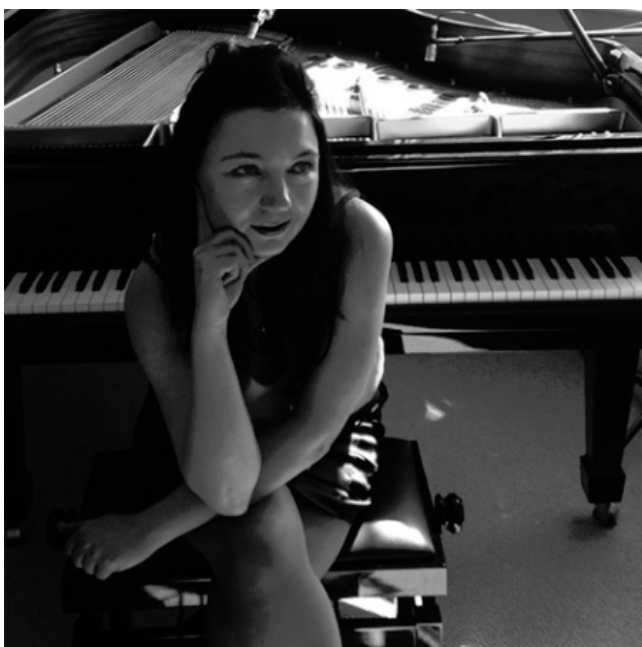


Memorising Music

*a blog exploring how musicians
memorise music*

Interview with... GéNIA (pianist)

Posted on [May 23, 2013](#)



Please tell me a little about yourself (profession, musical activities, etc).

I am a pianist, composer, educator and founder of the [Piano-Yoga®](#) method.

Do you actively memorise music and perform without a score? If not, why not? If so, why? When in your musical development did you start to memorise?

I learn very fast and always try to play without the score because it gives me a lot of freedom. Without the score, my senses are connected to my hearing and tactile sensations. I find the score a drag as it kills the music! The score can be very limiting, and is not always a good representation of what the composer intended. I would rather play without the score and make a few mistakes, than play perfectly with the score. Having said all that, these days I do use the score sometimes for contemporary music, if I need to play at a short notice or if I know that I won't play the piece again soon.

I've been playing since I was 4 years old, and I've always played from memory. In Russia, where I grew up, no one plays with the score. When I was a child, I had a phenomenal memory and would remember everything straight away – I wouldn't even have understood the question of whether to play from memory or not! I think if you play a piece from memory, you have to really know it, in your mind and in your fingers. If you rely on the score, your memory for the piece may be quite superficial.

Have you ever had a major memory lapse during a performance and, if so, what happened?

I remember my first memory lapse, but it wasn't really major. I was a student at the time in my early 20's, and my teacher and I had had a disagreement the night before a major performance of the [Medtner Sonata](#). During the performance, I somehow looked into the audience and saw my teacher, which made me think of the previous night and brought on a memory lapse! I don't think anyone really noticed, but I was shocked – before this I hadn't really realised that memory lapses were even an issue!

Are there any particular types of music – pieces, composers or genres – that you find particularly easy or difficult to memorise, and why?

I find Chopin particularly hard to memorise. It's often very similar musical material, but with incredibly small differences between repeats in a piece. I have to actively force the memorisation process for Chopin, by separating it into sections and learning each section separately. Some people have difficulty learning contemporary music, but I have quite a mathematical brain which easily remembers patterns and structures, so I don't usually have any problems with it.

How do you memorise music? Are there particular techniques you use? Do you use visual memory, and if so, what do you visualise?

When I was 8 years old, a friend asked me how I memorised pieces. At the time I thought this was a silly question – I don't do anything, the music is just there! She replied that this was very dangerous, because 'if you're ever feeling unwell there's nothing to rely upon'. Fifteen years later I realised what she meant! As we get older, our lives get much busier (and the music usually gets harder too!) and our brains can easily get overloaded. So now I find I need a strategy for memorising.

I usually work to tight deadlines, so have to learn new repertoire very efficiently. I use one simple strategy for memorising music: take a phrase, play it through hands separately from the score until each hand plays it perfectly three times in a row – with phrasing, emotional impact, fingering, notes, everything. For contrapuntal music, decide beforehand which voice(s) will be dominant, and play each of them through separately in a similar way. Then put the hands together until you've played it again perfectly three times in a row. By the end of this, you've played the phrase at least nine times and by then it's stuck in your head! Then you can try playing it without the score. If there are any errors, go back to the score to correct any points you didn't get right. But you have to get it perfect from the start, as if it was your final product – with emotion.

When playing from memory, I recall two aspects of the music most strongly – sound and tactile memory. About 10 years ago, I started incorporating music theory and analysis into my preparation too. I try to trace backwards to the composition process, to understand chord progressions and the structure of a piece. As a child, I sometimes used visual memory (of the score), but I don't use it anymore – the score is just a distraction! In fact, I don't really use visual memory at all. When I do mental rehearsal, I feel the music in my fingers and hear it in my mind, but I don't visualise anything.

At what point during learning a piece do you work on memorisation?

I've been influenced by two teachers in particular. The first demanded that I only bring memorised pieces to lessons, and refused to work on a piece unless I could play it completely from memory. The second would work on a piece with me until it was almost perfect, and then tell me to memorise it (though by then it was already memorised)! I regard learning a new piece as a three stage process: synthesis (playing the piece through to get an overall idea of it); analysis (detailed work); and synthesis again (putting it all together). I start memorising just over half way through this process, in the middle of the analysis phase. I think it's a bad idea to memorise straight away, before you understand the music. When you are just starting to know a piece, you need to work with the score so you don't learn the wrong notes!

How do you deal with memory lapses? What tricks do you use to prevent it happening during a performance?

Everyone has memory lapses. My advice is to improvise and keep the piece flowing with the same rhythm, the same key and the same emotion. Never take your hands off the keys! Obviously you need to know the piece very well to reduce the chance of memory lapses. You can't just jump from playing with the score into performing from memory, it needs practice. Practicing performing from memory in front of people, and in different places, is also very important.

Are there particular techniques you use for maintaining your memory of specific music over a long period of time (i.e. years)?

If you learn a piece properly in the first place, and perform it in public at least 3-5 times, it seldom disappears and will come back in a few days with some work.

What do you think is the role of musical memory in creating new music, either through

improvisation or composition?

Although I improvise and compose, I don't really connect these activities with memory. Obviously collective memory is used unconsciously, but I'm not aware of using memory when creating new music.

Have you ever tried to teach others to memorise music? If so, how do people differ in their ability to memorise music, and what tips do you offer them to improve?

There is a very clear differentiation between students. Some people don't need to be taught to memorise, they just do it naturally. For example, most Europeans play from memory as that's what they're used to. I don't try to teach them to memorise, as they already have their own method that works. But other people – particularly English adult amateurs who have never played from memory and want to learn – I teach them the strategy that I use (described above).

I now combine piano with yoga practice and meditation too. When you work on a piece of music you need to be present in what you're doing. If you're emotionally involved then usually your mind will be involved too. Meditation really helps with concentration, and can bring focused energy into practising.

Forthcoming events:

- [Piano-Yoga Retreat. Oxford on 16 June 2013](#)
- [Piano-Yoga Open Day, London on 29 June 2013](#)
- [GÉNIA's Solo Concert at Burgh House, Hampstead on 14 July 2013](#)

Websites: www.genia-music.com, www.piano-yoga.com



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