



Flowing Water

Play piano with more joy and less stress

by
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Part 1: Flowing Water



Flowing Water

Flowing water. All over our planet, water flows. In streams, rivers, oceans, pipes, drains, and canals. Down mountains, over waterfalls, through the soil, and onto rooftops. It flows through our bodies, out of our tear ducts, and down our cheeks, whether we want it to or not. Flowing water is a visible manifestation of the movement of energy and is a force that is worthy of respect, awe, and delight.

Musical notes flow too, in much the same way as water. Taking this a step further, our musical impulses flow out of our psyche and our bodies and through our musical instruments, where they are converted into sound waves that travel through the air and into the perception of our listeners.

Flowing water, flowing musical impulses, flowing sound.

Music.

How I learned Flow by teaching 5-year olds

As a professional pianist, I've helped create a Tony Award-nominated Broadway show (*Swinging On A Star*), played jazz piano at the top New York City jazz clubs



including The Blue Note, and have appeared at Carnegie Hall several times. And as much as I enjoyed all of these experiences, at the back of my mind was always the question “Am I good enough?”

“Am I good enough?” is the curse of being a professional musician. We start out at the piano because we love music and the instrument, and at some point, the pressure comes in to “play well.” At the professional level, it often becomes the predominant motivation from moment to moment.

All of that changed for me, unexpectedly, when I answered a friend’s request to teach piano at a local school. My role was to give piano lessons to 5- to 17-year-olds during the school day and in the afternoons. I could teach lessons during the day and play piano professionally at night. A great combination!

From the very first day, I decided to incorporate improvisation into every single lesson. The students loved it! The teenagers enjoyed learning jazz and pop music in addition to their classical repertoire, and my younger students had fun learning piano “as a language,” with improvisation going hand-in-hand with note-reading. Even the 5 year olds improvised with ease, spinning out melodies effortlessly while I provided accompaniments. It was at this time that I developed my Major Scale Workouts, where I went from folk to rock to jazz to calypso to semi-classical, while the students enjoyed adapting their improvised melodies to each new rhythmic style.

My goal was to provide a “safe haven” where each student felt comfortable improvising. I demonstrated that a sense of “flow” was the most important thing and that I, too, would make mistakes and play some notes that didn’t sound “right.” When this happens, I explained, you just keep going with an uninterrupted flow and it will be absorbed into the overall sound of the music.

After a few months of teaching young kids in this way, an astonishing thing happened to my own playing: I began playing the way I had always dreamed! I’d be on a professional gig, and the music would effortlessly flow out of me *much* more than ever before. By teaching the young students to relax and go with the flow, I began doing this myself. When I heard myself playing this well, I couldn’t help but smile, because most professional musicians prefer to teach older, more “advanced” students while I was having the time of my life improvising with 5 year olds. I’d hear a sax player, for instance, routinely play every bebop lick he could remember and think to myself, “*If you only knew the secret!*”



The secret is *flow*, and it took a bunch of open-minded 5-year-olds to show me how to play piano 10x better. I was having such a great time jamming with them in a non-judgmental way that I began to trust in the flow of the music, instead of always trying to outdo myself.

Here's a 7-year-old pianist, learning to improvise with the blues scale by tapping into the flow of my accompaniment:

[Blues Piano Lesson with 7-year old kid](#)

Bringing the teaching online

When I began teaching piano improvisation online at KeyboardImprov in 2012, I began by thinking deeply about what held pianists back in their attempts to learn improvisation. I had seen firsthand that while young kids embrace improvisation in a natural way, self-criticism often comes into the picture as older students begin to learn improvisation. And once self-criticism, or even excessive musical criticism, gets into the picture, the entire process of Flow is cut off and it becomes virtually impossible to learn how to improvise.

So... I knew that I had to find a way to counteract this. I had to find a way for teenage and adult pianists to learn how to improvise in a way that actually worked. And not only that, this new method had to work for *every* pianist; classically-trained pianists who had never improvised before as well as jazz, rock, and pop musicians who were unsatisfied with their current level of playing.

And then one day it came to me: Flowing Water!

Yes, Flowing Water. When water flows, it carries everything along with it. A boat doesn't have to push itself down a flowing river. It simply has to navigate. The flowing water does the work of propelling the boat forward. So my question became, "How can I devise a series of piano improv lessons that would immediately establish a flow, and allow the pianist to freely improvise a series of notes that would simply be propelled by the flow, as opposed to fighting against it?"

I already knew from my teaching experience that as soon as a teenage or adult pianist improvised their first three notes, they would ask themselves "Is this good enough?" And unfortunately, they'd usually tell themselves, "no." I was often puzzled by the fact that they'd say this even if their improvised melody sounded



great. This led me to investigate not only *what* was holding them back, but *why* they didn't enjoy their first successful attempts at improvising. It gradually became apparent to me that it was simply a question of acclimatization. They weren't used to creating melodies themselves, so their first attempts felt awkward. In addition, they hadn't yet established a real connection between the notes they improvised and what they were hearing with their inner musical ear. So even though I, as a listener, thought it sounded wonderful, they themselves didn't experience it as such.

Of course, some students *did* immediately enjoy improvising so it became my goal to create a series of exercises that would help all improvisers, at all levels of previous piano-playing experience.

I set out to create an introductory exercise that would make it impossible for a beginning improviser to ask "Is this good enough?"

"Eureka!"

When most pianists attempt to learn to improvise, they try it backwards: they start by learning a difficult technique and then afterwards work on getting it to flow. Or, someone tells them to "Make up a melody," which doesn't get them very far because their immediate thought is "This isn't good enough."

To remedy the situation, I set out to reverse the process. After all, I had seen that my 5-year old piano students could improvise with ease because they had no mental barriers to establishing a flow. But my adult students started by asking themselves "Is this good enough?" and this held them back.

After trying out various strategies with my piano students, I finally hit upon the right approach.

Flowing Water Lesson 1: An Effortless Beginning

You can try it for yourself. Just sit down at your piano or keyboard, and play any white note with your left hand index finger. Keep holding down that note and then play the next 5 white notes up the scale with the 5 fingers of your right hand: 1-2-3-4-5.



To review, it's LH finger 2, followed by RH 1-2-3-4-5. Do it again and simply listen to the notes as you play them, and keep holding the 2nd finger of your LH and the 5th finger of your RH down for a while. Play them slowly and evenly.

That's it! The only note-choice you have to make is to decide which white note to begin with in your left hand. After that, you continue up the scale with the 5 fingers of your right hand.

Now play the same notes again, s-l-o-w-l-y and e-v-e-n-l-y, always listening to each one as the sequence unfolds, and linger for a few seconds on the last note as I described above.

It's impossible to ask yourself "Is this good enough?" because anyone can do this perfectly after a few tries. I've shown this to 5-year-olds and 95-year-olds, and everyone can do it. Even people who have never before touched a piano keyboard can do it perfectly. The only decision you have to make is to choose which note to begin with, and even with this there are no wrong choices.

The next step (literally) is to move your left hand index finger one note to either the right or left, and repeat the process: LH finger 2, followed by RH 1-2-3-4-5.

Let me show you this on the piano:

[Flowing Water Lesson 1: An Effortless Beginning](#)

The beginning of a wonderful journey

This simple Flowing Water exercise is the beginning of a wonderful musical journey. While it may seem that it's "too easy" to just make that one little decision about your starting note, therein lies the real power and beauty of this exercise. That "little" decision is in fact a huge accomplishment. It's huge because you can keep doing it with a good sense of Flow. Flow, after all, is what piano improvisation is all about.

Despite its simplicity, this Flowing Water lesson has proven to be extremely powerful. Since I created it in 2012, I've taught it to hundreds of pianists during my local piano lessons and thousands more online over Skype or through my video course. One student, in Singapore, played it for her family one evening, and her mother found it so relaxing she promptly fell asleep on the sofa! Another student of mine, a Russian jazz pianist, used it to overcome the relentless self-criticism she



experienced during her jazz performances. Pianists of all levels have experienced something very soothing and freeing while doing this exercise. In retrospect, I've realized that this shouldn't be too surprising; it sounds beautiful and at the same time prevents the student from any self- or musical-criticism whatsoever. All you have to do is follow the simple instructions and the music will sound good.

Flowing Water Lesson 2: A Continuous Flow

After the first lesson becomes very easy for you, we can go for a steadier Flow. In Flowing Water Lesson 2, you do the same thing as in Lesson 1 but you don't pause each time. You just keep going in a slow, steady tempo. At this point, the actual notes are far less important than the act of playing them in a flowing manner, with absolutely no hesitation. The Flow you establish here will help make *all* the music you play easier for you, even at the advanced levels.

Here's the video:

[Flowing Water Lesson 2: A Continuous Flow](#)

Gradually introducing musical choices

The 3rd step is to introduce more musical choices, in as gradual a way as possible. In this exercise, your hands don't have to follow each other around the keys so closely. After your LH plays its note, your right hand can start with whichever white note you wish, and then keep following the sequence 1-2-3-4-5.

[Flowing Water 3: More Note Choices](#)

The Flowing Water method is actually a little "sneaky," because you're training your fingers and your musical ear to improvise without putting any pressure on yourself to "be musical" or play something that sounds like Mozart, Elton John, or your favorite jazz pianist. It's like going for a nice walk. Just enjoy the walk and you'll be getting some good exercise, without feeling like you're "exercising."

After your fingers become accustomed to improvising in this way, you'll find it very easy to make more musical decisions. I love to see my students become able to change the direction of the melodic lines, move their hands around, learn various bass patterns, and freely spin out beautiful melodies. Again, the key is to establish a



“flow” first, and then add complexity later. (Not the other way around!)

Incidentally, when I began teaching with the Flowing Water approach, I knew right away how effective it would be with beginning improvisers. What took me by surprise was how many intermediate and even advanced jazz and rock pianists were helped by it too. In retrospect I guess I shouldn't be so surprised, since my own playing had improved so much by teaching Flow to my 5-year-old piano students. My Flowing Water approach has helped thousands of pianists all over the world improvise beautiful music while at the same time feel great about their own piano playing.

It's nice when Mozart agrees with you!

Mozart had his own version of Flowing Water. He wrote that music “should flow like oil.” This beautiful image is reflected in his music.

Learning music as we learn language

When I was in my late teens and early 20s, I had the extreme good fortune to learn from two legendary jazz musicians, Billy Taylor and Gerry Mulligan.

Billy Taylor had studied jazz piano with Art Tatum and played with Charlie Parker. During our lessons, Billy told me that “we learn improvisation like we learn language.” In this way, he encouraged me to reflect on how I had learned language as a child, and to apply this knowledge to the piano in order to become a fluent improviser. I soon realized that fluency and flow are related. Starting with flow will lead to fluency, just as playing with fluency keeps our music flowing.

After studying with Taylor, I spent 2 years working as the baritone saxophonist Gerry Mulligan's assistant. While hearing him play, I realized that there were two things that distinguished Gerry from “ordinary” jazz musicians. For starters, he gave 150% effort every single time he played his sax, even if he was only tuning up. And in addition, he played with a Flow that far surpassed everyone else. In my opinion, his sense of Flow is what made him such a great player, even more importantly than the specific notes he played.



Using Flow in our learning process

Letting the musical notes Flow is one aspect of a deeper process that's at work here. Our learning process can Flow as well, and a big part of creativity involves letting our musical impulses Flow in a natural manner.

When pianists learn to improvise, there comes a moment when it begins to "click." They get it. They take whatever musical vocabulary they know and use it spontaneously to express themselves at the keyboard. Whether you're 5 or 95, this is a major moment and can be very joyful. Sometimes it happens in a step-by-step manner, and it can also happen in a seemingly sudden fashion. Although I've seen this countless times during my decades of teaching experience, one instance was especially dramatic.

A Piano Improv Miracle

I was once asked to teach a 14-year old boy named Steve. Steve had begun to learn piano relatively late, at age 12, and had made remarkable progress in a short time. He played classical music and could already sightread fluently when we started working together.

I taught him in his home and after a few lessons, I began to suspect that Steve might have hidden improvisational talents. However, when I showed him how to improvise a melody and asked him to try it for himself, he blandly stated that he didn't know how to do that. I didn't force the issue, but occasionally said something like, "Hey, why don't we make up something on the black keys together?" He would try it, but was unenthusiastic. I remember once asking him to "play just one note, any note at all." He responded by playing one note and commenting that it didn't have any meaning for him. I decided not to push the issue, but to gently bring it up once in a while.

Then the miracle happened: His mother greeted me at the door one day with tears of joy flowing down her cheeks. Steve, she told me, had sat down at the piano and improvised beautiful music for 7 hours. "Like Beethoven!" she beamed. It was true. Something had clicked in Steve, and the most beautiful and energetic music began to pour forth from him through the keyboard. He has since performed in public, sharing his piano improvisations with appreciative audiences, and continues to love playing and composing music to this day.



What's holding us back?

As pianists, we've all heard expressions such as "Don't worry about wrong notes," "It's the spirit of the music that matters most," and "Your listeners aren't judging you – they just want to enjoy the music." While we may nod our heads in agreement, somewhere in our minds a little voice is saying, "But... I want to play perfectly and not hit any wrong notes." This voice prevents the water from flowing.

The problem lies in a cultural shift that took place 60-70 years ago.

Since the earliest times, human beings have been singing together and playing musical instruments for each other, and there is little-to-no indication that they ever worried too much about playing wrong notes.

Picture the following profound human interactions that involve music:

A mother singing a lullaby to her infant. (Yes – fathers too. Some of my deepest musical experiences took place at 4:00am while singing "Shenandoah" to my young children.) A bagpiper leading the troops into battle. A hearty singalong at the local pub. A mournful funeral threnody.

And even in formal performances, musicians didn't fear wrong notes. Mistakes were accepted as "part of being human." As long as the musician let the wrong note become absorbed into the flow of the musical river, no one paid any attention to errors. It was reported that the composer Johannes Brahms didn't worry about the many mistakes he made when performing his own pieces in public. Taking it even further, the 19th century piano teacher Hans von Bülow advised his students to *intentionally* play wrong notes during challenging technical passages, to show the audience how hard the music was to play!

We humans have been playing musical instruments for at least 40,000 years. And until very recently, wrong notes were clearly not an issue.

Even in the early days of recording, performers kept some wrong notes on their records. Classical and jazz recordings from this era contain many mistakes, and we can even hear some trumpet "clams" on Frank Sinatra's classics.



There are 2 reasons for this:

1. The goal of recording was to emulate a live performance, and everyone knew there would be wrong notes in live performances.
2. The process of “fixing” a wrong note involved doing the whole recording over again, which was an expensive process.

So for decades, recordings served to imitate live performances.

The “big shift”

Sometime during the 1950s, the situation began to reverse itself. More consumers could afford stereo equipment and more records were sold. This led to a slow decline in the number of live musical performances which continues to this day, and at the same time, the recording technology of “overdubbing” allowed performers to easily and inexpensively “fix” wrong notes. Even the great classical pianist Vladimir Horowitz, who famously didn’t care about hitting wrong notes during his live performances, began “punching in” to fix a wrong note here and there on his recordings, saying that he didn’t want a listener to hear the same wrong note played over and over while listening at home.

With the gradual decline of live performances and the growing popularity of seemingly-perfect recordings, the “big shift” happened:

Instead of recordings imitating live performances, live performances began imitating recordings!

Think about this for a minute. The performers on the recordings didn’t always play perfectly. But because they could electronically fix their wrong notes, the musicians

who idolized them began to put unnecessary pressure on themselves to give note-perfect live performances – something that their idols themselves couldn’t do!

Now, decades later, the whole situation is completely messed up!!!

We have 5-year-olds going into their first piano recitals stressed out about playing a wrong note. We have teenagers giving up piano because they dread having to play in public. And we have adults who love piano but are too scared to play for their



family. *There's no "flow," my friends.*

It's not your wrong note we care about, it's the next one!

When I hear you play, I don't care about your wrong note. In fact, nobody does, except you. And if you were living a hundred years ago, you wouldn't care about it either.

What we *do* care about, in a big way, is your *next* note. And the notes after that.

We all make mistakes, and we all play wrong notes. The important question is, "Do we let it stop the flow of the music or do we let it be absorbed into the flow of the music?" Just like in sports, speaking with friends, or reading a book, it's about the flow. An occasional wrong note isn't as important as you may think. In fact, it's meaningless. A drop in the ocean.

An exercise to help you keep the Flow going

Here's a great exercise to help you keep the Flow going if you play a wrong note.

With your right hand, play this sequence of notes beginning with middle C:

C C G G A A G

F F E E D D C

Do you recognize the melody? Yes, it's "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." Play it a few times in a moderate tempo, with a natural sense of Flow.

Now, play these notes: C C G G A B

Notice what happened when you played the B (instead of the expected A). Did you tense up, or remain calm? How would you react if you made this "mistake" during a

performance. How would you feel if you were performing Mozart's Theme and Variations on this melody ("Ah, vous dirai-je, Maman?") and you played that wrong note?

If you're like most pianists, you'd probably tense up a bit, maybe rush the tempo a little, and scold yourself for "messing up."



But let's try for something different, in the interest of keeping the flow. Let's create an exercise to *intentionally practice* keeping the flow going in the event of wrong notes.

To do this, play the melody again, and make the same "mistake." This time, however, keep going without tensing up, without rushing, as you simply play the next G and continue with the melody. *As if nothing happened.*

How did it go? Were you able to do it? I just tried it again for myself, and I found myself actually enjoying the sound of the B. (*"Hey, this doesn't sound so bad after all!"*) Although we all know that "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" doesn't go higher in that spot, we accept it because of 3 things:

1. It actually does sound pretty good.
2. If the Flow of the music continues, our enjoyment continues along with it.
3. If you're not bothered by an occasional wrong note, we as listeners aren't bothered either.

Now it's your turn to keep playing the melody, and intentionally play a wrong note once in a while. And when you do, remember to stay relaxed, keep the flow going, and simply play the next correct note after that. Do this for about 15 minutes, until you begin to have fun with it. Become fascinated by the process of playing wrong notes, staying relaxed, and recovering by staying in the Flow.

I tried it myself in this video: [Using Flow to recover from wrong notes](#)

Keeping the Flow with music you know well

Let's try this exercise with a piece you know pretty well. It can be classical, jazz, rock, folk, or anything else you enjoy playing. Play it with both hands and intentionally play a wrong note. Do it a few times, and practice resuming with the correct notes just as you did with "Twinkle." Yes, it may take a few minutes or even a few days to become fluent at this, but you can do it!

Go ahead, try it. (I'll wait.)



So, what happened? What did you observe? Did you tense up? Or maybe you didn't since it was intentional. Either way, nothing big happened, right? You simply played a note that wasn't in the melody and then moved on, finishing the phrase.

Just like an athlete does when she bobbles the ball yet still successfully scores a goal. Not picture-perfect but who cares? Her team still wins the game. We still play a beautiful piece and the audience enjoys it.

Let's take it a little further. Play it again, with the same or a different "mistake," and as soon as you hear the wrong note, smile. Just a little smile.

Is it possible to actually enjoy our performance at the very moment we make a mistake? Yes, it definitely is. In fact, we have no other choice since as human beings we are going to make mistakes. Over time, we'll make lots of mistakes so if we want to remain emotionally healthy we'd better get used to them. We need to embrace them.

The audience only tenses up if we tense up. If we keep enjoying the piece, the audience will keep enjoying it too.

Look at it another way: a sports audience actually finds it *more* exciting when their favorite player fumbles the ball yet still scores the goal. As pianists, we forget that our audience is rooting for us in the same way.

Improvising a Bach Gigue

I learned about this "the hard way," while in college. I was accompanying a violinist on a Bach Gigue, which we played at a pretty fast tempo.

Although the violinist and I had rehearsed the piece extensively, she must have become a little nervous during the performance because I suddenly began hearing her play notes that I had never heard before. They certainly weren't the ones on the page!

I was already pretty comfortable improvising in a jazz or rock context, but I had never tried to improvise in the style of Bach before. But now, in front of a full auditorium, I realized that I had no choice – I needed to make up an accompaniment.



To this day, I have no idea what I played. I just remember listening to her *very* intently and playing some chords while keeping the Flow of the music going. It felt like I was holding onto a wild horse, and I remember modulating to a new key when I heard her play an unusual sharp.

After what seemed like an eternity (probably 30-45 seconds), she played a phrase that was recognizable as Bach and I rejoined her in the written music, about 2 pages later.

The funny thing is that none of our friends in the audience heard anything wrong! Our performance was successful because we kept the Flow going.

Because we humans will occasionally make mistakes, simply let them be absorbed into the Flow of the music when they happen.

Great places to get into the Flow

A great way to practice getting into a better flow while performing is to intentionally perform in places where wrong notes won't be as noticeable. Play background music at the opening of an art exhibition, or during a wedding cocktail hour. Dance gigs are great for this too because you'll find yourself having so much fun grooving to the music that it won't matter if you play an occasional wrong note. The beat will just keep going on as if nothing had happened.

It's also helpful to play with other musicians as opposed to always playing solo. Whether we're playing classical chamber music, in a rock or jazz group, or accompanying a pop singer, the overall sound of the group makes any individual mistake less obvious.

Even when I've played Broadway shows, the musicians would sometimes play wrong notes. When this happened, we simply smiled and moved on.

Please feel free to share the link to this ebook with a piano-playing friend. It may make a big difference for them.

Part 2: Let The Music Flow!



Is there something obsessive about how we usually learn piano?

There's something about the way piano is usually taught that makes us feel like each new piece needs to get harder and harder. Always more and more challenging. "If my pieces don't get increasingly complex, I'm not improving." (And what exactly does "improving" mean, anyway?)

Part of this is understandable, of course. It's a wonderful feeling to move one's hands rapidly up and down the keyboard and it does indeed take years of diligent effort to arrive at this point. But the whole process is lopsided if, *at the same time*, we don't adequately enjoy each step of the way. And learning piano tends to be more lopsided in this respect than many of the other activities we do in our lives.

Imagine a teenager playing a soccer (football) game. They're in an exciting game with the score tied 1-1 with only 15 seconds remaining on the clock. Our teenager gets the ball, outmaneuvers a series of defenders, and scores a spectacular 40-yard goal to win the game for her team. Yaaay!!! Her teammates triumphantly carry her off the field as the hero of the day. A few minutes later, her coach tells her, "Great job! Next week I want you to score *two* goals, from *50* yards out."

That would be ridiculous, right? But that's exactly what well-meaning piano teachers do all the time. The student spends 5 months learning a Mozart sonata and plays it magnificently in recital. And what happens at the next lesson? The teacher says, "Great! Now you're ready for something harder, like Chopin's Fantasia Impromptu!"

Why does every step need to be harder than the last one? Why not let the student play a simpler piece again, in another style of music? Perhaps a series of 5 easy Mozart pieces, or some jazz and pop songs? I've found that piano students learn much better when the curriculum is "spiraled," meaning that they touch on challenging material while applying their knowledge to a wide variety of music at all levels. This approach is both fun and gives the student a more solid springboard



towards learning more advanced music.

Letting the flavors blend

Every good cook knows that soup needs to cook slowly, over low heat, if you want the flavors to blend. Piano is like that too. To become real musicians, we need to let the soup simmer. There's a time to push forward, and a time to play music at the same level for a while. There's a time to turn up the heat and a time for slow cooking. Soup tastes better when it simmers for a while, so that the flavors blend better.

Our pianistic flavors need time to blend in this way too.

"If I can play it, it must not be hard enough!"

Because of this relentless push towards ever more and more technically difficult music, many piano students can play one or two masterpieces yet struggle to learn each new piece. Despite years of lessons, they can't sightread easily. Learning new music is a painful process for them and they try to memorize each piece just so they don't have to look at the music any more. And even worse, they don't ever enjoy the level they're at, because they feel they're not playing music that's challenging enough.

"If I can play it, it must not be hard enough!" is not an exaggeration. Unfortunately, many piano students feel this way about themselves and their music, *for decades*.

You deserve better. I want you to love the music you're playing, and to enjoy the level you're at. And when you improve, I want you to enjoy that new level too. If you don't enjoy your own playing now, the chances are you'll never truly enjoy playing music. I know pianists who have played for 50 years and have never thoroughly enjoyed their own playing. This even includes many professionals.

Have fun by moving laterally

Here's a fun exercise to try for a month:

Think about your current level of playing, and select 5 pieces that are a little easier



than what you'd normally practice. They could be pop songs, folk songs, blues, easy classical pieces, or jazz standards with simple chord progressions. Put them on your piano where you'll readily see them every day.

The idea is to play this music for a full month. Yes, you can practice more challenging music as well, but come back to these 5 pieces every day. If you have time, you can play all 5 each day, or you can rotate through them.

The idea is to enjoy playing these pieces. Thoroughly enjoy them, with absolutely no thought of playing anything harder. Totally be "in the moment," and let the music fill your soul. Listen to the harmonies, hear how the bass and melody support one another, experience the rhythms, and become the emotional mood of the music.

This process may sound obvious, but it's amazing how few aspiring pianists ever do it. But isn't this exactly what music is about?

Take the time to learn several pieces at each level, and thoroughly enjoy playing them for their own sake. Not just as steps on the way or as preparation for the future. If you do this, you'll also experience a wonderful "side effect:" your overall level of musicianship will improve so much that it will become much easier to learn your challenging music as well.

Here are 3 more ways to Move Laterally, especially if your piano playing is "stuck in a rut":

1. Improvise simple melodies with a scale of your choice.
2. Learn just the bass lines to 10 songs.
3. Accompany kids while they sing.

Letting your emotional baggage dissolve

While it's true that we can't get rid of our emotional baggage in one fell swoop, we can allow it to slowly dissolve. I can acknowledge that I want to be perfect, and then simply smile at this thought and get down to the business of enjoying myself at the piano. Whatever happens, I can handle it because I've practiced staying in the Flow of the music.



Let's become rock guitarists!

Rock and folk guitarists are really good at enjoying each level they're at.

Can you imagine Keith Richards or Ed Sheeran tensing up because they didn't think they were "good enough?" The big difference here is that the guitarist celebrates what he *can* do, while the pianist feels overwhelmed by what he *can't*.

Here's a video I made that shows this:

[The REAL difference between Guitar Players and Pianists!](#)

Changing our focus

I once produced an album for a vocalist who sang Frank Sinatra songs. It was a fun project and I enjoyed transcribing many of Nelson Riddle's beautiful orchestrations and conducting a full orchestra in the recording studio.

At one point, the vocalist decided to go back into the studio and redo some of his vocals. I'll never forget one particular moment in which I suggested he sing a certain high note at end of a phrase. The vocalist became very agitated and began rambling on about how he wasn't able to sing that note, because Frank Sinatra was the greatest vocalist in the world and no one else could sing a note that high as good as Frank Sinatra could.

To my complete and utter astonishment, the vocalist proceeded to perfectly sing the exact note he was telling me he couldn't reach, and then immediately went back to claiming he couldn't sing it.

Wow! Since it was obvious to me that this vocalist had a mental block about how high he could sing, I merely nodded my head in agreement and listened as he went on to sing the phrase with a lower, but less effective, note. He was so focused on his preconceptions about "results," that he didn't embrace his true level of ability.

By letting go of "results," we often play better.

What would happen if, the next time you played in public, you focused on intently following the line of the music instead of worrying about what people thought of you? Knowing that you can recover from an occasional wrong note, what would



happen if you decided to dance inside yourself as you played a piece with lively rhythms? And now that I think of it, what would happen if you played a very easy piece the next time you performed in public? (Hint: the audience will still enjoy it!)

Food for thought

Instead of “good,” aim for energetic. Instead of “note perfect,” aim for Flow. Instead of “to make everyone think I’m a good pianist,” aim for enjoying your own playing.

Miles Davis never made a note-perfect recording.

View performing as an experiment

I was once asked to perform during a formal concert in front of a large audience. Instead of choosing a flashy, technically impressive piece of music, I chose a gentle, simple composition of my own. However, I gave myself one goal: I would try to be as comfortable and relaxed onstage as I am in my own living room. I’m so glad I tried this experiment, because it showed me what’s truly possible as a performer.

Self – sabotage

Have you ever heard the old saying, “With friends like these, who needs enemies?” Well, when it comes to holding us back, we’re usually the ones doing it to ourselves!

One of the biggest ways in which we sabotage ourselves is by trying to play better than we really play. Sometimes it’s easier to see this in non-musical situations so let’s look at job interviews for a moment. One of my piano students manages a large factory, and he verified that interviewees sabotage themselves in this way all the time. They walk into a job interview and try to be better than they really are. They try to say things that will impress the interviewer, even if they don’t really know what they’re talking about. They try too hard to be witty, clever, or knowledgeable about anything and everything. As a result, they inhibit the flow of their personality so much that the interviewer never sees their positive qualities. No personal or professional relationship is established.



It's the same thing with actors when they're auditioning for parts in a musical theater production. I see this all the time when I accompany them on piano. They get all worked up into a frenzy because of the "competition" and go into the audition trying to sing "better" than they really do. The irony is that they end up singing worse, and as a result they don't show what they *can* do.

Instead of trying to be "perfect," we can play music the way we really play. We can do what a great athlete does: prepare as well as we can, and then stay relaxed yet intensely focused during our performance, knowing that we can handle any mistakes that may happen. If we (figuratively) drop the ball, we'll simply pick it up and keep our "head in the game."

This type of attitude wins championships for athletes and makes us into world-class musicians.

Flowing Water as the cure for Practice Paralysis

I once had a 16-year-old pianist come to me for lessons. He was very serious about learning jazz piano, and I remember him well because he knew exactly what was holding him back. He explained that he had an entire shelf full of jazz piano books on his wall at home, and he felt so overwhelmed every time he glanced at that shelf that he never actually started practicing anything.

Wow! This was back in the 1990s and I had never encountered this before. There were so few jazz piano books available when I was first learning, in the late 1970s, that I was overjoyed to get *any* information on how to play. In fact, I happily spent a year or two playing jazz with basic 7th chords and loved every moment. When I eventually discovered 9ths, 13ths, and A/B voicings, I was more than ready for them.

My young student, on the other hand, was experiencing what I eventually named Practice Paralysis. Practice Paralysis is when you feel so overwhelmed by what you *think* you need to learn, that you freeze up and don't do anything at all. It can feel overwhelming to see everything you need to learn all at once. And if we go numb and get emotionally paralyzed like this, we don't feel good about ourselves *or* our music. Practice Paralysis stops the flow of our learning process.

The cure for Practice Paralysis is to narrow down what you're practicing at any given time to one, or at the most two, concepts. You take one thing, like b9 chords



for instance, and you pretend the rest *doesn't exist*. If we try to learn everything at once, it's like connecting 30 garden hoses to one faucet. It overwhelms the system. But if we use just one hose, then yes, we can water our garden.

Here's an exercise to help you avoid Practice Paralysis. Let's say you want to work on your soloing. Put aside everything else, like advanced chord voicings, for a while. You can practice soloing over the voicings you already know. Now where do we start with the soloing? Even here there are many options: you can learn modes, melodic embellishment, rhythmic displacement, motivic development, soloing in hard keys, soloing on different tunes... the list could go on and on.

Let's start with just one of these, like modes. Modes sound great, and will help you with your soloing, but there are so many of them to learn. And they're so confusing at first! Here's the key: instead of getting overwhelmed like most pianists do, just choose *one* mode to start with and learn it *really well*.

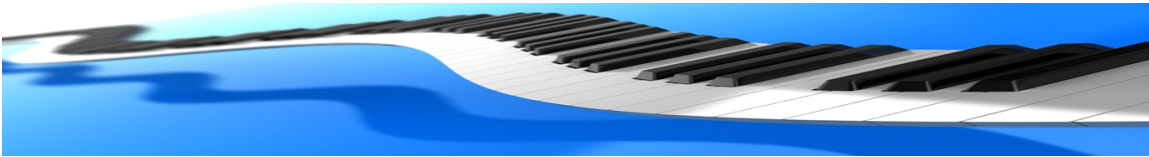
Let's say you choose the E Dorian mode, which has 2 sharps (F#, C#) just like the D major scale. Become fascinated with the sound of this scale, as if you've never heard it before. Play it a few times. Can you hear where there are half steps instead of whole steps? That's a big difference and we usually gloss right over it. In fact, the placement of the whole and half steps is what gives each mode its unique and characteristic sound.

Then, spend some time improvising with the E Dorian mode, over an Em7 chord in your LH. Try it as a ballad. Now slow swing. Medium tempo. With both straight and swing 8th notes. Use the fact that you're becoming familiar with this mode as a chance to also get comfortable improvising at a fast tempo. Then try it as a bossa nova. Are you keeping a steady beat? If not, how can you work on that?

Did you notice the amazing thing that just happened? We became so interested in exploring just this one mode, E Dorian, in different tempos and with various rhythmic feels, that it naturally led us to a whole new study of rhythm! Voilà! No more Practice Paralysis! That's the beauty of narrowing our focus down to one thing to start with. It actually widens our field of interest in a good, healthy way that feeds itself. We've re-established a sense of flow to our learning process.

Video: [The Cure for Practice Paralysis](#)

Part 3: Keeping The Water Flowing



At every new stage, begin with Minimum Viable Piano

As we've seen, there's something about learning piano that can become a little compulsive when we place too much emphasis on "progress" over enjoyment. The irony here is that when we truly enjoy how we play *now*, at each step of the way, we'll improve faster and have a much more fulfilling musical life.

The idea is to apply a concept I call Minimum Viable Piano. Minimum Viable Piano is a term I've invented to describe an attitude toward your playing where you identify, at each stage, the bare minimum you need to do in order to play with Flow.

Minimum Viable Piano is actually the same as the way we learn most of the things we do in life. We learn our language by saying a few words over and over, until we can communicate our basic needs. We don't wait until we know thousands of words before we enjoy communicating with our family and friends. So why do this at the piano? It holds us back more than we realize. The Minimum Viable Piano concept, by the way, doesn't always refer to playing simply. I've used it myself when playing for Broadway shows, and I've taught professional pianists how to successfully use it in their work. This just means that we begin by using what we can play well, and then building from there. I'm often surprised by how few pianists actually take this view. Instead, they usually start with something much too complex and never really play it with a sense of Flow. Minimum Viable Piano, on the other hand, helps us feel more confident and enjoy our playing more, at every step of the way.

Here are 3 ways to use the Minimum Viable Piano concept in your playing:

1. **Pop:** If you know your basic triads in root position but struggle with inversions, learn 10 pop songs with only root position triads.



2. **Rock:** If you know the C Blues Scale but not the others, have fun improvising with the C Blues Scale over several LH patterns, before you go on to tackle the other blues scales.
3. **Jazz:** if you can play 7th chords but haven't yet learned the A and B rootless voicings, spend some time enjoying the 7th chords before learning the more complex voicings. Play 5 jazz standards using only 7th chords. You'll have fun and yes, you'll sound great!

Video: [The Minimum Viable Piano Concept](#)

Stage fright: the inhibitor of Flow

I remember the scene vividly. My friend Barry Levitt and I were standing backstage at NYC's famed 92nd St. Y auditorium, about to begin a concert of Cole Porter's music. It was our fifth and final performance in just 3 days, and as pianist and music director, I was finally feeling completely relaxed. Barry was just about to go onstage and introduce me, when Hadassah Markson, the show's producer, approached us. She wished us luck and then added, as an afterthought, "By the way, George Shearing and his wife are in the audience. Have fun!" And she left.

Panic! G-G-G-e-e-e-orge S-S-Shearing-g-g???? All my relaxation instantly fled and was replaced by a racing heartbeat and pools of sweat. Barry then walked onto stage and I was left alone, trembling with fear.

George Shearing, you see, has been one of my musical idols since I was a teenager. I listened to him extensively and even transcribed several of his jazz piano solos. And now he was right there, in the audience to judge my piano playing (so I imagined). Even worse, he was blind, so I knew he couldn't see the singers or dancers. This further convinced me that he would focus intensively on every single note I would play for the next 2 hours. Yikes!!!

When I heard Barry announce my name, I walked out onstage, sat down at the 9-foot Steinway grand piano, and began playing. I could feel the sweat roll off my fingers and onto the keys. My heart was pounding furiously, and I began to feel a little lightheaded. Worse yet, all the singers and instrumentalists were relying on me to set the tempos and give them musical cues. And as I played each note, I asked myself "Did George Shearing like *that* note? What is he thinking about *this* note?"



What would I do? There seemed to be no way out of this terrible situation.

Then, it occurred to me that I could not physically survive a full 2 hours of this. I would have a heart attack or faint if it kept up. Miraculously, this thought helped put things in perspective a little and I gave myself a little smile, realizing how crazy it all was. I saw that the whole thing was in my own head. *George Shearing didn't care about me.* He lived in the neighborhood and had simply come to the show with his wife to hear Cole Porter's music and have a good time. It didn't matter whether he thought I was a good pianist or not and besides, he could tell what level I was at after hearing just 8 measures of the opening song.

So a little light was let in. A breath of fresh air. And sure enough, after a few minutes, the "George Shearing panic" began to flow a little. It became like a cloud of sorts, moving to my left. And then it would come back again and I let it keep moving as it drifted to my right. I began feeling calmer and even started to have fun with the idea he was in attendance, by using his trademark "block chords" technique here and there. Yes, George Shearing was in the audience, and I was onstage. I realized that there can be Flow with this human experience, just as there can be in the music itself.

This was a watershed moment for me as a performer, and I've since been able to take what I learned from this and incorporate it into the lessons I teach. I can help you to "open a window" when you're playing for family, friends, a birthday party or even a wedding.

What's in your teacup?

In his book *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, Paul Reps shares the story of a Zen master who pours a cup of tea for a visitor. To his guest's surprise, the master keeps pouring until the cup overflows and tea spills onto the table. The master explains that the guest is like this cup, already full. He elaborates, "How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?"

It's the same way with performing. You can't push away the fear, but you can intentionally add another element to the cup. This way, it won't be filled 100% with the fear. By adding even 20% of something else, the fear will begin to dissipate.



Here are 5 ways to bring fresh elements to your “teacup” when performing:

1. Smile.
2. Think of a silly face or remark that a friend or family member has made.
3. Remember how much you love music. Experience your love of music fully.
4. Listen to the music in a wholehearted way. (When we’re nervous, we usually don’t listen enough.)
5. Take a true look at the audience. In a typical 100-member audience, I’ll bet that 30% are tired after a long day at work, 20% are energetic and completely into the music, 20% just want to hear something “nice,” 25% are bored and want to go home, and 5% are suffering from a physical or emotional ailment. Think about them for a moment before you perform, and acknowledge how the music can soothe and comfort them. This can be a powerful tool.

I was once playing a concert with Bob Kindred, who was a world-class jazz tenor saxophone player. I was impressed by how beautifully he played a ballad, and after the performance I asked him what he was thinking about while playing that tune. He told me that he always picked one person out of the audience and played exclusively for that person. This was his way of connecting with the music and environment in a fully human manner. Give it a try the next time you perform.

The parallel between music and sports

Along these same lines, I’m fascinated by the parallel between performing music and playing organized sports. In both cases, it’s about tapping into our love of what we’re doing and the energy of doing it well. When a soccer player is 10 feet in front of the goal and about to kick the ball, she doesn’t stop to worry, “Oh no, that person in the 10th row is watching me. Do they think I’m any good?” Instead of asking these self-defeating questions, athletes fully engage with the present moment and kick the ball towards the goal. We pianists can do this too!

Ironically, we often play our best when we’re sick. Early in his career, Keith Jarrett was in so much back pain while performing a concert in Köln, Germany, that it took him completely by surprise to hear how well the live recording came out. Lots of



listeners agree with him, because his Köln Concert album is one of the best-selling solo piano recordings of all time.

Although it's dreadful to have to perform when ill, the flip side is that we're so concerned with simply "getting through it," that we don't get in our own way anymore. The music flows better because we don't have the energy to criticize ourselves or our playing anymore. All we're trying to do is survive the performance and get home to rest as soon as possible. And somehow, the music flows better. Just ask Keith Jarrett.

Paul McCartney knows about Flow

Paul McCartney once said, "One of the biggest thrills is sitting down with a guitar or piano and just trying to make a song happen."

What I love most about this quote is what he *didn't* say. McCartney didn't say that he loved it when a song comes together. Or when a song sounds great. Or when a song becomes a hit.

No, Sir Paul is speaking about the joy of simply getting into the flow and *trying*. This isn't what we usually value, however. Book stores don't line their shelves with titles like *The Seven Habits Of People Who Try*. Athletic companies don't use #justtry as their logo. And yes, the only reason we care about Paul McCartney is that he wrote a lot of great songs and was part of The Beatles.

But I feel this quote highlights a big part of what makes McCartney so special. Here's a guy who hasn't written many great songs in decades, yet despite this, he *still* gets a kick out of sitting down and trying. And in fact, this is the common thread between his early years and now. He loves that magical moment when you first sit down to make music. That magical moment of possibility when you have no idea what may happen and what might appear. That magical moment when you begin to establish Flow.

One of the most wonderful feelings in the whole world

Being able to sit down at the piano or keyboard and let the music effortlessly flow through our fingers is one of the most wonderful feelings in the whole world. One of my students, who tried improvising after years of only playing from written scores,



reported having an “overwhelming sense of freedom” the very first time she tried improvising.

The Flowing Water concept goes deep. We begin each new step in our musical journey by establishing a sense of Flow first, and then adding complexity later. And then once we use Flow to become fluent improvisers, we find that improvisation takes a lot of the fear away from performing in public. And finally, we can study and improve the Flow in our whole approach to making music, both in our learning process and everywhere we find ourselves playing piano.

Once we bring Flow into our musical lives, everything changes for the better. Our playing improves, and we begin playing piano with more joy and less stress. Most importantly, we begin to feel good about our own piano playing, perhaps for the very first time.

Enjoy the journey, and “let the music flow!”

Ron Drotos

Please feel free to share the link to this ebook with a piano-playing friend whom you think may benefit from it. Thanks!



About Ron Drotos and KeyboardImprov

Hi! I'm Ron Drotos. I began improvising on piano at the age of 6, when I sat down and made "dinosaur" sounds on the keys every chance I could. Eventually, I took piano lessons and even studied with the legendary jazz pianist Billy Taylor, who had learned from Art Tatum and played with Charlie Parker!

After spending two years as the saxophonist Gerry Mulligan's assistant, I moved to New York City in 1989. Because I can play in many musical styles, my career has brought me to Carnegie Hall (NY Pops), Broadway (*Smokey Joe's Café*, *Swinging On A Star*) and The Blue Note Jazz Club (with jazz vocalist, Giacomo Gates).

I'm passionate about piano improvisation and love to share my knowledge and experience with my piano students. In 2012 I created KeyboardImprov.com to provide pianists at all levels a supportive and comprehensive environment where they can receive personal guidance to become fluent improvisers in jazz, blues, rock, pop as well as classical improv styles.

My Flowing Water approach has helped thousands of pianists all over the world improvise beautiful music and feel great about their own piano playing.

Learn more at <https://keyboardimprov.com>