

The Ten Commandments For Learning New Repertoire

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"The Ten Commandments for Learning New Repertoire," JUNIOR KEYNOTES. Winter 1989

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Article:

When a pianist begins to study a new piece, there are several rules and guidelines that can help make the process more successful and fun. These "Ten Commandments" are equally useful and valid for students at any age and level.

- 1. Good Editions:** Start by selecting good editions. So many older editions of music, especially where Bach and Mozart are involved, have mistakes in them. Editors in the nineteenth century did not have advantage of the musicological scholarship that has appeared in the last twenty years. Consequently, they made many serious errors when preparing music for publication. These editions contain incorrect information regarding phrasing, ornaments, dynamics, tempo indications, and even notes. Such inaccuracies seriously mislead and confuse students and can lead to a lower finish in competitions. Among the recommended, reliable editions are those by Henle and the excellent Alfred "Masterworks" series.
- 2. "FERN":** This acronym stands for "fingering," "expression," "rhythm," and "notes," the four essentials when learning any new piece. Too often, students will deal with only one or two of these elements during the first weeks of the learning process, and that can lead to real problems later on. For instance, if notes and expression are stressed but fingering and rhythm are ignored, the student's musical memory will have been programmed with faulty information. Correcting these mistakes, as all teachers and students know from hard experience, is ten times more difficult than learning them properly in the early stages. Students must be convinced that fingering, expression, and rhythm are just as important as the right notes and cannot be ignored until some future date.
- 3. Speed Kills:** The best, most efficient way to learn anything is to practice it so slowly that every detail is perfect with every repetition. Unfortunately, no one seems to have the patience to work at a slow speed. To combat the natural tendency to go fast in practice, teachers should demonstrate the piece at an extremely slow tempo and should set leisurely metronome goals for the first few weeks. Students should use their musical imagination to find the beauty and drama of "slow." Such emotions as elegant, regal, and stately can be projected to make learning a new piece at a slow tempo more enjoyable.
- 4. Exaggeration:** A basic principle of learning theory suggests that exaggeration promotes quick and secure mastery. For pianists, exaggeration should be in the form of "slow and loud." Even those passages which will be played **piano** eventually should be practiced **forte**. For those who doubt the benefit of dynamic exaggeration, they need only reflect on the relative degree of learning that takes place when one just barely brushes his shin against a chair leg versus hitting the chair so hard that the shin bruises. In the first instance, the lucky person probably will not remember the chair; after the second instance, he will give it a wide berth. Exaggeration does make a difference in the learning process!
- 5. Choreography:** As in dance, each motion at the keyboard should have intelligent purpose and advance planning. Most slurs, for example, should begin with a down wrist motion and conclude with a wrist lift, Staccatos can be performed with either wrist or fingers. Intelligent choices have to be made in the early stages of working on a new piece, and decisions should be notated in the score with arrows and any other meaningful

signs. Teachers should help students develop a system of choreographic notation for the piano and encourage them to use it.

6. If It Works, Fix It: The old maxim, "if it works, don't fix it," is dangerous when applied to piano study. Pianists of all ages are fooled into a false sense of complacency again and again. The new piece is finally perfect at home, so the student ceases to worry about it. Unfortunately, at the lesson, the difficult passages somehow just will not work. How many times has every student lamented, "If you could only have heard me play this piece yesterday at home!" Of course, the problem is that even small anxiety causes a rush of adrenalin, tightening of the muscles, and a lack of concentration. The lesson that ought to be learned—but almost never is—is that students must continue to practice just as hard on a piece even after they think they have mastered it. The principle involved is called "over-kill" and means that, in music, work on something is never completed.

7. Fix It Now!: Too often, students will work on a piece and continue to make the same mistake over and over. Their plan is to fix the problem later. What they do not realize is that the brain remembers every single thing that the body experiences. Even one incorrect play-through of a passage will be remembered forever. If any of the four basic elements of practice—fingering, expression, rhythm, or notes—is flawed, no matter how small or inconsequential the error seems to be, it should be corrected immediately.

8. Memorize Early: Memory work should be started at the earliest stages of working on a new piece. Memorization forces students to study the score carefully and to deal with each detail of the composer's intentions. Difficult passages are made easier once they are memorized. Also, the memory process will not be so dreaded if it has been going on concurrently with work on the piece, and the memory will be more secure.

9. One Month Rule: Many pianists have discovered the wisdom and benefits of the "one month rule," or the self-imposed goal of getting a piece in performance shape — memorized, up to tempo, and under full control—a month before the performance. Waiting until the last minute to polish a piece only increases anxiety. Having repertoire ready a month in advance allows numerous try-outs before family and friends. Also, "rest periods" or a two or three day vacation piece (frequently a very useful tactic for enhancing the freshness of the student's musical vision) are possible when the "one month rule" has been observed.

10. Satisfaction with Best Effort: While students should always be encouraged to excel, they should also learn to be satisfied with their best effort, which means that excellence is measured against their own past accomplishments and not against others. Festivals are more closely allied with this concept than are competitions. Teachers can help by assigning repertoire that is challenging but manageable. The "best effort" essentially promotes enjoyment of piano study and teaches important lessons about the avoidance of overzealous self-judgment that can lower the personal sense of worth and esteem.

The "Ten Commandments for Learning New Repertoire" are not written in stone, but they should be firmly rooted in the memory of all piano teachers and students. They will save time, streamline the learning process, and lead to greater joy and fulfillment. These Commandments should be part of every pianist's testament of piano playing.