

The Speed of No Mistakes by Graham Fitch

Have you noticed how sloppy practice ingrains mistakes that are seriously hard to get rid of later, and come back to haunt us? It's a bit like careless eating when you end up wearing your food – I don't wish to contradict the detergent commercials, but those stubborn stains aren't always so easy to shift.

When I was a student, I had to learn certain works very quickly to meet lesson and exam deadlines and I was not always scrupulous about organizing the best fingering. When I pick those works up again now, my old fingering will come back after a day or so – most of it is fine but there are one or two places I can now see I was in a rush and didn't come up with the best solution. Now, I can of course take the time to work out a better fingering and practice it in, and it'll hold. But when I shelve the piece again, the next time I go back to it my original fingering is **still** likely to be stronger than any subsequent reworking. The same is going to hold true for more blatant errors such as wrong notes or incorrect rhythms.

The pianistic equivalent of baking soda to remove practice stains is slow, conscious work but it is **far** better to avoid errors in the first place by spending some quality time during the note-learning stage at **The Speed of No Mistakes**. I wish I had come up with this term, but it was in fact coined by my colleague Lucinda Mackworth-Young, whose book [Tuning In: Practical Psychology for Musicians](#) should be on all our shelves.

Before I go on I want to distinguish between accidental mistakes that happen **in performance** (and that might include a performance in a lesson situation), and mistakes that arise in our practice room from a careless and sloppy attitude. We are all human and therefore fallible, and because we are not robots errors are part of our story. Mistakes that happen when we perform or when we're in the process of playing should not derail us, and I am not going to concern myself with the psychology of them in this post. For more on this subject, I can highly recommend William Westney's excellent book [The Perfect Wrong Note: Learning to Trust Your Musical Self](#) where he makes the important distinction between honest mistakes and careless mistakes. This podcast is most interesting and full of terrific thoughts and information, but if you want to jump to the part that relates to this post, join in at 40:00:

The kind of mistakes I am talking about may be unrecognized ones (we're going so fast we can't see, hear or feel them), or persistent errors where we haven't bothered to stop to really figure out the notes in that chord – or to work out that awkward rhythm, or the passage where deep-down we know we have never really organized a workable fingering.

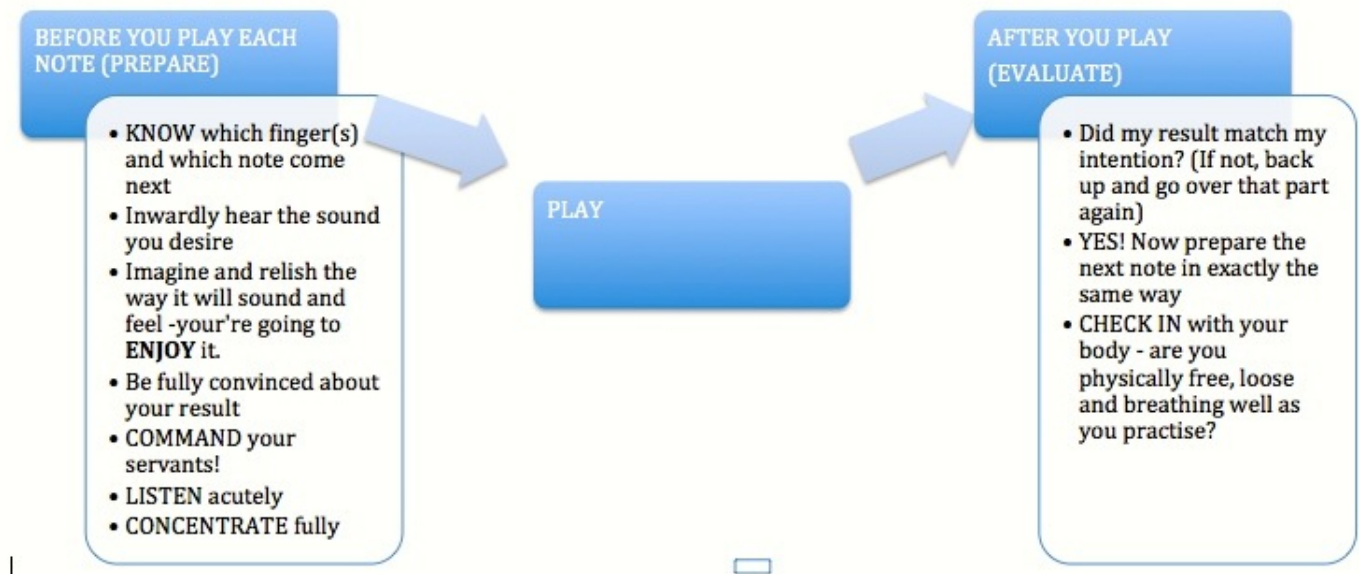
So how does **The Speed of No Mistakes** work in our practice? Very simple! Choose a practice speed where it is not possible to make any errors at all (in a word, **S – L – O – W – L – Y**). We compute what we have to do **before** we do it, and focus all our attention on the task. We do it slowly enough that we can be fully confident that what we are going to play is going to be correct. If we can't be sure, we don't play it!

I recently acquired a most interesting book, [Tradition and Craft in Piano Playing](#) by [Tilly Fleischmann](#). In 1901, she had gone to study in Munich with Bernhard Stavenhagen (Liszt's last student) and Berthed Kellerman (also a student and close associate of Liszt), and later passed on the Liszt tradition of piano playing to her students. In her book, Fleischmann describes a process for learning a new piece that corroborates the type of ultra-slow practice that I have come to believe is indispensable for serious students of the piano – those who want security in performance as well as a competitive edge, and who have the time and energy to devote to such serious, dedicated work:

The first phrase is taken by itself (or, if the work is especially difficult, even less than a complete phrase) and **played so slowly that approximately three seconds might be counted between each successive note or**

chord... Students who have the necessary knowledge should reflect on the tonality and harmonic structure of the passage, noting modulations or characteristic features. Students who have not had an all-round musical education and lack of knowledge of harmony... can reflect on the chords and progressions even if they are not able to analyze their nature. At the same time one should watch every movement involved... (*Tradition and Craft in Piano Playing by Tilly Fleischmann, p 21-22*).

Three seconds per note is a heck of a long time, and this prescription should probably be taken with a pinch of salt. Here's how the process might look:



So what counts as a mistake? The cardinal ones are obvious:

- Wrong notes
- Wrong rhythms

Next, in no particular order of priority:

- Fingerings
- Pedalling
- Dynamics
- Articulation

The last bullet point in my diagram above should be behind all we do at the piano – **always keep checked in with our body**. If we have played our phrase perfectly by all this criteria and yet our arms have been locked in tension, then perhaps we have made the biggest “mistake” of them all.