

Dear Student or Prospective Student,

If you have studied with me or are considering it, you may have heard me touch on some of these topics. While I don't agree completely with everything said here, if you have ever thought any of these statements, you owe it to yourself or your student to think about the responses.

Pierre Miller

“Since I didn't begin studying piano as a child I'll never be able to play well as an adult.”

Reality: It's never too late. Early neural stimulation as a child DOES help with musical intelligence as an adult, but it need not be from the piano. For example, kids who are great at sports or gymnastics or dance are often the best at piano, when they eventually try it. That's not a surprise to most people. But what is a surprise is that adults show the same parallel! An adult who had been athletic as a child will find it easier to learn piano as an adult, because the advanced neurological stimulation lasts one's whole life. It is simply a new application. If you're had a nurturing, stimulating environment as a child, you will definitely have an advantage when you begin piano studies as an adult. If you had limited exposure to physical experiences as a child, this would tend to make it more difficult to learn the piano whether you are a child or an adult.

“Children learn faster than adults.”

Reality: There is no difference. From my own personal experience of teaching both children and adults since 1975, this idea that a child's brain is more receptive is incorrect. What may be true is that the child is less encumbered by the busy-ness of life and tends to have less mental clutter. This state results in a naturally-better focusing ability which creates the illusion that the child may be able to absorb new material faster than the adult. However, what the child often doesn't have is desire. The adult really wants to study piano. And this great desire creates the same type of focus that is needed for quick learning. In fact, adults who have this intention, often from wanting to make up “for lost time,” often learn faster than children! The adult who is just a dabbler who doesn't have the great desire is a typical hectic, frazzled adult. This type of adult is the adult who will tend to learn slower — not because they don't practice enough, but because their energy is so distracted. Another cause of distraction is self-judgement and stress and impatience that is associated with learning. Adults have had their lifetimes to become familiar with music so they know how it is “supposed” to sound, whereas children usually have never heard the piece they are learning. As a result, adults do tend to become easily frustrated by comparing their current ability to play a piece with the way they know it should sound — and THIS comparison can cause enough stress and anxiety that the adult student will often lose interest or stop playing altogether. So adult students need to take caution about this unnecessary temptation to think they “should” sound like a professional pianist after only playing for three weeks. The adult student must learn to embrace his or her current ability with grace and appreciation. From this point improvement will occur.

“If I take a break from piano practice, I’ll have to work harder to make up for lost time.”

Reality: Piano growth cannot be “crammed” like studying for a test. Piano growth occurs primarily from the cumulative time spent practicing, even if this is sporadic. So if you work for six months and then take off three months and then practice for four months and then take off two months, it is tempting to add up all those months, including the time off, and feel that you should have improved a total of 15 months’ worth of progress. But you really only have ten months of actual growth. Then the average person is tempted to feel inadequate and that they have to work extra hard to make up for the “lost” time. Instead, it’s better to think of this in the way a plant grows. You can give it sunlight, water and fertilizer, but you cannot be yelling at it “grow!” It will grow on its own time line. You cannot rush it. Your piano growth pretty much stops when you’re not practicing for two months or for two years, or for two decades. When you take it up again, you may have a short period of review but you will pretty much be back to where you had left off and then you will progress from that point. If you can remove the pressure of having some kind of deadline to “make up for the lost time,” your attitude towards the piano will be so much better and you will have so much more enjoyment!

“My teacher will drop me if I make a lot of mistakes.”

Reality: Most teachers enjoy teaching and are inspired when they see someone who really tries and is diligent with their practice. In fact, good teachers PREFER to witness your mistakes so they can help you not only fix the problem, but learn how to avoid the problem in the future. This could be in the realms of practicing suggestions, fingering, hand position, eye movements and more. If you have latent mistakes that you somehow are able to hide for the lesson, the teacher may not be able to help you fix these hidden problems, which means that they may appear later when you are performing. Also, fear of making mistakes tends to distract you from the music and will actually CAUSE the very mistakes you were trying to avoid! So, never be afraid to make mistakes for your teacher.

“I should study finger technique before playing actual music.”

Reality: Is physical technique and accuracy more important than interpretation and expression? No. Does physical technique and accuracy take more time to master than interpretation and expression? No. It’s like comparing apples and oranges, but both require a lot of time. The best way to develop interpretation and expression is through the repertoire. In some countries, it is common to have a student just do drills for 5 years before they are allowed to play any music. Then the student is allowed to play repertoire. It’s no surprise that these performers play accurately and fast, with very little expression. The best thing to do is to study music along with finger technique. Ideally, the difficulty of the technique level should always be slightly ahead of the requirements of the repertoire.

“I must practice every day.”

Reality: Taking one or two guilt-free days off from practicing each week will help you progress faster than if you practiced everyday! Think body building. People who work out or who lift weights are always told to rest the day after a workout. Why? Because the workout tears down the muscle tissue and the day off is when it is rejuvenated and built up stronger than before. Our brains are similar to this. The rest periods are when your brain assimilates your effort. Also, the reason it must be guilt-free is so that you get the complete benefit of the day of rest. If you intend to practice seven days a week and you miss a day, you will be inclined to be stressed about it during the inadvertent day off. So instead of relaxing from the piano on that day, you are more stressed. In fact, with this more typical approach, you may be inclined to practice more the next day with the hopes of “making up” for the missed day. This approach never works. You can’t cram learning.

ADDENDUM:

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All you will get is more and more errors and more and more frustrated because your poor brain is never given a rest it desperately needs. Practice the RIGHT number of days for you, and do it consistently. This path leads to happiness and away from frustration.

“Long sessions of practice time are best.”

Reality: Shorter times are optimal. After about 15 minutes of an activity, the average person becomes mentally fatigued. Short bursts of concentration repeated frequently are much more effective than one long session. So, even if you only have 10 minutes, DO IT. Do another 10 minutes later in the day or the next day. By the end of the week, you might have 16 micro practice sessions, yet only practiced on 4 days. This is highly efficient. Instead, if you have the goal of practicing an hour or practicing a half hour, another day goes by with ZERO practice. Why is this? Because our life gets so busy and that half hour or hour just doesn't materialize. The result is that you miss practicing ALTOGETHER. If you could sneak in five minutes here or 10 minutes there, you would miraculously accrue that half hour or hour that you had intended to practice! In fact, even if you had the luxury of sitting for six hours at the piano and didn't have other typical competing issues that life brings, it would STILL be preferable to break up your practice into smaller segments. Also, do not practice if you are tired, angry, distracted, or in a hurry or you will “learn-in” these feelings. On a professional level, if you find yourself seated at the piano for an extended period of time, you can still observe these principles by rotating the activity while still remaining at the piano. For example, you can spend 20 minutes learning a new passage of one piece. Then switch to practicing some finger technique. This way, your mind is resting while your fingers are getting a workout. Then GO BACK to the same passage and you will be mentally refreshed. Then work on a section of a different piece. Then do a little sight-reading. Then back to the first piece. And so on. Keep it in rotation.

“Once I can play hands together, I don’t need to continue practicing hands separately.”

Reality: The very steps that bring you to a certain level of mastery are the ones that will help to maintain that level of mastery. Most people assume that practicing hands separately is a temporary step towards the goal of playing hands together. But let’s examine what professionals do. They will continue to practice hands separately on a piece they’ve played for 25 years! This is because only when you practice hands separately can you really focus on certain nuances that would be obscured if you were spreading your focus between two hands. The better hands are mastered separately, the more reliable and proficient it will be when you then bring hands back together. So, please think of practicing hands separately not only as an initial phase of learning a passage, but also as a way to MAINTAIN and also to further improve and polish a section of a piece you’re working on.

“I must not work on any new pieces until I master the one I’ve already started.”

Reality: Professional pianists have 10 or 20 pieces that they are working on concurrently! There are sections within each piece that are at varying levels of mastery. This is really a good way to go about practicing, because if we become fatigued or bored, we become much less efficient with our learning. By giving yourself permission to switch your attention to different compositions or to different sections within one piece, you are actually BECOMING efficient. This happens for two reasons: 1) You are honoring your fatigue level on any one piece. 2) When you step away from working on something, you allow your subconscious to do ITS job and continue processing it without giving it your attention. This dramatically increases the results, better than if you had been exclusively working on the one piece.

“I should learn a new piece in order, from the beginning to the end.”

Reality: The most efficient way to study a composition is to learn the most difficult sections FIRST! Here’s why: The typical way that people learn is to learn the first part first. Then, each day they push forward and learn a few new measures. The problem is that it’s very tempting to stop pushing forward and to prematurely reward yourself by playing through the part you’ve already learned. This, of course, is the beginning section. As you approach the part that you don’t yet know, you hear the music getting slower and sloppier until it just stops. Then, this is so frustrating, you are tempted to repeat the part that you know again rather than work on the new section. So in essence, when you do this, you end up “practicing” the part you already know and avoiding the parts that you don’t yet know. This is so common, yet so ineffective! The worst part of it is that the part you already know is often the easiest portion of the music, as composers rarely start out with the most difficult passages. So think about it: You end up practicing and practicing and practicing the first section of the piece every time you “run through the part you already know.” Yet this is the EASIEST section and requires collectively the LEAST time. Whereas the hardest parts that require the MOST time collective are the parts you tend to avoid each day. It would be so much more efficient if you could get out of the assumption that you should learn the first part first. Instead, scan through the new composition and determine which sections appear to be the most difficult. Start on THESE sections, even if they are not connected.

Eventually, each section will grow and they will overlap into each other. NOW, when you want to play through the sections you “already know,” it will be the HARDEST sections that you play through rather than the easiest. This means even if you avoid learning the new sections and you fall back on playing the parts you already have learned, you will still be doing some good, because these sections are the ones that will benefit by the continued review since they are so difficult. In the end, you will have over-practiced the hard sections and under-practiced the easy sections. The result will be that all the sections will be equally-mastered and this is what will help you reach your goal sooner than later!

ADDENDUM:

I'd also like to add that beginning the practice of a piece from the most difficult sections or another popular approach, from the end, and working backwards, work best when you have an idea of how the piece works. Find a recording of the piece and follow along with the score, or have your teacher work with you on how to approach it. Working without context is a dangerous practice because you won't necessarily notice the details, the ever-changing details of the music.

This has been a selection of Myths & "Truths" from the website of David Nevue, quoted from piano instructor Howard Richman.

<http://www.davidnevue.com/pianomyths.htm>