THE OPTIMIZING PIANISM NEWSLETTER © TOPIC: MUSICAL SKILLS

Your sound lives in three places. Practice them all.

Issue No. 11 · 18 November 2026 · Dr. Cameron Roberts

"There are no bad pianos, only bad pianists."[1]

— Ferruccio Busoni

We press the keys and sound comes out of the instrument. Easy, right? Job done?

Nope. How we *perceive* those sounds – the bit that matters – involves an entirely different equation, where the instrument is only one of its inputs.[1] Most of us practise as if the piano sound is the only point of importance. But then we walk on stage and meet the other two – 1. the acoustic space (reflected sound and the sounds of others), and 2. the 'space' inside the heads of our audience: their perceived sound and their perceived meaning of it based on multiple sensory inputs. And so things go wrong, and the inexperienced pianists call them excuses (see issue 10). But they're bad excuses: **the totality of the listening experience** has been underestimated and not prepared for.

Pianist András Schiff talks about using the '3rd ear' – the ear that listens to the space in the room. Watch › It's a good start to better listening. Acoustic research shows that musicians change their tempo and dynamics to suit the room.[2] That's no surprise. Simply: a resonant hall blurs and thickens the sound; a dry room thins it and exposes the gaps. That said, here's the point: **why do we presume that the way we've prepared the sounds on our instrument at home will match the needs of the acoustic space on concert day?** And why do we presume that the technique that produced those sounds at home will serve our needs on stage, or on other stages, or on different instruments...?

And furthermore, what about the listeners' interpretation of those sounds? Their acoustic space is different to yours, and they are wildly influenced by their visual sense, their mirror neurons (read Chapter 4 of the book)[3], your gestures, and, as one disgruntled lady once told me after a concert – your shoes. Mine were dirty once from a thunderstorm and a late arrival. She *heard* my shoes, and it stained *her* sound.

MAKE YOUR PIANISM BETTER

> **DON'T** force your home-piano touch onto a strange piano and expect it to work.

> **DO** rehearse adaptability. Practice passages in different ways: Thicken the sound. Thin the sound. Play faster. Play slower. Play deeper. Play shallower. Gesture more. Gesture less. Practice on different instruments, in different rooms and to different ears. Get comfortable in all environments.

Your practice-room sound is not portable. It is an agreement between one piano, one room and one set of ears. Expand each variable.

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

Cameron

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Next issue: The hammer only knows one thing.

Would your best sound survive a stranger's piano?

The Book — Chapter 8, "Musical Skills," shows how to work *with* the pianist, the instrument and the listener, not against them. Read ›

- **3M Self-Assessment** — see which M wobbles when the piano changes (free)
- **Newsletter Archive** — pair this with Issue 5, Sound Chef

REFERENCES

1. Roberts, C. *Optimizing Pianism – Evidence-Based Perspectives*, Ch. 8 ("Make Friends with Your Medium – Work with Reality").
2. Ueno, K., Kato, K., & Kawai, K. "Effect of Room Acoustics on Musicians' Performance. Part I: Experimental Investigation with a Conceptual Model." *Acta Acustica united with Acustica* 96, 2010: 505–15.
3. Kohler, E., Keysers, C., Umiltà, M.A., Fogassi, L., Gallese, V., & Rizzolatti, G. "Hearing Sounds, Understanding Actions: Action Representation in Mirror Neurons." *Science* 297(5582), 2002: 846–48.

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