

# Essenti

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## for Promoting a Lifelong Love

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PART 3 OF 4

### *Introduction*

BY GAIL BERENSON AND SCOTT MCBRIDE SMITH

**W**hy did you choose to become a music teacher? Research has shown the benefits music study provides for all types of learning. That's one important reason to teach, for sure. But we believe most of us chose music teaching to share our love of our art with a new generation and provide them with the skills and knowledge to participate in music-making all their lives. These goals are the same whether the student pursues a career in music or plays for personal satisfaction.

Audiation, understanding musical relationships, physical awareness and health—these are the topics so expertly addressed in our first two articles by Dorothy Payne and Barbara Lister-Sink. In this, our third article, William Westney deals with the psychological elements of successful learning and performance. He gives us the tools to help our students build confidence, self-empowerment and the skills of self-expression.

A long-time advocate of liberating students to allow their musicality to emerge, Westney offers *AMT* some provocative and exciting ideas for enlivening lessons. You will find a wealth of ideas to help rejuvenate your teaching and bring the music to life—and have fun doing so!

# all Skills

## of Music and Music Making

### *Risks and Rewards*

BY WILLIAM WESTNEY

**T**he question of what we mean by musical “skill” fascinates me, so I was delighted to be asked to contribute to this worthy series. Certainly, essential skills—substantial skills for a lifetime—are what we genuinely hope to impart as teachers. Yet, it’s all too possible for a student to learn one piece after the other for years and not really develop essential skills in the process.

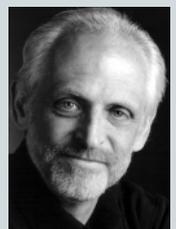
What should we be looking for? If we see a high school clarinetist marching smartly up and down the football field in perfect cadence with the others in her prize-winning band, never missing a note in the tricky arrangement, what skills has she acquired? It’s hard to tell. She may be responding wholeheartedly to music and all its vital elements. Or she may find if she goes to college and majors in music, that she can’t actually figure out rhythms on her own, or sing, improvise, play or move expressively. And some high school players, as we know, pack up the horn on graduation day never to play it again.

Often, at pedagogy conferences, we witness prodigiously talented fourteen-year-olds taking a master lesson in huge pieces like Prokofiev sonatas or Chopin scherzos. Their achievement is awesome. But sometimes, even though the teacher’s suggestions are inspiring, inviting, encouraging

and clearly intended to engage the student’s imagination, the student—after listening dutifully—proceeds to play with precisely the same inflections as before. And those inflections are beginning to seem a bit too programmed. What skills are in evidence—and not in evidence?

Or consider the college piano student, carefully groomed to taper each Mozartean phrase just so, and deliver sharp accents in Bartók. What skills does he have? Might he be primarily an accomplished mimic, faithfully cloning the teacher’s interpretation, the teacher’s musical instinct? Or is his own creative self, blossoming, maturing, finding an authentic voice?

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One way to look at this issue is to delineate two categories of skills. I've often described these as "outer" and "inner" skills, and they complement each other beautifully.<sup>1</sup> Competencies such as singing on pitch, counting rhythms accurately, understanding the basics of style and developing finger technique ("outer skills") are essential, to be sure. And satisfying to master, too! But so are the profoundly rewarding, if harder to define, "inner skills"—playing from the heart, enjoying rhythmic vitality with the whole body, expressing and creating and truly speaking the spontaneous language of music. These skills give joy to the performer *and* the audience, and evince a deep connection to music and its elements.

### **Ability to Work Creatively— Improvise, Compose, Harmonize and Play by Ear**

**Importance:** These are all ways to make music our own and share the impulse with others—not on stage, but in more "everyday" settings. Obviously, the four creative skills mentioned here all deserve a much more thorough discussion than we can attempt in this article, but we can touch briefly on each.

Solo improvisation can be as immediate and truthful as musical expression ever gets—"What feelings are occurring within me right this moment? And how are they evolving in the next few moments?" There's no need for judgment, and no comparison with anyone else. Sometimes improvisation focuses less on feelings and more on the lively imagination itself, given free rein to roam, make up stories, try new things. In any case, improvisation is fun, flowing, healthy, even cathartic. An interesting benefit is that improvisers who really are "getting into it" tend to produce tones of remarkable color and variety—a "connected" sort of tone. As Stephen Nachmanovitch sums up the dynamic quality of improvisation in his

compelling book *Free Play*, "The noun of self becomes a verb."<sup>2</sup>

Group improvisation ranks among the purest delights music can offer. If you are in a drumming circle and, after some experimentation, the group somehow comes up with a rich, funky, humorous rhythmic groove that none of you thought of individually (but all contributed to), the genuine belly laugh you share afterward is richly fulfilling. According to Nachmanovitch, Leonardo da Vinci kept his creativity stimulated through group improvisation with his friends—they liked to make up fanciful operas and sing all the parts.<sup>3</sup>

Composing is creating in a more thought-out way—making a structured statement in the language of music. When composing, we can revise, plan, construct and manipulate musical elements in original ways. One of the most impressive ways in which piano teaching has improved in recent years is the greatly increasing numbers of teachers who routinely integrate composing into the musical journey of all their students. This wise approach was practically unknown when I was a child.

Harmonizing and playing by ear are functional and extremely useful "outer skills." Can every piano performance major in college sit down at a party and improvise a confident rendition of *Happy Birthday to You*, with all the right chords? People expect them to be able to do this, and they are quite right to expect it. If diligent music majors can't utilize a basic skill to share a familiar song with others, then what exactly *are* they learning in school?

**Suggestions:** Even though we know it's essential to improvise, the very word "improvisation" can cause the chill of fear to grip our chests; what if we embarrass ourselves in front of others by fumbling badly or drawing a blank? One technique that helped me improvise more comfortably came from the remarkable grassroots organization Music for People, whose

workshops I heartily recommend. I call this "Atonal Improvisation" and have had a wonderful time passing it on to students and fellow teachers. The only ground rule? NO TRIADS—at least no polite diatonic ones like A minor or G major. Only dissonance is allowed, and the more random the better. We don't want wrong-note anxiety to be the bugaboo.

A simple format for implementing atonal improvisation at the piano is Ostinato/Solo. Sit with your student duet-style, with the student in the treble. Start the "ostinato"—some sort of atmospheric (dissonant) soundscape, with repetitive patterns. Perhaps a moody underwater one—think *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* with creepy overlapping harmonies and lots of mushy pedal. The student listens for a bit and then adds, expressively, an atonal, free solo. Just about any notes will sound good, if imagination and spirit are there. Do not comment or evaluate at all; just delve into the feeling. Create a nice ending together, share a good laugh and say, "Let's try something different!" Now it's a spiky, aggressive bunch of syncopated staccatos, jazzy, fast and crazy. The student senses this different energy and jumps in. Afterwards, you can reverse roles, with the student making up the ostinato and the mood—and there has to be a mood, not just random abstract patterns. Exercises like these are fun, vanquish the fear and thus make later "tonal" improvisations easier to try.

Playing by ear—finding chord structures readily—is tricky to teach, I find. Some people seem to have known from birth how to do this, while others are mystified. Those who do have the knack aren't always clear about *how* they do it, and this makes it hard to explain to others. I did have good luck recently, though, with a graduate student who was highly motivated to improve at keyboard harmony; he didn't trust his ear and would panic when he had to find chords. Here's what we did: the idea was to take one song, a

familiar one that moves nicely through the basic chords, and become really fluent in it. We chose that old cowboy standby *Red River Valley*, and it served us very well. It has a satisfying harmonic sequence with just enough movement:

From this valley they say you are going  
I I' IV

We will miss your bright eyes and sweet smile  
I V

For they say you are taking the sunshine  
I I' IV

That has brightened our path for a while  
V' I

Seated at two pianos, we did it in three or four keys to begin, and ultimately, in every key. One of us would play the tune in octaves, while the other supplied only the chords, “oom-pah style” with open octaves in the left hand and triads in the right. We would switch roles frequently, without any break in the tempo. “Becoming fluent” meant moving around the keyboard registers freely, finding the triads anywhere our hand happened to fall and using smooth voice-leading to shift from one triad to the next. At first the student hesitated with the chord changes and fumbled quite often, messing up accidentals in the tune as we jumped from key to key and so on. But because the song is short and straightforward, practicing yielded good results; after several weeks more fluency began to kick in, and his confidence along with it. (Yes, several weeks—you really have to stick with it.) It’s a great help to do this at two pianos because the sonority is always big and full, and the tempo keeps going, as opposed to the fragmentary sounds the novice harmonizer tends to produce when playing alone.

### Ability to Respond to the Interpretive Elements of the Composition in Order to Express Its Emotional Character

**Importance:** This skill means going beyond correctness, for example, merely “observing” the *crescendo* or the accent, and truly responding to the aliveness of musical details. This is a precious skill, and when a performer has it, it’s immediately noticeable to any listener. Teachers and judges talk about “dynamic contrast” all the time, but is there any intrinsic expressive

authentic connection. (And maybe their best connection will turn out to be a different one anyway!)

Conducting while they play, singing along, gesticulating, working ourselves into a lather, may be fun for us teachers, but doesn’t necessarily “impart” emotional expressivity to the student.<sup>4</sup> In fact, it can alienate, discourage, puzzle or even frighten them. So what can we do instead?

**Suggestions:** Émile Jaques-Dalcroze, inventor of eurhythmics, definitely had the right idea here. I’m amazed his

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*meaning* when changing abruptly from loud to soft? Not unless we bring intention to the moment. Dynamics themselves have no meaning or human interest, and our jobs as performers are not done when we simply have obeyed the markings. If the passage calls for *pianissimo*, does that imply the music is ghostly, or whispering, or dreamy or tender? There may be several possible “good” answers here; in fact, any imaginative intention will bring the music to life. The same, of course, holds true for articulations and rhythmic elements—they can be alive or merely correct.

Traditional teaching has not always excelled in this area. *Describing* emotional import to students, even with the most compelling words, doesn’t necessarily help them make an

innovations didn’t quite revolutionize music instruction as they might have, but the powerful idea is simple: get away from the instrument and experience every musical element with your whole body, your whole self. If possible, find a playful way to do it—playfulness expands the creative range. Then, when you’ve found expressive vividness and energized the elements, take that sense back to the instrument and let the notes flow from it.

I find it’s essential for teachers to *join* in this exploration, not just sit on the sidelines and direct the student to “dance that phrase.” Instead, try some mirroring games. Stand opposite your student in the center of the room; take a minute for both of you to breathe and loosen up. Say to her, “Just do whatever I do, like an image in the

mirror. Match my energy.” If the passage in question is a *crescendo* with a big punctuating accent at the end, for example, vocalize it (You don’t have to sing the exact pitches!) while crouching, then leaping, shouting or whatever you are moved to do. Feel free to overdo it a bit—be theatrical. Try it a couple ways, making them all different; in other words, “brainstorm” instead of dictating one interpretation. Be sure the student matches your full energy every time. Now say, “OK, you try it” and mirror faithfully whatever she does. Don’t evaluate; just say encouragingly, “Fine, let’s see a different one!” The key here is for the teacher to walk through that “risk taking” door first, inviting the student to come along, too.

Exercises like this use two fundamental actions—(1) vocalizing and (2) moving—that comprise our innate expressive impulse, something I call the “musical self.” The “musical self” is that unabashed, unguarded, physical/emotive responsiveness to music that is so delightfully exhibited by the three-year-old toddlers we know. The trick is to preserve that spark *past* age 3.

In addition to those potent and primal response modes, there are other simple ways to explore music’s emotive content for ourselves. Make up a story for each piece, no matter how silly the story may sound, but one that accounts for *every* event and mood change in the music. Write actual words to lyric melodies—and sing them “with feeling.”

### Ability to Conceptualize and Transfer Musical Ideas

**Importance:** If anything defines the dream student, it’s this skill. You teach something once, and she immediately starts applying the idea autonomously to other situations, thereby truly making it her own. Here, we are talking about recognizing significant “clues” in a musical score and not having to be spoon-fed and guided time after time.

If students do this, it is a telling sign that they are active, not passive, partakers of their education. Naturally, we want to foster active thinking and engagement, which leads to a lifetime of fulfillment.

**Suggestions:** Basically, don’t be too helpful—at least not all the time. This is hard, I know; it’s the opposite of who we are as teachers. But, if we really care about our students, we won’t make it easy for them to be mentally passive.

One of the most empowering items in my university piano division’s curriculum is the so-called “One Week Piece.” In their junior year, performance majors are given a piece one week before juries; the piece is chosen for the student by a faculty member *other* than the student’s regular teacher, and the student is forbidden to seek any help at all with it. His assignment is to master it artistically and technically, up to tempo; memorize it, research its background; explain how it’s put together compositionally and stylistically; and present it all in a short lecture/performance for the faculty—all in one week’s time. We don’t care *how* he gets it done; that’s his business. In almost every case, the student presents himself at the jury with more confidence and maturity than we had ever seen before, does a great job with the piece and announces with a big smile that although he had been jittery about the project beforehand, it only took three days to complete. Any teacher can set up a similar assignment with students, maybe once a year, as a way of consolidating skills that have been learned.

In lessons, open questions are the key: “What sort of sound might make this section more special?” “Can you think of some nice ways to add an ornament or two to that phrase?” Or, if the passage calls for specific techniques like rotation or arm-staccatos, “Look this over for a minute and tell me what techniques you think you’re going to need,” and “Describe how

you plan to practice this part for the next few days.” Two cautions about open questions: (1) Don’t use them *all* the time, lest they become cloying and irritating, and (2) Don’t let them descend into a version of “Read my Mind—there’s only one answer I want to hear,” because this makes students understandably cynical. At their best, though, open questions can make teaching a thrill; it’s a fine moment, indeed, when you can listen to the student’s creative answer and truthfully say, “What a great idea for that passage; I never would have thought of it!”

### Ability to Perform Comfortably in a Variety of Settings

**Importance:** It’s perfectly all right to study piano for our “own enjoyment” with no ambition to perform for others. But a fulfilling new dimension opens up when we *do* perform for others, one that gives deeper import to the whole journey of learning and mastery. Performing is the step that pulls it all together, on many levels. Expression of any kind is certainly much more real and alive when there are actual people on hand to receive it, especially people who haven’t heard the material before. Your after-dinner speech may have been rehearsed many times at home, but once the audience is there and you have a well-prepared message you are eager to impart, your delivery springs to life as never before. And if your joke gets a good laugh, you are transformed, energized—hooked into the palpable excitement of give-and-take with your audience. Your message takes on new meaning. Music, perhaps the richest language of all, forms a similarly satisfying circuit between performer, message and audience.

Equally important, going on stage truly puts our nuts-and-bolts work on technique and memory to the test. There may be some surprises, yes, but it is only in performance that we discover what we’ve *really* mastered. The

parts that go well become solidified as never before. Minor fumbles show us with new clarity what bits of unfinished business there may be. Ultimately, when we have worked through those steps, we can savor what it feels like to know we've thoroughly made that piece of music "our own." Once again, risk leads to reward.

**Suggestions:** The key word in the heading to this section, of course, is "comfortably." Here are a few ways to increase our comfort in the pressure of the limelight:

1. *Learn to memorize methodically.*

Nothing can be more disconcerting than the fear that our minds will go blank on stage, in ways that never happened before. And, as we know, this happens all the time, so it's an understandable fear and one that can cause a dread of performing. To me, the most powerful tool here boils down to being able to re-create in advance the piece in your mind in exhaustive detail, naming everything, picturing everything and explaining to yourself *why* it is so—**away from the keyboard and without moving a muscle.** And be sure to do this within a few hours of your performance. The comfort level will soar!

2. *Perform a lot.* It's essential to find out about ourselves, and how our own mind and nervous system respond to the performing experience. No teacher can do this for us, and practicing in a room won't do it. The more times we perform, the more we become accustomed to the physical sensation of excitement/nervousness, the racing of our thoughts; as we learn to manage these, our enjoyment of communicating through music continues to grow.

3. *Practice expressing and performing away from the piano.* American society is not the most demonstrative in the world; we mumble a lot and tend to be less passionate in our gestures than some other cultures. And

it's not unusual for piano students to be rather reserved types as well. We don't even have to face the audience when we perform! So it can be a freeing new experience to play expressive games away from the instrument, just as a way to get used to sharing spontaneous feelings or responses with others. For example, put on a recording of music that is

up loving the very music they didn't think they wanted to play. The experience is creative, it's liberating, it gives them the idea, "Hey, I'm a performer after all!"

### Conclusion

If lessons can help develop inner skills, they are accomplishing something very special. Having the chance

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powerful and mercurial, like a Mahler symphony or the *Star Wars* soundtrack. Pair off with a partner; establish eye contact and start enacting the music with your whole bodies, taking turns leading while the other person mirrors every move.

4. *Play something "weird" and modern.*

On many occasions I've seen reticent performers turn into dramatic "stage animals" simply because I coerced them into learning and performing some dissonant, vividly graphic modern music—music they promptly announced to me they hated because it wasn't "pretty." For one thing, it gives them great comfort to know if they falter here or there and need to make up some notes, no one is likely to notice. More importantly, since the atonal language won't make "sense" on its own to much of the audience, the only way for the performance to come across is if the player becomes an actor of sorts, striking a suspenseful body pose to dramatize a rest, bringing mysterious mood to the *pianissimo*, hunching ferociously when the music growls. Playing "weird" music gives students permission to try things they just wouldn't dream of when playing Mozart or Schubert, and they end

to connect to these skills is exactly the reason many people feel drawn to music lessons in the first place. Let's face it, though—it's not always easy to focus on the "inner" realm. There's risk involved. But a teacher-student relationship based on mutual respect and honesty, with plenty of room for playfulness, can help provide a fertile, reassuring ground for nurturing growth in this area.

The original seed is there—that "musical self." As we get older, we still have it, but opening up to it—risking embarrassment or criticism—takes more trust and courage. I guess trusting is always a risky business in life. That's where the reward comes in, of course. Risk-taking makes us feel truly alive, and we can *sense* ourselves learning and growing.

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### NOTES

1. Westney, William. *The Perfect Wrong Note: Learning to Trust Your Musical Self.* (Pompton Plains, NJ: Amadeus Press, 2003): 32–35.

2. Nachmanovitch, Stephen. *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art.* (Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 1990): 52.

3. *Ibid.*, 7.

4. Westney, 46.