

Surrendering to the Music: 6 Life Lessons Playing Piano Taught Me

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Dedication

To Daniel: Thank you for helping me see beyond the notes.

Introduction

Music has been an important part of my life ever since I can remember. My dad used to play records on Saturday mornings and my sister and I would dance around the house while he cooked pancakes for us. We had a piano that no one played, but it must have had some impact on me because at the age of seven I cited it as my favorite instrument.

My desire to learn to play came when I was in the middle of a high-pressure graduate school program. I needed a healthy escape, and though my piano skills were practically non-existent I discovered that playing for a few minutes each day relieved stress and provided a much needed creative outlet. Soon my seven-year-old daughter and I began taking lessons together, and I embarked on one of the most challenging and fulfilling journeys I've ever undertaken. This book contains the wisdom I've gained along the way. Whether you are a music student, music teacher, music parent, or music lover, I hope that as you read you will be inspired to find greater joy in your own journey.

Lesson #1: Learn the Rules, Then Learn to Break Them

“A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.”
-Lao Tzu

Thinking back to when I was first learning to play piano, it doesn't really seem like it was a deliberate choice. It feels more like the piano chose me. And kept choosing me, even when I wanted to give up.

I was 26 years old at the time, and most of my waking hours were spent at work or at school. I had ordered the textbook for my next class, econometrics, about a week before, and when it arrived I realized that econometrics was just a fancy name for statistics. Math has never been my strongest subject, and I was worried that the class would be so difficult I wouldn't be able to finish my degree. I needed an outlet for excess stress, so I dusted off my wife's electronic keyboard and started teaching myself how to read music.

The statistics class wasn't as difficult as I'd feared, and after it was over I continued to find solace at the piano. My daughter, Alexis, who was seven at the time, saw me playing one day and asked if I would teach her. I could hardly play myself, much less teach someone, but I found a piano instructor and when my daughter came home from her first lesson I asked her how it went. As she responded, I realized that she had learned more in one lesson than I had learned in three months of trying to teach myself. So I asked her teacher if she would teach me, too.

At my initial lesson I learned two fundamentals that provided a solid foundation for the rest of my piano training. The first was the importance of consistent fingering. I had

been playing with whichever fingers I felt like using, and it limited my ability to develop muscle memory. By following a written fingering plan for each song, I began to use the same movements each time I practiced it, which allowed me to progress more quickly. The second was the difference between sight reading and playing. My definition of a successful pianist was someone who could open any book and play any song, but I didn't realize that learning to play involves more than just sight reading and that songs are best learned through careful and correct repetition.

For the next two years I practiced almost every day. I learned the language of written music, which felt very foreign to me at times. I learned rhythms, scales, arpeggios and how to play in different keys. I learned that, with practice, it isn't necessary to name a note in order to play it; I can just look at its position on the staff and play the corresponding key without knowing if it is a D, F, or G. And I found that 15 or 30 minutes each day adds up to a lot of progress.

When people say to me, "I'd love to learn to play piano," my response is always the same: "It only takes 15 minutes a day." That small amount of time adds up to nearly a thousand hours over the course of a decade. If someone spends that much time doing the same thing every day with the guidance of a teacher or mentor, I can pretty much guarantee that he or she will achieve competence. More time is even better, as long as it doesn't lead to burnout.

There is a set of rules associated with playing piano, and many of them are beneficial. When I first started learning to play, I accepted everything I was taught as truth, because I had no frame of reference by which to evaluate it. But eventually I gained enough experience to be able to put what I'd been told to the test and determine what worked for me and what didn't.

I also had a few subconscious "rules" that were working against me without my even realizing it. One of my concerns was that a lot of doors were already closed because I

was starting later in life. I couldn't be a concert pianist, for example. I know now that my interests lie elsewhere, but in the beginning I could only see two paths: working towards playing at a professional level or not playing at all. I didn't realize that there is another path: playing purely for my own enjoyment.

Another subconscious "rule" that held me back was the belief that adults can't learn to play piano. I had been working towards that goal for two years, but I wasn't sure if I would actually "arrive" and possess skills that were comparable to the many talented musicians I knew. My confidence was slowly being eroded by a growing gap between my expectations of what I should be able to do and what I could actually do. I had a very demanding job in the computer industry at the time, and the combination of stress at work and mounting frustration at the piano overwhelmed me. So I decided to quit taking piano lessons. I would have stopped playing altogether, but every night when I tucked my daughter Alexis into bed she asked me if I would play a song for her. That's the only thing that kept me going through that difficult period.

I believe the false idea that adults can't learn to play piano took root in me because I didn't know anyone who had started learning later in life and mastered the skill. I had also heard about scientific studies showing the benefits of early learning in music and other areas. Because I started playing at the same time as my seven year old daughter (she is now eighteen), I was able to compare and contrast our progress. I had expected her to surpass me in every conceivable way at some point, but it didn't happen. What I noticed instead is that we learned differently. I took a more academic and analytical approach to music, while she went with the flow and developed instinctive abilities. She is a better sight reader than I am, but I have a better command of music theory and have learned to improvise, arrange and compose. If she'd had the desire I have no doubt she could have mastered those skills as well. And she still may, later in life. But many of the differ-

ences between our individual abilities can be explained not by our respective ages when we began but simply by our preferences.

There are rules in life just as there are in music and art. Some rules are beneficial and some are not. Some are explicitly stated, but many manifest themselves as subconscious beliefs that impact everything I do without my even realizing it. Many of the rules I live by, for better or worse, were learned by watching others. Fortunately, I can change any underlying beliefs that are holding me back. But first I have to be aware of them.

Like guard rails, rules can keep me safe. But like prison bars they can also hold me back. Wanton disregard and mindless adherence can both cause serious problems, but the wisdom of experience can guide my efforts to differentiate between rules that help and rules that harm. I always begin music lessons with new students by teaching them the rules, but as they become more advanced I invite them to break the rules and am often pleasantly surprised by the results.