

## Some Thoughts on Expression & Musicianship

**Josef Hofmann** was a famous pianist who lived from 1876-1957. He was the only student of Anton Rubinstein (*who was very, very famous*), and he was the director of the Curtis Institute of Music (*which is a respected music college in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*). It is said about him that he “possessed a brilliant technique. He never allowed it, however, to intrude itself on whatever piece he was playing. He was an artist with few equals, and his pianism was rooted in the noblest traditions of the nineteenth century.”

Josef once wrote: “In some respects, the performance of a piece of music resembles the reading of a book aloud to someone. If a book should be read to us by a person who does not understand it, would it impress us as true, convincing, or even credible?”

Okay – so what does he mean?? What is Hoffman trying to say??

Well, the bottom line is this:

♪ A true, convincing, and credible performance is one in which the audience gets caught up in the mood and energy of the music and then is carried away in the flow of sound. (In the same way that an audience gets caught up in the storyline and energy of a play or movie and is carried away in the flow of the plot & scenes. In order to perform music like this, you must be able to bring out the expression of a song, with all the details involved.

♪ In order to bring out the expression of a piece, you need to really know & really understand the piece.

♪ In order to understand the piece, you first have to know all the notes and all the details that the composer has marked into the music. Then you need to be aware of the song’s “intention” – sad, angry, thoughtful, playful, happy, etc. And you need to have enough “control” to be able to play all the notes and details the way the composer intended when he wrote the piece, without letting the music sound “technical” or “mechanical”.

♪ But you don’t stop there. By looking, focusing, and studying closely, you will reach a point where you know the notes with all the details so well that you can stop thinking about the notes so much and start to let the music flow as you play.

Now you must be sure that everything you understand about the piece is still there when you “let the music flow”. So now it’s time to practice performing the piece, listening carefully as you watch the music to see if what you hear is what you see.

♪ When you can let the music flow and what you hear is what you see, then you will have started to bring out the “expression” of the music and will be playing with “musicianship”. Only then you will be playing the music, and not the notes.

Now, here's the question: **How do you do this?** How do you “understand” your Recital pieces? How do you reach the point where you can perform the pieces with expression & musicianship?

I know I'm repeating myself – but it's true – the way to do what Josef Hoffman is saying, is to:

- ♪ practice in **small sections**,
- ♪ practice **hands alone** as well as hands together, and
- ♪ practice **slowly** sometimes.

... **even after** you have “mastered” your song.

However, the above practice methods are **not** the most important things to perform with expression & musicianship ... Your **mental attitude** is the **most** important. Once you feel like you “know” a song, it is easy to fall into “auto pilot” and stop thinking when you are “practicing”. **Don't!!** This is not the time to “play mindlessly”. When you are “**practicing**”, you **always** need to:

- ♪ **pay attention & be aware**,
- ♪ **focus** on & **think** about a specific “thing” to work on,
- ♪ **listen** carefully, and
- ♪ **be your own teacher** when you practice.

**Even if you think you already play everything well – practice this way anyway so you keep getting better.**

Each day when you practice your pieces, you should pick one or two “things” to work on – a certain weak or trouble spot, a certain “technical” finger movement (like trills or runs or big chords), or a certain detail (like dynamics or staccatos). If there aren't any trouble spots, practice weak spots. If there aren't any weak spots, practice to improve a certain part of the song. **Pick different “things” to work on or to improve each day.**

One of the first things to be sure you can play well is the **Rhythm & Speed**. If the rhythm is sloppy & uneven, or if the speed is not constant (you slow down at the hard parts & speed up at the easier parts), then nothing else will sound right. Practicing (sometimes) with a metronome will help you keep the speed constant – and counting (sometimes) while you practice will help you be sure you always play the rhythm correctly ... **even after** you have “mastered” the piece.

Also, during practice, **always** be on the look-out for “**details**” that the composer has written in – things like **dynamic changes** (volume), **articulation marks** (accents, staccatos, etc.), **sustained notes, rests**, and anything else that might be written there. There is usually so much “detail” in a piece of music that it can take a long time to see & play it all. **Consciously** practice playing the notes with these details. **Listen** carefully to the sound as you play and try to change what you are doing until it sounds the way you think the composer wants it to. If you don't know how it should sound – listen to a recording of the piece several times and make notes about what you hear right on the sheet music (i.e. not too fast, slow & gentle, etc).

Then **when you have finished practicing in this way**, the next step is to practice performing your piece a couple of times by **“playing”** the music, **not** the notes. In other words, when you are **“playing”** don't think too much about the notes or the details, but **don't stop thinking!!!** Instead, think about what you hear and how the music sounds. Get into the groove of the rhythm – get carried away by the expression – get lost in the flow of the music – **but** don't stop thinking about what you are hearing.

When you are practicing this way, if a stumble occurs, **don't** stop and correct yourself. Instead, try to keep the flow of the piece moving - don't lose your focus – don't let it frustrate you – stay with the flow and pretend the mistake never happened. And when you're done, don't forget to practice your bow.

### Preparing for Performance

I suggest that you play your finished pieces on as many “different” pianos as you can. If a friend or family member has a piano – play on it. If there's one at school or church, see if you can play it – at least once. And when you come to the Recording Sessions or Rehearsals and are “warming up”, pay most attention to the expression of your song & how the sound of that particular piano effects the expression.

Every piano has a different “feel” to it. Every piano's keys respond in different ways – on some pianos, the keys are hard to press, and so it's hard to play loud – on other pianos, the keys press down too easily and it's hard to play soft. You may have to experiment a little bit with how you press the keys to find out how to get the "loud" and "soft" that you want in your piece. Try to make it sound the same way that it does on your piano at home. Listen to the lounds and softs – are they sounding the way you want them to or do you need to press the keys harder or lighter? **Also notice the pedal** – how far down do you have to push it in order to hold the notes? How high do you have to lift it in order to let go of the notes? (For some songs, this is **very** important.)

You will get less and less nervous the more you perform your song, which is why we have so many “practice-performances”. But you can calm your nerves yourself by taking every chance you can get to practice performing your piece(s) somewhere else. Try recording your piece ... or ask your parents to be your audience and perform for them (complete with bow). Or when your cousins come over to visit, ask if you can stage a small concert for them. Or, when you go to the Mall, or Costco, or Walmart, or some such place – go over to a keyboard that's on display and start playing a part of your piece. (Really!! Wouldn't you be more nervous playing in a store in public than when you're performing for fellow students and family? Well then, after playing at a store, our big Annual Recital should be a “piece of cake”.)

You will always be a little nervous before performing ... remember - **it's normal & you'll be okay.**