

The Complete Pianist

By
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Every semester when I meet new students I always try to find out their musical and professional goals. It is extremely important for the students to have an understanding of what a career in music means and what opportunities exist in the field. Since a music degree requires a lot of dedicated practice along with academic school work, the students has to be prepared for a big work load. It is therefore essential that they know what to concentrate on. Usually music degrees require more credit hours to graduate than other degrees.

Being a professional musician is perhaps one of the most rewarding occupations one can have. It requires dedication to the art of music and a constant drive to improve on your musical knowledge. It is also helpful to have an understanding of the music business and in what areas you fit, based on your interest and knowledge.

There are some musicians who have the ability to focus and become extremely skilled in only one specific area. These people however, are in the minority. Musicians who are skilled in several different areas are more competitive and have a much better chance of surviving as a working musician. With my own students, I feel a personal responsibility to help broaden their education by introducing them to different aspects of the business as well as helping them become highly skilled musicians on their instrument.

The areas in which all students should be familiar include (in this case pianists), classical piano, jazz piano, arranging and composition, midi applications, music notation (free hand and computer) and last but not least music business.

Classical Piano

Guess what? This is where it all starts. I can't stress the importance of a solid classical piano background enough. It gives you strong technique, control, knowledge and respect for the piano. I guarantee that after you have mastered several classical piano works you are a much better pianist than before. Most great jazz players have started with classical piano, Bill Evans, Oscar Peterson and Art Tatum to mention a few. So even if you are a jazz major, keep practicing classical piano, it is a skill that you keep for the rest of your life. It is also the responsibility of us musicians to keep the old master's music alive. The world of music is richer because of Mozart, Beethoven and Chopin.

Jazz Piano

Even if you are not a jazz piano major, studying jazz will enhance the way you think harmonically. The harmonic structure of jazz can sometimes be extremely complicated and learning about this kind of harmony will give you a new tool to apply to everything else that you do in music, composing, arranging and playing.

For jazz piano majors there is an endless list of what should be practiced. If you go to the back issues of this site you'll find several important areas that should be carefully practiced. To me, one of the most exiting things about studying jazz is that you focus on the actual music. I assume

that my students can already play the piano by the time they are ready to learn jazz. There are of course certain technical aspects that need to be dealt with, but if the students has a solid classical background they are usually knowledgeable about how to overcome technical issues. For most, the biggest part of studying jazz is learning to improvise. This skill teaches musical judgement and is also one of the greatest forms of ear training. When you improvise you have to listen to your own playing with a objective view. In other words, you have to be your own audience and critic.

Arranging/Composing

Arranging is just improvisation accomplished at a much slower rate. It takes planning and organization when you arrange and compose, and learning this craft is something that is very valuable when you want to become a professional musician. Think of it this way; there are always musicians, churches, brass groups, marching bands, big bands, all kinds of school orchestras etc, that want to be unique. In order for them to achieve this they need music tailored for them, so there is always a demand for newly written music.

Midi Applications

MIDI is something that has become a large part of the music business in the last ten to fifteen years. The reality is that a lot of music for movies, TV and commercials is done with synthesizers. It is arranged, composed and recorded using the MIDI format. This way of recording and composing has become standard and it is important to know how to utilize this medium from a musical standpoint. In the beginning of MIDI the musicality often took a back seat role because the high tech guys were doing the recording. These days the musical quality is much better because musicians are the ones recording with MIDI. Another aspect that has raised the quality of the MIDI based recording is the combination of synthesizers and real instruments. Clearly, real instruments can never be replaced permanently!

Music Notation

Music notation is something that a lot of instrumentalists have very poor knowledge of. Generally, the arranging and compositions students are far better than the instrumentalists when it comes to notating music, simply because they are much more involved in studying scores and writing notes. But being able to notate music so that others can read and interpret it properly is an important skill to be mastered by all musicians. A lot of music has fallen by the wayside because it was notated in a way that the performer could not interpret.

There are also computer programs that have become industry standard for music notation. Learning these programs is important because like the MIDI, it is the way of the future. It also adds several advantages as far as speed and neatness which can be very important for an arranger. However, make sure that you become proficient at computer notation because badly written computer parts are worse than badly written hand written parts.

Teaching

Teaching music can be very rewarding. It is a wonderful feeling when you have dedicated students who are progressing musically. If you decide to go the teaching route, it is important that you really want to dedicate your music career and talent to teaching others. Do not

go into teaching because you think it is easy or it is “something to fall back on” if a playing career doesn’t work out. Teaching is a very serious matter because you have the opportunity to influence other human beings and have a great impact on their lives. It might sound dramatic but it is true. Helping someone to develop the gift of music might be one of the most important things you do. Please take teaching seriously and always stay a couple of steps ahead of your best students (in other words, don’t stop practicing)!

Music Business

I can’t stress enough how important it is to have knowledge about the music business. There will always be room for great performers of all kind and there is nothing that says that you can not do it. However, music is very competitive in most areas so it is essential to develop strong business skills along with good musicianship. Perhaps one of the most important things to learn about the music business is professionalism. Are you on time? Are you dressed appropriately? Do you have proper communication skills? Do you play the right music for the occasion? There are countless incredible players out there who’s music goes unheard for a lack of good business skills. Learn all you can about self promotion, and it is also wise to have knowledge of recording, broadcasting, licensing, copy write and publishing issues in order to protect your music products. **If you want to be a musician, learn the business of music.**

I have written this month’s article specifically for those people who’s goal is to become a well rounded and complete musician. If you are well educated in the areas that I have mentioned, you have a greater chance of becoming successful in the field of music. When you choose a school, make sure they can offer you the courses you feel are important and that they are interested in your future as a professional musician.

It may seem overwhelming to master all these areas, but it can be done with time, perseverance and practice, practice, and more practice.

Good luck in your music endeavors.

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