

The Two Mindsets

One of the best things my old teacher taught me is that there are two distinct mindsets: one for learning a piece, and one for performing. When learning a piece, you strive for perfection. Your critical senses are fully engaged and weighing everything you do. But when performing, you turn off your inner critic. Instead, trust your preparation. Concentrate instead on the effect you're going for. If you make a mistake, get past it and move on. Do the best you can in the moment.

When learning a piece, you're building it from the ground up. At this stage, mistakes are unacceptable. Every last bit of the piece must be correct and secure. You can't build accuracy on inaccuracy. You can't build security on insecurity. Your foundation must be perfect and bulletproof.

When performing, you're no longer building the piece. You're displaying it. A performance isn't the place to work on problems. Your preparatory work is, for the moment, done. The piece itself is as perfect and secure as you can make it.

You're not, of course, infallible. Stuff happens in performance. You can't let mistakes derail you in the heat of a performance. So you practice recovering from mistakes as smoothly as possible. In this kind of practice, you're no longer working to perfect the piece. It is what it is. In performance practice, you're focused on learning to cope with the inevitable glitches of a live performance.

You can shuttle back and forth between the two kinds of practice. You may find that, while practicing performance, the piece isn't as secure as you thought. In that case, it's back to the drawing board of further refining the piece.

Learning to play without mistakes and learning to play through mistakes aren't contradictory. They simply address different questions. If asked how well I should know a piece, my answer should be "perfectly." If asked how well I can perform a piece, my answer should be "as well as I can."