

Motivation & Performance Anxiety

Why Play Piano?

Learning to play piano is one of the most challenging tasks a person can pursue. The fact that you're reading this likely means you're motivated to play. But did you ever stop to think why? What is it about music that makes you want to make it yourself?

Musical sounds are vibrations that travel through the air around us. These vibrations impact our bodies and can affect heartbeat, blood pressure, breathing, and emotions. If you've ever cried during a song, or gotten chills, or tapped your foot, or felt uplifted from listening to music, then you've experienced the effects of musical vibrations.



Music is everywhere: on the radio, on television, on smartphones, and in the movies. Most people are content to be music listeners. But there are some, like you, who want more. You want to create your own musical vibrations. You want to be MUSIC MAKERS!

Maybe you once thrilled to hear someone make music and wanted to be able to do the same. You thought about how wonderful it would be when your friends and family heard you play. Yet when you sat down to practice, you got discouraged because you didn't seem to be making progress quickly enough, or it seemed too hard.

Playing a musical instrument, particularly the piano, is an incredibly complex task. It involves “ballistic” movement—rapid action that once started cannot be modified. To play a song accurately, your brain must calculate the exact sequence of muscle contractions needed *before* you even press a key!

Planning for these ballistic movements requires massive neural connections. Most sports involve ballistic movement, as does speaking. In a split second your brain must calculate what your body must do to accurately throw a ball or utter a coherent sentence. But the brain delights in making these precise calculations, and evidence and experience prove that the more you do something, the better you get.

Believe it or not, your brain *rewires* itself to accomplish these tasks. Rewiring uses up a lot of energy, because brain fibers from one neural cell must grow through surrounding brain tissue to connect to other cells. This can be very tiring. Since playing piano is not necessary for survival, why make the effort?



Well, why do hobbyists build things when they could easily buy the finished products? Why do home gardeners grow vegetables when there's a ready supply at the grocery store? Because they love to create!

As do musicians. But instead of making or growing a “physical” structure, such as an airplane model or a tomato plant, musicians create a “musical” structure—a song. Each time they play they add a little bit to that musical structure. It's difficult at first, but in time, once the new neural connections are made, play becomes effortless.

The song is your destination in music; learning to play is the journey. If you understand and embrace this challenging process, the journey can be as rewarding as the destination.

Whom should you play for?



Many of us were drawn to the piano when we heard someone else play. We were impressed and secretly wished we could play, too. But if your only goal is to impress others, you may be in for some disappointment.

Your family and/or housemates may be supportive at first but will likely grow tired of hearing you practice a piece over and over and over again. And even after you've perfected a body of songs, an audience will listen quietly for only so long before they start conversing among themselves. Unless they've paid for a concert or are encouraged to sing along, people are rarely content to listen passively for very long.

So whom should you play for? The answer, and you probably already knew it, is to play for **YOURSELF** first, for the pleasure it gives you. If your listeners appreciate it too, and some certainly will, accept it as a welcome bonus.

PERFORMANCE ANXIETY!

Should you choose to play for others, you may experience performance anxiety, the feeling of discomfort or paralysis that occurs when performing or anticipating performing in front of others. It's also known as "stage fright" and can be either a minor inconvenience or a debilitating problem.

Even Professionals Get it!

Stage fright and a lack of artistic control make musicians a high-stress group, according to a study by David Sternback of the D.C. Institute for Mental Health. Nearly 30 percent of musicians in major symphony and opera orchestras use "beta-blockers" (drugs to treat high blood pressure) when performing.

Source: Musical Merchandise Review, February 1993



Fear of Failure

For most of us, performance anxiety is based on fear of failure and humiliation. We think that if we make a mistake, we will be thought less of, laughed at, or criticized. Some of us may have been traumatized by a less than sterling performance at a childhood piano recital. Or we may have been teased by unthinking friends or relatives when we made a mistake.

But I can play it perfectly when I'm alone!

Why is it that you can play a song perfectly when you're alone, but start to make mistakes as soon as someone walks into the room? First of all, when alone we tend not to dwell on the mistakes we might be making. We just continue on or replay the correct notes without much thought. So it's possible we are **NOT** playing as perfectly as we think! Secondly, when people are listening, the anxiety of performing causes us to hit the wrong keys or lose our place, and we are very aware of our mistakes.



Shifted Focus

When we have listeners, our focus tends to shift from playing and enjoying the music to worrying about making mistakes. And of course, when we worry about making mistakes, we're more likely to make them!

Recital Reaction

When he was 11 years old, M had taken piano lessons for a few months and was doing well so his teacher signed him up for his first recital. She selected an appropriate piece, and he worked on it until it was perfect.

On the day of the recital, about 20 students and their parents were in attendance. M felt pretty sure of himself and viewed the younger students' nervousness with a slight feeling of superiority. That is, until he heard his own name called and felt the blood drain from his face!



Approaching the piano bench, all eyes were on him, and it seemed eerily silent, as if he were in a dream. Setting his music on the piano, he took a deep breath, began to play and...*completely mangled the first line of music!* Stopping abruptly, he turned sheepishly to his teacher and asked, “May I start over?” She nodded, and he played the song through without a mistake. But he never quite got over the trauma.

M’s recital experience left such a sour taste in his mouth, he shortly thereafter decided that he’d rather be out playing baseball with friends than practicing piano—and quit taking lessons.

Critics Carnage

P’s wife was a talented note reader who had taken years of lessons when she young. P didn’t have time or desire for lessons, but when he discovered Allcanplay he decided to give it a try. He especially liked one particular song and practiced it diligently until he could play it well.



One day P’s uncle was visiting, and they got to talking about the piano and Allcanplay, so his uncle asked him to play. P proudly sat down and was playing well when his finger slipped. “Ha!” said the normally kind and well-meaning uncle, “You made a mistake!”

Embarrassed by the experience, P gave up playing the piano. After all, if he was going to be criticized, why bother putting in all the effort?

Overcoming Performance Anxiety

Ultimately, the only sure way to avoid performance anxiety is to *never* play in front of anyone. It's certainly your choice not to. If asked, just smile and say something like, “Thanks for asking, I love playing, but performing makes me uncomfortable.”

On the other hand, the desire to bring musical joy to others is a worthy goal that can motivate you to practice and excel. In this case, your best insurance against performance anxiety is to practice *a lot*, so you'll be confident and make fewer mistakes.

Practice with other people in the vicinity whenever possible so you can get used to noises and distractions and learn to ignore them.

A great option is to join or form a group of like-minded, supportive piano players, then hold informal recitals for each other.



Practice makes Perfect



A student once came to a great piano teacher named Leschetizsky and said, “Maestro, I practice all the time, but I can't seem to play perfectly!” Leschetizsky took a small box with ten buttons in it and gave it to the student saying, “Each time you play one page perfectly, place one button on the piano. If you make one mistake, put all the buttons back into the box and start over. This will teach you to play carefully.”

Avoid Excuses

If you are willing to perform for others, when asked to play something, avoid negative phrases like, “Well okay, but I'm out of practice and might make some mistakes.” Unfortunately, excuses like this can be self-fulfilling prophecies, since they focus on making mistakes rather than playing.

Don't call attention to mistakes

When you hit a wrong key, don't say things that call attention to the mistake like oops, sorry, darn, wait, or ouch! If you make a mistake, say nothing, just smile and keep playing. The bigger the mistake, the bigger the smile! If your listeners even noticed the mistake, they'll admire your pluck. In any case, if you keep playing as if nothing happened, they may soon forget about the mistake.

Passing Perceptions

A well-regarded piano teacher told his students that if they make a mistake during a piano competition, and the music repeated itself, to make the *same* mistake the second time through. On the first go round the judges may rush to downgrade the performance. But on the second they may think, “Ah, what an interesting interpretation!”

The catch: Students had to remember *where* they made the mistake!



Nobody's Perfect

Like any human, every professional make mistakes. What pro athlete has never errored, fouled, or fumbled? Concert pianists usually practice six to eight hours a day—after all, that's their job—and yet they are not immune to mistakes. During a concert performance or competition, it is considered acceptable to make three mistakes per hour of play, an incredibly high standard, but still not perfect. If the pros are allowed to make mistakes, the rest of us should relax a bit. Do the best you can, have a good time, and if you err, vow to improve the next time!

An Enlightened Mentor

Pablo Casals, the world-famous cellist, was once listening to a colleague play and congratulated him on the beauty of his performance. “But,” the musician protested, “How can you say that? I played so many wrong notes.” Replied Casals, “But you played the others so exquisitely!”



***Perfection is not the goal in music or in life,
but the constant striving for perfection is.***