

# Memory—As Simple As Black and White?

BY SCOTT PRICE

**M**emorizing piano music is tough business. It is difficult, complex, and time-consuming for students, amateurs, and professionals. Occasional memory lapses are part of the human condition. Others may be symptoms of a larger problem. While some pianists sail past memory lapses with little thought, others can become paralyzed. Are memory problems just a natural occurrence, or are consistent memory lapses the result of a missing piece of the learning process?

Most students and teachers spend a great deal of lesson time learning the names of notes and how to find them on the staff. After all, we must learn to decipher the sound of what we see on the printed page. It's also important for students to have some knowledge of music theory, counterpoint, form, and analysis to interpret the score in order to make good music. While absolutely crucial for informed music making, learning and identifying note names and understanding abstract musical subjects is an intellectual process that can, and probably should, be done away from the piano. The business end of the piano is black and white keys, not note names on a staff. I believe that this is an area where many students encounter their first problems with memorization.

Students normally begin to learn the names of the piano keys and to find the letter names of the lines and spaces on the staff. In observing student teachers, I often see much intellectual guidance without a direct application to the actual instrument that makes the sounds. At some point, a correlation must be made between the notes on the staff and the keys on the keyboard. Unfortunately, the correlation between the staff and the piano keyboard is often left to chance. The best method book cannot teach this correlation, and even the best teacher can overlook initiating and maintaining students' understanding of this concept. The problem lies in not understanding that there is a difference between note reading and music reading.

Although it is important, note reading (deciphering the names of the notes on the staff, hearing the sounds, and deciphering the intellectual organization of the music) is only one side of the process. A student who relies only on internal aural and intellectual processes is doomed to memory failure. Why? Because the business end of the keyboard is full of black and white keys, and that is the prime reality in memorized performance.

The score is a blueprint that every student may aurally and intellectually understand. But, for a student to actualize and memorize music at the piano, a process of *transliteration* must occur to enable the student to fully realize the printed music in keyboard-produced sound. This transliteration process,

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Photo: Bob Gassen www.humanature.com

From the studio of Dr. Mark Sullivan, Garden Grove, California

*music reading*, is very different from note reading.

To read music, the notes on the page are no longer names of pitches; they represent individual keys on the piano. The notes on the printed page must be seen as individual black or white keys, small combinations of black and white keys, and larger groupings of piano keys. Once students grasp this concept, the music is literally

before their eyes *on the keyboard* as a black-and-white snapshot of the music that has been studied away from the piano. Students can see the key combinations needed, immediately shape the hand to the key grouping, know which fingers need to play the individual keys, and gauge how the fingers must make contact with the key to produce the desired sound. Immediately, the process of memorization becomes organized and demystified.

Many great artists have related how they can hear a piece mentally and know the fingerings, dynamics, and other markings needed to create the sound at the piano. They can do this because they read music and know the correlation between the sounds they hear and the piano keys needed to realize that sound. If the mind knows the piano keys needed to play the piece, then it is just another organizational step to remember which finger is needed to play the individual key, which hand/wrist/arm gestures are needed to shape the phrase, and which markings are attached to the key or the groups of keys.

With my young students, college performance majors, and even myself, I have found the following formula to work very well as a teaching and memorizing learning tool. It has changed my learning/memorization/performance habits, and my students tell me that they feel comfortable in performance situations because they can remember and see exactly which keys they need to play to make music at the piano.

#### ◆ Choose a Small Bit

Select a small bit of the music—a phrase gesture or smaller note group. With younger students, I use groups as small as two or three notes, depending on the meter and the pattern grouping. I always sing the small bit while we clap the micro and macro beats and, after a couple of tries, the student will often join in the singing. Fostering aural comprehension is the goal. Students are involved in an environment where they hear the sounds they need and develop a sound vocabulary that will eventually be applicable to any piece.

#### ◆ Notes and Keys First

We then find a beginning note name and move directly to determining which piano keys—not which note names—make up the small bit. We figure out which fingers need to go over the keys and observe the black and white pattern. Fingering problems are solved and the hand is set to actualize the technical finger movements and hand/wrist/arm gestures necessary to make the correct sounds.

#### ◆ Are You Ready?

Students are often so motivated and excited to play the notes that they can't wait. They play before they have really double-checked their information. I always ask if they are ready, and I am surprised that so many students will ask me to wait a minute before they say, "Okay, I'm ready to play". I think that's such a wonderful thing to hear from a student. The student is

the one making the decisions in his or her own playing and learning and is fully invested in the process. The teacher and student are working together to achieve the goal.

#### ◆ Play the Small Bit

If my student and I have done a good job of following this process, then the small bit plays itself with a few errors and necessary repetitions. Most importantly, the student is repeatedly reminded of the learning and practice process and takes these concepts home.

When this process is followed, students understand the music aurally and intellectually, know which keys to play to make the musical sounds, and know the fingerings and patterns needed for the whole piece. They can remember the black- and white-key combinations that make the sounds and can actually see them on the keyboard underneath their hands. Seeing really is believing! They know that they can remember the music and make it happen without fear in the performance setting.

The learning process is the practice process, which in turn is the memorization process. Best of all, everything has been accomplished with the student and teacher working together toward a common goal, and young minds are set up for 100% success with each trial. Teacher and student both grow together and learn to respect and love each other through music making. It sounds trite, but students leave lessons with learning tools that will serve them throughout their lives—and with fully memorized music! Confidence is built into the system, and personal pride comes from a job well done.

Memory is often seen as a task that follows after the music has been fully learned. Instead, it really should be part of the

learning process. The key lies in realizing the difference between note reading and music reading and recognizing the importance of translating the notes on the page into black- and white-key patterns under the fingers. Once done, the music is memorized. It is literally under the fingers and before the eyes in black and white keys. With a little bit of rethinking in the learning/practicing/performing process, the fear can be taken out of memorizing and students can go into the performance situation ready to do their teachers, their parents, and—most importantly—themselves proud. ■■■

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