

"Must I Memorize?"

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By Arthur Houle

On July 7, 1999 an article entitled "The Pianist in a High-Wire Act" by Anthony Tommasini appeared in the New York Times. It argued eloquently for equal acceptance of performing with or without music. Nothing new here; this debate has been raging ever since Clara Schumann and Franz Liszt became the first prominent pianists to play concerts by memory. But perhaps due to the unique status of both Dr. Tommasini and the New York Times, this article touched off a firestorm of internet discussion. So why write more on an issue that has already been hashed to death? Marianne Uszler cautioned that trying to change minds on this issue may be "like trying to change the arrangement of letters on the typewriter keyboard." Nevertheless, I hope these internet discussion excerpts can help forge constructive flexibility in both the teaching and concert arenas:

Professor Stewart Gordon, piano faculty, University of Southern California:

Whether or not a piece is played in concert by heart, it should be *able* to be played that way [i.e., by heart]. A lot of my students--not knowing the difference between playing the notes and excellence--will challenge any attempt to impede their degree progress on the basis of artistic values. As soon as they can play through the piece with their music they are ready to do their stunt on stage and proceed to the next assignment. Memorization can keep students working longer at assimilating details and thinking about musical concepts.

Arthur Houle:

No real professional would come to the stage ill-prepared. But, as you say, immature students spend less time on a work in the absence of a memory requirement. Teachers must convey that "artistic ripening" must take place with or without memory.

I also have students who memorize TOO EASILY and therefore convince themselves that the piece is fully matured and ready to perform. (I teasingly tell one such student that he's got a "pornographic memory"). It's like pulling teeth to get these students to look -- and I mean REALLY LOOK -- at the score once they've "memorized" it. It's "locked in" the way it was originally learned, notwithstanding countless missed details. Chopin was familiar with this problem. A student once arrived to play a nocturne for Chopin without music. He was furious because she was not ready to memorize the work. It's the worst of both worlds when students "glaze" at a score without fully memorizing it either. These students need better musicianship skills. Their ability to crank out recital and competition pieces should not be exploited by teachers wishing to further their

careers. Dishearteningly, "prestige" correlates almost exclusively with how many super-talents you recruit to perform classical repertoire--by memory, of course--at competitions, festivals and auditions. I don't mean to demean this important and valuable tradition -- I'm THRILLED to get students like that and VERY supportive if that's the path they choose. But wouldn't it be nice if we invested equal stature and importance in competitions, festivals and music programs that encourage musicianship skills, improvisation, and performing at a high artistic level with music?

A performance festival director once related an interesting insight to me about a noted pianist who plays all the Beethoven sonatas by memory. "Watch out," she noted, "if this pianist has a memory lapse. Though rare, it's a complete disaster. He cannot find his way back because the process is so intuitive for him." That's the paradoxical thing about memory: if it comes too easily, it's a mixed blessing and risky. But if memorizing is a great challenge, and IF you can surmount this difficulty with persistence and intelligence, it may in the end be more secure.

Professor Rayna Barroll-Aschaffenburg, piano faculty, Arizona State University:

I agree with Stewart Gordon that a work should be memorized, whether performed with the music or not. For most people, there is a depth of understanding that comes with the intense involvement of memorization that is not, or may not be, achieved without that extra step. There is one caveat. Some people, having memorized a work, decide at the last minute to perform with the music. This is dangerous. If we decide to perform with music, our final practicing must be with music. We've all had experiences of memorizing a difficult passage and not knowing where to look! We must be sure to perform with the same edition we've practiced with, and to memorize locations on the page.

Virginia Willard, piano teacher, Idaho Falls, Idaho:

I personally detest playing from memory. It is a hellish experience anticipating a scoreless performance, the panic, waking up in a cold sweat, dread taking over of my entire life. Performing should be a pleasant experience of looking forward to sharing my musical sounds and ideas with people who would enjoy listening to them. Nevertheless, I am grateful that my teachers required memorization. Terrifying as the experience can be, students must do some memorization to find out for themselves if they are more comfortable with or without the score. I may start having some recitals in which I REQUIRE the students to play from the score. I would still have the memorized recitals as preparation for events such as Sonata/Sonatina Festival, when memorization is required, but this mix would give students a chance to discover which mode best suited them.

Arthur Houle:

So let's lobby various teacher organizations to allow music for some festivals and competitions! We need not "throw the baby out with the bath water." Just have at least a FEW venues now and then for those who do better with music to shine. Otherwise, what have we accomplished? We know countless stories of students who drop music because they are intimidated by our overemphasis on solo recitals and memorization. And how many teachers stop performing because they are terrorized by the feeling that they MUST memorize?

Gay Pool, piano teacher, Boise, Idaho:

As an accompanist and non-memorizer, I went to every jury in absolute terror and promptly forgot the pieces after I survived the torture. My teacher once asked me to play the piece well from memory. I told him, "Do you want the correct notes, or do you want me to play it from memory? You can have one or the other but not both." Please intercede with the option for your students to play from the score. For some it is much easier to memorize and they feel unencumbered for the performance. I, however, have never once felt encumbered using the score. Let's get a dialog going and change this in schools and studios. It is long overdue.

Arthur Houle:

My students memorize one selection at midterm (for the sake of learning the PROCESS, and to prevent cramming most of the practice late in the semester). However, the three contrasting pieces required at the end of the semester need not be memorized (but the quality must be there nonetheless!). Those who feel better playing by memory are encouraged to do so. When I arrived at Albertson College, piano majors had to play one senior recital, ALL memorized. I changed that to two recitals -- a short junior recital (only 1/3 memorized) and full senior recital (about 1/2 memorized). Our Annual Albertson College Piano Festival has no requirement to memorize; I instruct the judges that memory is not by itself a factor.

Professor Rose Taylor, voice faculty, University of Texas-Austin:

I have been at concerts where there was a memory lapse in a concerto and the whole orchestra had to go back with the pianist and start over; then the same place fell apart again. Painful!!! and unnecessary, in my opinion. Singers have the same thing in recital. We "lose" a little "face" if we use music for anything but the most difficult contemporary music. Silly. I break the rule, but I always feel a little "guilty" about it.

Betty Benthin, retired piano and string teacher and former violist in the Boston Symphony Orchestra:

When I was at Yale I attended Ralph Kirkpatrick's master classes. Kirkpatrick played from the score. He felt he had reached an age when contrapuntal music demanded too much from that part of his brain, lessening the other musical powers in the process. The

blood-sport of performance, though, has demanded that we put ourselves on the sacrificial altar to see if we can avoid having any error detected in reciting the traditional ritual. Some in the audience are disappointed if there is not an obvious breakdown that sends them home with the triumph of having seen a champion brought down. I hate being a part of this uncivilized process. And that goes for most competitions and music "juries". When I realized that a student's musical attainment was to be assessed by such unworthy benchmarks, AND THAT NO ONE EVEN QUESTIONED THE PROCESS, I lost interest in teaching. If you have the ability to judge musicianship and instrumental competence, you can do it whether or not the performer uses a score. (My only problem is with page-turning, which I hope will eventually be solved with a large monitor, one that the audience can follow as well.) I am convinced that we have missed out on some superior musical contributions because of the graduation demands for memorization (interestingly enough, not for orchestral winds and brass who, if they make a living in music, will never be asked to perform from memory even though single-line memorization is a snap). It seems so vain and anti-music to judge music on anything but how it sounds.

Sylvia Hunt, Director of Caldwell Fine Arts and former student of Betty Benthin:

Although I could memorize early in my life, without fear, I have gotten older and do not wish to experience the terror of "messing up." I came to your conclusions for myself in regard to certain students who were very good in every respect except the memorization. I did not want to lose the child over such an insignificant part of the music study, so I have encouraged sight reading and the useful playing performances of music. I still have students who can do festivals and other primitive rituals, but I do not force others to endure months of tribulation on the same two pieces.

Stewart Gordon:

One other thought: there are some pieces wherein the physical aspect of playing keeps the player so busy that memorization may be desirable in order to facilitate performance. For example, if one used music to perform *Feux Follets* of Liszt or *Pour les accords* by Debussy, the eye-to-page focus would need to be peripheral since navigating the keyboard demands a considerable amount of the performer's attention, either by actually looking or by conceptualizing spatial relationships. Experienced keyboard players can cite many examples of such bifurcation. Some contemporary works require total physical involvement: the *Makrokosmos* of George Crumb, for example, where the player must focus on the inside of the piano, plucking, strumming strings, as well as dealing with some foreign objects and vocalizing at many points. When dealing with either 19th or 20th century works of this type, many performers feel it is easier to memorize the music in order get referring to the score OUT of the performance process.

Arthur Houle:

You make a crucial point about eye-hand coordination. Prokofiev's 7th Sonata is another example of a piece perhaps better played by heart, since one almost has to look at one's hands. I've played the whole piece both ways, but I admit that when I used music I could not keep my eyes on the score for the virtuosic last two pages.

Memory, however, tends to "freeze" an interpretation one way. Certainly, conviction and security are desirable. But many works beg for great spontaneity. I have virtually every known authentic Chopin variant (from original editions, eyewitness accounts, penciled variants by Chopin, etc.) marked into my scores. Chopin played every repetition differently, especially in nocturnes, mazurkas and waltzes. It's great fun and liberating. This approach has often led to new discoveries even as I'm performing. I know it terrifies many people to change anything at the last minute--I perfectly understand. But for me it's a real rush. Probably my experience with jazz has something to do with it. However, I would never impose what works best for me on everyone else. In return, what Tommasini suggests is simply that the street should run both ways. The road to artistic quality is unique for everyone. Memory should not be a "one size fits all" tyrant (e.g., piano departments that mandate memory rather than allow for teacher/student discretion). SOME students SHOULD be encouraged (or even at times required) to memorize, but only if it is truly in the best interests of that particular student.

Concert performances should be evaluated wholly on their artistic merit. A critic once raved about a performance of mine, but in the same review expressed dismay at my using music. Presumably he would have preferred a shallow memorized performance?

When told of the strong reactions his article elicited, Anthony Tommasini responded: "It shouldn't be so controversial. I wasn't even recommending playing from music, just saying that the protocol that dictates playing from memory is ridiculously rigid and that pianists should do, piece by piece, whatever is best."

Amen.

Arthur Houle is Associate Professor of Piano at the Albertson College of Idaho. His "Chopin Nocturnes" CD features live performances with authentic Chopin variants along with discreet original variants as Chopin might have done.