

Why I Should Have Paid More Attention in Music Theory Class

Description

For much of my life, I thought that being “musical” was a matter of operating by intuition and instinct.

Playing louder or softer because it felt right. Taking more or less time because it seemed to make sense.

That served me pretty well for a while, until one day I had to learn an unfamiliar piece of music for which there existed no recording, and I struggled.

For once, it seemed that simply feeling the music and going with whatever naturally came out wouldn't get me to where I wanted to go.

I wondered...had I reached the limits of my musical intuition?

The dot and the line

A colleague recently told me about a book she read as a young child, which speaks to this experience of mine. Titled *The Dot and the Line: A Romance in Lower Mathematics*, it is a cute little story about a line which falls in love with a dot, and woos her away from a squiggle.

It was adapted into the following 10-minute Oscar-winning animated short. Check it out:

What is your main takeaway?

For me, the takeaway is that pure intuition, instinct, and feel are necessary, but not sufficient. We also need some structure, some understanding of the fundamental principles that make music work, in order to take our art to the highest level.

What's the purpose?

My oldest kid has been studying taekwondo for a few years, and one of the elements he enjoys most are the [forms](#) – choreographed patterns of stances, blocks, punches, and kicks.

These movement patterns can look almost dance-like at times, but they are not just a series of random moves. Each is a sequence of punches, blocks, and kicks against imaginary opponents. However, it's not always obvious what each move is supposed to accomplish (though “double face punch” and “groin thrust” don't leave much to the imagination), and this uncertainty can lead to uncommitted or lazy-looking technique.

The other day, I saw the instructor explaining to my son what the *underlying objective* of a particular block was. How to visualize the opponent in front of him, and which exact strikes he was blocking against.

Immediately, I saw the light bulb go on, and his movements were not only more clearly defined, but snappier, and more purposeful.

Rather than simply telling him how to position or move his arms, clarifying the *purpose* helped him [turn things up to 11](#) .

Is Hindemith ranting just a tiny bit?

I wasn't aware that Hindemith had written a series of textbooks on musicianship, harmony, composition, etc., but apparently he felt even back in the '40's, that many musicians lacked a sufficient understanding of the underlying principles which make music work.

In his preface to [Elementary Training for Musicians](#) he writes:

“If our performers – players, singers, and conductors alike – had a better insight into the essentials of musical scores, we would not be faced with what seems to have become almost a rule in the superficially over-polished performances of today: either the rattling through of a piece without any reasonable articulation, without any deeper penetration into its character, tempo, expression, meaning, and effect – or the hyper-individualistic distortion of the ideas expressed in a composer's score.”

Galamian and the division of practice time

Why was the phrase written this way and not some other way? Why is there an accent here, but not there? How would I play it if there was a line or dot instead – or no mark at all? What does this suggest the composer is trying to tell me about how to approach this particular gesture?

I find questions like this to be interesting now, but for many years, I slept through theory classes and never bothered to look beyond the surface of the score.

Seems a little silly in hindsight, but at the time I thought practicing meant producing sound from my instrument. And because deeper inquiry and contemplation resulted in silence and didn't “count” as practice time, I skipped it.

Of course, I later came across Galamian's [Principles of Violin Playing and Teaching](#), where he describes the three categories of practice and how they fit together.

Referred to as “Building time,” “Interpreting time,” and “Performing time,” Galamian explains that we need a *balance* between the nitty gritty technical work, the musical/conceptual work, and the process of putting

it all together.

So score study, listening to recordings for ideas, and taking time to come up with a clearer concept of how we think a phrase should sound *is* an essential component of our practice time and totally *does* count. Read more about this [here](#) in Chapter 4, which begins on page 93.

The one-sentence summary

Here's one last indication that if we want to take things to the next level, we might have to spend some time going beyond intuition...

“The happiest genius will hardly succeed by nature and instinct alone in rising to the sublime. Art is art; he who has not thought it out has no right to call himself an artist. Here all groping in the dark is vain; before a man can produce anything great, he must understand the means by which he is to produce it.” ~Goethe

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