

“*Gradus ad Parnassum*”

Steps to Success Preparing Piano Pieces at the Highest Level

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Steps 1 – 4, and beyond:

To achieve Step 1, the following process must take place...

Select repertoire that follows a logical progression of teaching and learning
Listen to several recordings (style, overall impressions)
Write in fingerings
Consider rough structural analysis
Sectionalize piece for practice
Understand groupings and patterns, scales and chords (harmony)
Practice hands separately
Practice slowly everyday
Practice with metronome; scrutinize rhythms carefully

Step 1 is achieved finally when a student can play through a piece at a medium tempo, with metronome (or in a steady tempo), with fluidity, and with no stumbles or fumbles.

To achieve Step 2, the following must take place...

Work with metronome to increase speed gradually
Begin memorizing in sections

Musical memory comprises 4 distinct compartments:

Aural – Visual – Tactile – Analytic

Sectionalize practice from end of piece to beginning, to develop starting points
Drill starting points
Study score away from piano
Listen again to recordings (find many artists)
Lots of slow practice with the score, everyday... with continued emphasis on harmonic analysis
Eventually, work on pieces faster than prescribed tempo when appropriate

Step 2 is achieved when a student can play a piece from memory approximately at tempo with no stumbling. Slow practice and medium tempo practice continues.

Step 3 really pervades the whole learning process, from Step 1 on, but blossoms mostly after Steps 1 and 2 are intact. It involves the gradual discovery of flexibility in the execution, and interpretation through experimentation and various research: reading, listening, live concerts, lessons and discussions with teacher and peers, etc. Flexibility becomes important during this step to finding a personal approach of interpretation. Memory, and especially muscle (tactile) memory, must be re-examined and dealt with here. Slow practice and medium tempo practice continues of course.

Step 4 is a process that takes patience, is usually pretty intense, and can last for weeks and months, and involves working out the piece through performance, private at first and then public. Recording oneself is also wonderfully beneficial. Again, work on pieces faster than prescribed tempo when appropriate, for the big picture. It is during Step 4 that ones transforms the “memorizing” of a piece into “knowing” a piece, integrating concept and interpretation.

Beyond Step 4 is what follows: a lifetime of working and reworking a piece in the conscious and subconscious mind. Piano playing is more than 80% mental, and yet still physical. Time and patience are a must.

* Have your students print/copy this and place it on the piano to look at daily.