THE OPTIMIZING PIANISM NEWSLETTER ©

TOPIC: PROCESS

More practice isn't better – more *good* practice is

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"Practicing mechanically is a waste of time. It's not what intelligent humans should do. They should practice a little less, and think a little more."[1]

— András Schiff

THE ASSUMPTION

The assumption is that more practice is better. No, it isn't. Practice is just an amplifier. It amplifies the quality of practice that you put into it. More *good* practice is better; more *bad* practice is worse.

WHY IT MATTERS

Our body will adapt (within biological limits) to whatever we give it. Give it weights to lift, your muscles will grow. Eat too much fat, it'll find a place to store it. Practice using the wrong fingerings, it'll remember them for next time. But most importantly, build musical errors into your neuro-muscular system and you'll get those hard-wired too. The most common errors in pianists tend to be: moving your fingers without having musical purpose, OR achieving your musical goals with poor quality biomechanics that won't be long-term sustainable, i.e. placing too much force through small joints, too much cross-force through joints, or excessive tensions that will fatigue muscles, strain or injure them.

Nerves build more connections when stuff gets repeated. Famously said, "Neurons that fire together wire together."[2] And a corrected take does not suddenly overwrite a faulty one either. You *cannot unlearn* what you have systematically taught your body to learn over days and weeks (or months and years). Furthermore, unlearning is "just the spawning of a new, competing memory, not erasure of the existing memory."[3] The residual bad connections still remain – like an echo that will haunt your pianism every time you're on stage.

Your best practice ONLY repeats what is maximally in your best interest to get learned. This, logically, comes from knowing what best to aim for and how best to do it. Ahhh!! – I think there's a book written about this somewhere...

MAKE YOUR PIANISM BETTER

DON'T Run any passage just for reassurance, or just to check if you can get through it. A repetition with no intention towards something *better* just reinforces your average. It will never get you out of your current level, and most certainly, never into a "musically special" zone.

DO Set one target before each repetition: a sound, a movement, a pattern sequence. Anything that can be improved. But only if it's practiced with intention. If it's not working, find the primary cause (Mechanical, Mental or Musical) and focus on fixing just that before you move on. It could well be the flat tyre of your pianism that you've been neglecting to fix all these years...

If sportspeople know the drill, why don't we? As Tiger Woods's coach remarked: "He makes mistakes, but then you watch him go about his business and he doesn't make that mistake twice."[4]

One step forwards... one step ~~backwards~~ forwards...

Cameron

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Next issue: mental practice — the session that needs no piano.

What did you repeat most this week?

The Book — Chapter 7, "Optimizing Practicing," explains how nerves actually learn: how much, how often, when to rest. Textbox 7.2 turns it into a checklist for your next session. **Read ›**

- **3M Self-Assessment** — find the M that's failing (free)
- **Newsletter Archive** — the issues you missed
- **Performer** — the pianist behind the science

REFERENCES

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3. Criscimagna-Hemminger, S. & Shadmehr, R. "Consolidation Patterns of Human Motor Memory." *Journal of Neuroscience* 28(39), 2008.
4. Gregory, S. "Tiger at the Masters: An Ultimate Test of Toughness." *TIME*, 5 Apr 2010. Quoted in Roberts, C. *Optimizing Pianism*, Ch. 7.

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