopeless case. It takes a little time to learn the acceptable "dialects" in the interpretation of any composer, but this is easier than ever now with digital media. One needs only to invest the time to make oneself familiar with the possibilities of

a piece. Eventually the instincts will develop themselves. Most important—do not lose faith in the individual ability to overcome the obstacle.

Perceived challenges. There is perhaps no greater hurdle than expectations left unchecked. It may be extremely helpful to listen to the Zimerman recording of a work, but the help ends as soon as we unrealistically expect the same of ourselves. It's not such a grand undertaking to play through the first Ballade of Chopin. The expectation, however, that we can do it without investing the time to learn it properly, or to take it to heart, simply because we hear stories of the greats doing so in two days, or because we procrastinated before our exam or competition—these are unnecessary challenges. Anxiety is a powerful tool in deciding whether a challenge is appropriate to our abilities.

Perceived abilities. Of course, abilities are also partially subjective. Those who spend too much time watching more advanced players may have an underinflated sense of their own performing powers, while those who grew up in a small rural town may have no idea of the level of others'. Both are a misrepresentation of one's own abilities, and both have a decided effect on one's own ability to quiet internal discord and achieve flow. A balanced and reasonable account of one's own abilities assesses the nuance of individual strengths and weakness without under- or overinflating them. Technical ability, ease of memorization, a knack for interpretation—in these areas, musicians can see greater differences among themselves than there really are.

It's perhaps a Jedi mind trick on one's own thoughts: reframing an insecurity or worry in the practice room in these three terms—locus of control, perceived challenges, and perceived abilities—is essential to becoming free of the worry itself. If at the heart of the issue lies a misplaced focus or dependence on external factors, then one has been tricked into helplessness—one must refocus on the individual own power to improve and overcome the situation. If the challenge seems too great, then we have either overinflated the challenge or underrated ourselves. Through awareness of these factors we can find the fires that disrupt our practice and put the fire out at its source.

Pianism for the Future

There is no singular recipe for happiness. An essential ingredient, however, does seem to be our own ability to focus on the things we can control. Like Csikszentmihalyi's factory workers, we can change our perception of a situation even if the external appearances remain the same. Though the various periods of music history seemed to have conflicting takes on mental self-control—Beethoven's Enlightenment ideals stand in stark contrast to Massenet's Werther, a Robert Schumann, or an Alexander Scriabin. Despite the fashionable nature, cult status, and allure of a Liszt, a Paganini, or a Hendrix, we must remember that nowhere is it written that those who perform Romantic repertoire must necessarily be true Romantics themselves.

Some say that the future of classical music is gloomier than in the past. Modern technological advances and capitalism have combined to devalue "handmade" music, while music made on a laptop can be louder and more stimulating to the untrained ear. Furthermore, the internet's deep resources have made ticketed live music much lower on the younger generation's list of needs and wants—that is, unless their favorite social media idol is singing. In this stage, one may quickly come to the conclusion that the effort involved in perfecting a difficult work for performance yields a much lower reward than in the past. Concert attendance is dwindling in many places; even worse, the distinguishing feature of many classical music audiences is often bigotry, affluence, exclusivity, or intolerance of other musical genres and styles. Those that speak the language of Western classical music, understanding and appreciating it truly for its own sake, seem fewer and farther between by the day.

Individual instruction is often no more inspiring. Many hypercompetitive young piano students are being taught to value result more than process, accuracy more than enjoyment, and success more than intrinsic love. The students are usually not to blame. Instead, ambitious teachers (often those who, embittered by their own "failures," see piano teaching as a suboptimal outcome) pettily vie against each other for notoriety and fame, flouting their protégés like well-

regulated racehorses. The parents of the children engage and encourage the system. Vying for their children's guaranteed acceptance into the world's great universities, they reward those teachers who show the ability to foster quick progress and guaranteed success.

We cannot count on convincing our students to want to be great pianists as we do. Our own personal motivation stems from our own set of beliefs and desires; their lives, circumstances, and desires will be different. But we can show them that we love the music, and that there is much to love about it. To truly communicate love of the instrument to our students, we must truly love it ourselves; to truly communicate love of music to our students, we must truly communicate it ourselves; and, to truly teach our students to be happy through music, we must know its happiness ourselves. Perhaps this is the best future for classical music—a future generation of pianists who knows the joys of playing and self-sufficient musical creation at the piano.

There is no reason to believe the communication of pianistic joy to be an unrealistic goal. After all, there will always be restaurants, but some will always prefer cooking for themselves—not for the economy of it, but for the sheer enjoyment. Just as the pleasures of food are no mystery to most, neither are the pleasures of music. But we as teachers should emphasize the potential for enjoyment in "cooking" these sounds at home, teaching our students the recipes and methods so that they too may delight in exotic harmonies, the simplicity and purity of two-voice counterpoint, or the achievement at a job well done from day to day. Fostering enjoyment requires attention and intrinsic purpose. Classical music study cannot simply be a means to the end of making a child smarter; it must truly be an end itself.

Maybe this requires a shift in mentality, one that may seem a rather stark departure the usual thinking—especially as "enforced" by those who have made their living in areas of scholarly expertise. Frequently I meet people who treat pianistic rules— "No pedal in Bach! Follow what Beethoven writes in *this* edition!"—with the reverence due one of the Ten Commandments, expecting a trespasser to be smitten by lightning at the spot of the foul.

Admittedly, violation of these rules is usually the result of laziness on the part of student. But the focus on the *legality* of these things is a detriment to enjoyment itself.

If we could learn to communicate the rules as guidelines for creativity, the whole character of the exercise could change. If one believes there should be no pedaling in Bach, this should not be used as a bludgeon for bashing those who choose to use it—rather, the emphasis should be on the wonderfully increased awareness that nuance of the fingers can achieve in Bach without pedal, or learning to appreciate the clarity of the chords themselves. Great achievement can be made through creativity with pre-existing constraints, and often the achievement of the creativity is all the greater for it. Mozart did not add a chorale, an offstage brass ensemble, or a synthesizer to any of his symphonies, yet they are filled with passages that sparkle even brighter upon closer inspection. Likewise, if our students realize that rules are *opportunities* for creativity, we have already done a great deal to improve their mentality.

Playing the piano is an extraordinary opportunity to achieve flow, one that offers a lifetime of continual challenge and enjoyment. But, in order to achieve this, we need to learn (or re-learn) to free ourselves from worry over interpretation, external pressures of audience and teacher, and all other unnecessary preoccupations. We cannot and should not free ourselves from these considerations themselves; interpretation, external conditions, income, and mortgage payments are all important! As soon as we accept that our performances will always offend someone in the audience, or that we may always fail to satisfy some else's rules, we can begin to invest more of our attention and energy in creating performances we are happy to share. And, armed with this skill, we should be able to truly inspire and mentor a new generation of pianists.

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