

Habituation Doesn't Reward What Works – It Rewards What's Familiar

Issue No. 1 · 9 September 2026 · Dr. Cameron Roberts

HAVE YOU EVER

Every time you sit at the instrument, you put a belief into action — about how to sit, how to strike the key, how much to practice, how to phrase, and so on. Often these beliefs were never chosen. They were absorbed from a teacher, a book, a rumour, and then repeated until they became comfortable. Their feeling — of certainty, of "this is how it's done" — is not evidence. It's habituation, and what you choose to habituate will determine everything in your pianism for better or for worse. **Your goal is to habituate what works maximally in your favour.**

FACT BOX

Two types of habits affect our piano playing — habits of thought and habits of action. As biological organisms, there are many good reasons for them, as they allow us to carry out regular tasks in *mostly* effective and *mostly* efficient ways. Unless consciously checked, however, habits tend to ignore the elephant in the room... **is what I'm doing harmful, and could what I'm doing be done even better?**



Note caution when there is no step in the chain checking itself against reality. (Ch. 1, Optimizing Pianism)

"Habituation shields us from the realities that lie beyond the comforts of its walls – which is fine... until reality blasts its way inconveniently into your piano world, reminding you of your technical limitations, messy articulation, performance anxiety or pain."

— adapted, Ch. 2, *Optimizing Pianism*

THE MYTH

If a technique feels natural, it must be correct.

THE BUST

Cognitive psychology calls this the fluency heuristic: ease of processing is mistaken for truth. A movement or practice habit that feels natural may simply be the one you've done most — not the one that works best.

SO —

What you habituate — and what you CHOOSE to habituate — matters. It's the game-changing secret that lets you fast track failure or success. Simply, what you automate, you become, be it in thought or action. The next time a technique or a practice session feels too routine, treat the feeling with a question. **DON'T**

mistake comfort for correctness. Don't mistake ease for excellence — neither tell you anything about what is in your long-term interest. **DO** ask what evidence — physiological, acoustic, or music-based — actually supports it, separate entirely from how long you've been doing it or how confident it makes you feel while you're doing it.

Without warning, this is a trap we can all fall into — consider Jane, with a 'great' technique habituated at fourteen, never questioned, but quietly limiting her by the time she was twenty. The habit wasn't malicious. It was just never checked. That's the whole game: not whether you have habits, but whether you consciously test them against anything other than themselves... or something better!

One step forward... one step ~~backward~~ forward...

Cameron

Concert Pianist. Pianism Scientist. PhD. Physician. Author.

Next issue: whether talent is fixed or built — the surprisingly measurable science of growth mindset.

WANT MORE

Every belief you haven't questioned is still costing you something.

The Book

Habituation, and the 3 Ms it distorts, in full.

Read it ›

5-Sessions Intensive

Five 1:1 sessions across Musical, Mechanical, Mental, Process and Beliefs — the full picture, not just one habit.

Learn more ›

Consultation

A diagnostic 1:1 session — belief vs reality, sorted.

Book here ›

REF: Rankin, C.H. et al. "Habituation Revisited." *Neurobiology of Learning and Memory* 92.2 (2009): 135–38. · Reber, R., Winkielman, P., & Schwarz, N. "Effects of Perceptual Fluency on Affective Judgments." *Psychological Science* 9.1 (1998): 45–48. · Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. *Philosophy in the Flesh* (1999).

ONE FOR THE ROAD

"The chains of habit are too weak to be felt until they are too strong to be broken."

— Samuel Johnson

Dr Cameron Roberts

www.optimizingpianism.com

www.cameronroberts.com.au

[f](#)

[IG](#)

[in](#)

info@optimizingpianism.com

[Unsubscribe](#)