THE OPTIMIZING PIANISM NEWSLETTER ©

TOPIC: PSYCHOLOGY

"I could have, if I'd wanted to."

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"Nothing is more intolerable than to have to admit to yourself your own errors."[1]

— Ludwig van Beethoven

After the performance, it is often heard: "I could have played it better if I'd wanted to." It sounds like confidence. It's not. It's a symptom. It's the declaration of an amateur. If you *could* have played better, why didn't you? Was the piano poor? the acoustic difficult? or was it a little nervous slip that put you off? Excuses, excuses!

The infinite list of problems that appear on stage (but never at home!) are exactly the problems that make professionals practice as much as they do. The pro accepts them, takes ownership of them, and solves them in the practice room. The amateur thinks they're bad luck, outsources their cause, and complains when they keep recurring.

Psychologically, when what you *want* to be true (I am a great pianist) collides with what *is* true (you keep messing up on stage), *cognitive dissonance* comes into play[2] - **the mind tries to resolve the discomfort the cheapest way it can**: not by fixing the problem, but by changing the story... or blaming somebody... or some thing. Our excuses are endless: "The piano seat was the wrong height." "I'm just having a bad day" or, the insidious practice-room delusion, of thinking that you're practising as best you can when you're not. Each shortcuts the problem.[1]

MAKE YOUR PIANISM BETTER

DON'T lie to yourself. If things are going wrong, that's useful feedback from reality. Don't let today's problems keep on sliding into tomorrow. Your chance to fix them starts today.

DO acknowledge your excuses. Increase your awareness of them. Then just write them down and put them on your to-do list to fix. Find at least 3 each time you practice this week. They'll be there. Call it awareness training if it helps.

The pianists who keep improving don't have fewer problems; they admit them sooner and get to work. Beethoven did.

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

Cameron

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Next issue: Make friends with your medium

Which excuse did you use this week?

The Book — Chapter 2, "Mind Traps and Mental Shortcuts," examines the far reach of how our biased thinking affects the quality of our practice. **Read ›**

- **3M Self-Assessment** — turn your excuses into a to-do list (free)
- **Newsletter Archive** — revisit Issue 1, on beliefs and habituation

REFERENCES

1. Roberts, C. *Optimizing Pianism – Evidence-Based Perspectives*, Ch. 2 ("Reality Evasion #2 – The I Could've if I'd Wanted Pianist").
2. Colosio, M., Shestakova, A., Nikulin, V.V., Blagovechtchenski, E., & Klucharev, V. "Neural Mechanisms of Cognitive Dissonance (Revised): An EEG Study." *Journal of Neuroscience* 37(20), 2017: 5074–83.

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