

RACHMANINOFF'S
**10 ESSENTIALS OF
PIANO PLAYING**

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10 ESSENTIALS OF PIANO PLAYING[†]

BY SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

In 1910 *The Etude* magazine published an interview with Sergei Rachmaninoff, who had recently been named Supervisor General of the Imperial Conservatories of Russia.

In it, the eminent composer and pianist was prompted to articulate his views on the ten most important attributes of artistic piano playing and elaborate on each at length.

The task presented a challenge to Rachmaninoff, who writes about the "seemingly impossible task [of defining] the number of attributes of really excellent pianoforte playing."

"One can never tell in print what can be communicated by the living teacher," he says, but he still used the opportunity to offer us "food for thought" as he reflected on what artistry is at the piano.

Kept busy with his composing and performing careers, Rachmaninoff was not known for his teaching. **The following remarks are one of his only recorded statements on the craft of piano playing.**

[†] To access the archived March 1910 issue of *The Etude Magazine* online, visit <https://etudemagazine.com/etude/1910/03/>



10 ESSENTIALS OF PIANO PLAYING

BY SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

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ESSENTIAL #1

FORMING THE PROPER CONCEPTION OF THE PIECE



One must comprehend the main design of the composer.

Naturally, there are technical difficulties which must be worked out, measure by measure, but unless the student can form some idea of the work in its larger proportions his finished performance may resemble a kind of musical patchwork.

Behind every composition is the **architectural plan of the composer**. The student should endeavor, first of all, to discover this plan, and then he should build in the manner in which the composer would have had him build.

IN UNDERTAKING THE STUDY OF A NEW COMPOSITION IT IS HIGHLY IMPORTANT TO GAIN A CONCEPTION OF THE WORK AS A WHOLE.

Doubtless the best way is to hear it performed by some pianist whose authority as an interpreter cannot be questioned. However, many students are so situated that this course is impossible. It is also often quite impossible for the teacher, who is busy teaching from morning to night, to give a rendering of the work that would be absolutely perfect in all of its details.



ESSENTIAL #1

FORMING THE PROPER CONCEPTION OF THE PIECE

However, one can gain something from the teacher who can, by his genius, give the pupil an idea of the artistic demands of the piece.

If the student has the advantage of hearing neither the virtuoso nor the teacher he need not despair, if he has talent. Talent! Ah, that is the great thing in all musical work. If he has talent he will see with the eyes of talent—that wonderful force which penetrates all artistic mysteries and **reveals the truths as nothing else possibly can.**



YOU ASK ME, “HOW CAN THE STUDENT FORM THE PROPER CONCEPTION OF THE WORK AS A WHOLE?”

Then he grasps, as if by intuition, the composer’s intentions in writing the work, and, like the true interpreter, communicates these thoughts to his audience in their proper form.



ESSENTIAL #2

TECHNICAL PROFICIENCY

It goes without saying, that technical proficiency should be **one of the first acquisitions** of the student who would become a fine pianist. It is impossible to conceive of fine playing that is not marked by clean, fluent, distinct, elastic technic. The technical ability of the performer should be of such a nature that it can be **applied immediately** to all the artistic demands of the composition to be interpreted.



Of course, there may be individual passages which require some special technical study, but, generally speaking, technic is worthless unless the hands and the mind of the player are so trained that they can encompass the principal difficulties found in modern compositions.



ESSENTIAL #2 **TECHNICAL PROFICIENCY**

TECHNIC, HOWEVER, IS AT FIRST MADE A MATTER OF PARAMOUNT IMPORTANCE. ALL STUDENTS MUST BECOME TECHNICALLY PROFICIENT. NONE ARE EXCUSED.

In the music schools of Russia great stress is laid upon technic. Possibly this may be one of the reasons why some of the Russian pianists have been so favorably received in recent years.

The work in the leading Russian conservatories is almost entirely under supervision of the Imperial Musical Society. The system is elastic in that, although all students are obliged to go through the same course, special attention is given to individual cases.



It may be interesting for readers to know something of the general plan followed in the Imperial music schools of Russia.



ESSENTIAL #2 **TECHNICAL PROFICIENCY**



THE MOSCOW CONSERVATORY, C. 1901

The course is nine years in duration. During the first five years the student gets most of his technical instruction from a book of studies by Hanon, which is used very extensively in the conservatories. In fact, this is practically the only book of strictly technical studies employed.

All of the studies are in the key of "C." They include scales, arpeggios, and other forms of exercises in special technical designs.

At the end of the fifth year an examination takes place. This examination is twofold. The pupil is examined first for proficiency in technic, and later for proficiency in artistic playing—pieces, studies, etc. However, if the pupil fails to pass the technical examination he is not permitted to go ahead. He knows the exercises in the book of studies by *Hanon* so well that he knows each study by number, and the examiner may ask him, for instance, to play study 17, or 28, or 32, etc.

The student at once sits at the keyboard and plays. Although the original studies are all in the key of "C," he may be requested to play them in any other key. **He has studied them so thoroughly that he should be able to play them in any key desired.**



ESSENTIAL #2 **TECHNICAL PROFICIENCY**

A metronomic test is also applied. The student knows that he will be expected to play the studies at certain rates of speed. The examiner states the speed and the metronome is started.

The pupil is required, for instance, to play the E flat major scale with the metronome at 120, eight notes to the beat. If he is successful in doing this, he is marked accordingly and other tests are given.



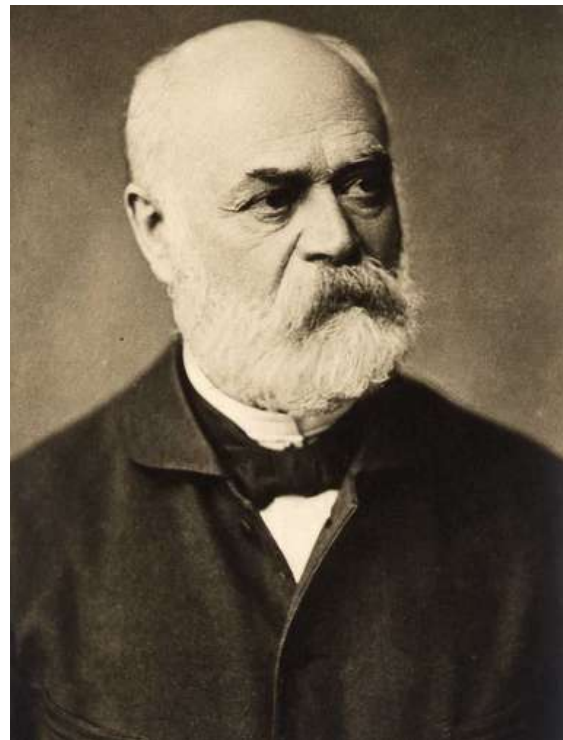
Personally, I believe this matter of insisting upon a thorough technical knowledge is a very vital one.

The mere ability to play a few pieces does not constitute musical proficiency. It is like those music boxes which possess only a few tunes. The student's technical grasp should be all-embracing.

Later the student is given advanced technical exercises, like those of Tausig. Czerny is also very deservedly popular. Less is heard of the studies of



ESSENTIAL #2 TECHNICAL PROFICIENCY



Henselt, however, notwithstanding his long service in Russia. Henselt's studies are so beautiful that they should rather be classed with pieces like the studies of Chopin.

THE MERE ABILITY TO PLAY A FEW PIECES DOES NOT
CONSTITUTE MUSICAL PROFICIENCY.



ESSENTIAL #3 **PROPER PHRASING**

An artistic interpretation is not possible if the student does not know the laws underlying the **very important subject of phrasing**.

Unfortunately many editions of good music are found wanting in proper phrase markings. Some of the phrase signs are erroneously applied. Consequently the only safe way is for the student to make a special study of this important branch of musical art.

In the olden days phrase signs were little used. Bach used them very sparingly. It was not necessary to mark them in those times, for every musician who counted himself a musician could determine the phrases as he played.

But a knowledge of the means of defining phrases in a composition is by no means all-sufficient. Skill in executing the phrases is quite as important.

The real musical feeling must exist in **the mind of the composer** or all the knowledge of correct phrasing he may possess **will be worthless**.





ESSENTIAL #4 **REGULATING THE TEMPO**

IF A FINE MUSICAL FEELING, OR SENSITIVENESS, MUST CONTROL THE EXECUTION OF THE PHRASES, THE REGULATION OF THE TEMPO DEMANDS A KIND OF MUSICAL ABILITY NO LESS EXACTING.

Although in most cases the tempo of a given composition is now indicated by means of the metronomic markings, the judgment of the player must also be brought frequently into requisition. He cannot follow the tempo marks blindly, although it is usually unsafe for him to stray very far from these all-important musical sign-posts.

The metronome itself must not be used “with closed eyes,” as we should say it in Russia. The player must use discretion. I do not approve of continual practice with the metronome. The metronome is designed to set the time, and if not

abused is a very faithful servant. However, it should only be used for this purpose.

The most mechanical playing imaginable can proceed from those who make themselves slaves to this little musical clock, **which was never intended to stand like a ruler over every minute of the student’s practice time.**





ESSENTIAL #5

CHARACTER IN PLAYING

Too few students realize that there is **continual and marvelous opportunity** for contrast in playing. Every piece is a piece unto itself. It should, therefore, **have its own peculiar interpretation.**

There are performers whose playing seems alike. It is like meals served in some hotels. Everything brought to the table has the same taste.

Of course, a successful performer must have a strong individuality, and all of his interpretations must bear the mark of this individuality, but at the same time he should seek variety constantly. A Chopin Ballade must have a different interpretation from, a Scarlatti Capriccio. **There is really very little in common between a Beethoven Sonata and a Liszt Rhapsody.**





ESSENTIAL #6

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PEDAL

THE PEDAL HAS BEEN CALLED THE SOUL OF THE PIANO.



I never realized what this meant until I heard Anton Rubinstein, whose playing seemed so marvelous to me that it beggars description. His mastery of the pedal was nothing short of phenomenal. In the last movement of the B-flat minor sonata of Chopin he produced pedal effects that can never be described, but for any one who remembers them they will always be treasured as one of the greatest of musical joys.

The pedal is the study of a lifetime.

It is the most difficult branch of higher pianoforte study. Of course, one may make rules for its use, and the student should carefully study all these rules, but, at the same time, these rules may often be skillfully broken in order to produce some very charming effects.

The rules represent a few known principles that are within the grasp of our musical intelligence. **They may be compared with the planet upon which we live, and about which we know so much.**

Beyond the rules, however, is the great universe—the celestial system which only the telescopic artistic



ESSENTIAL #6

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PEDAL

sight of the great musician can penetrate. This, Rubinstein, and some others, have done, bringing to our mundane vision undreamt-of beauties which they alone could perceive.



ESSENTIAL #7 **THE DANGER OF CONVENTION**

While we must respect the traditions of the past, which for the most part are very intangible to us because they are only to be found in books, we must, nevertheless, not be bound down by convention.

ICONOCLASM IS THE LAW OF ARTISTIC PROGRESS.

It is infinitely better to create than to imitate. All great composers and performers have built upon the ruins of conventions that they themselves have destroyed. Before we can create, however, it is well to make ourselves familiar with the best that has preceded us.



NIKOLAI ZVEREV (CENTER) AND HIS PUPILS AT THE MOSCOW CONSERVATORY, INCLUDING ALEXANDER SCRIBAN (SECOND FROM LEFT) AND RACHMANINOFF (FOURTH FROM RIGHT).



ESSENTIAL #7 **THE DANGER OF CONVENTION**

This applies not only to composition, but to pianoforte playing as well. The master pianists, Rubinstein and Liszt, were both marvelously broad in the scope of their knowledge. They knew the literature of the pianoforte in all its possible branches. They made themselves familiar with every possible phase of musical advancement.

This is the reason for their gigantic musical prominence.



FRANZ LISZT (1811 - 1886)

Their greatness was not the hollow shell of acquired technic. THEY KNEW.

Oh, for more students in these days with the genuine thirst for real musical knowledge, and not merely with the desire to make a superficial exhibition at the keyboard!



ESSENTIAL #8

**REAL MUSICAL
UNDERSTANDING**

I am told that some teachers lay a great deal of stress upon the necessity for the pupil learning the source of the composer's inspiration.

This is interesting, of course, and may help to stimulate a dull imagination. However, I am convinced that it would be far better for the student to depend more upon his real musical understanding. It is a mistake to suppose that the knowledge of the fact that Schubert was inspired by a certain poem, or that Chopin was inspired by a certain legend, could ever make up for **a lack of the real essentials** leading to good pianoforte playing.



FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN (1810 - 1849)

The student must see, first of all, the main points of musical relationship in a composition. He must understand what it is that gives the work unity, cohesion, force, or grace, and must know how to bring out these elements.

There is a tendency with some teachers to magnify the importance of auxiliary studies and minimize the importance of essentials.

This course is wrong, and must lead to erroneous results.



ESSENTIAL #9 **PLAYING TO EDUCATE THE PUBLIC**

The virtuoso must have some far greater motive than that of playing for gain. He has a mission, and that mission is to educate the public.

It is quite as necessary for the sincere student in the home to carry on this educational work. For this reason it is to his advantage to direct his efforts toward pieces which he feels will be of musical educational advantage to his friends. In this he must use judgment and not overstep their intelligence.

With the virtuoso it is somewhat different. He expects, and even demands, from his audience a certain grade of musical taste, a certain degree of musical education. Otherwise he would work in vain. If the public would enjoy the greatest in music they must hear good music until these beauties become evident.

The virtuoso is expected to give his best... and look to the students of the world to do their share in the education of the great musical public.



SERGEI RACHMANINOFF AS A STUDENT

Out of consideration for the sensitive reader, we have removed a small portion of the text. Rachmaninoff was influenced by a colonialist mentality prevalent in his day that featured ignorant beliefs about other cultures and their music. For the curious reader, the full text can be found in the original March 1910 issue of *The Etude Magazine*.



ESSENTIAL #10

THE VITAL SPARK



In all good pianoforte playing there is a vital spark that seems to make each interpretation of a masterpiece into a living thing.

It exists only for the moment, and cannot be explained.



For instance, two pianists of equal technical ability may play the same composition. With one the playing is dull, lifeless and sapless, with the other there is something that is indescribably wonderful.

IT EXISTS ONLY FOR THE MOMENT, AND CANNOT BE EXPLAINED.

His playing seem fairly to quiver with life. It commands interest and inspires the audience.

When the composition was originally written the composer was unquestionably inspired; when the performer finds the same joy that the composer found at the moment the composition came into existence, then **something new and different enters his playing.**



ESSENTIAL #10 **THE VITAL SPARK**

It seems to be stimulated and invigorated in a manner altogether marvelous. **The audience realizes this instantly**, and will even sometimes forgive technical imperfections if the performance is inspired.

Rubinstein was technically marvelous, and yet he admitted making mistakes. Nevertheless, for every possible mistake he may have made, he gave, in return, ideas and musical tone pictures that would have made up for a million mistakes.

When Rubinstein was over-exact his playing lost something of its wonderful charm. I remember that upon one occasion he was playing Balakirev's Islamei at a concert. Something distracted his attention and he apparently forgot the composition entirely; but he kept on improvising in the style of the piece, and after about four minutes the remainder of the composition came back to him and he played it to the end correctly.





ESSENTIAL #10 **THE VITAL SPARK**



This annoyed him greatly and he played the next number upon the program with the greatest exactness, but, strange to say, it lost the wonderful charm of the interpretation of the piece in which his memory had failed him.

Rubinstein was really incomparable, even more so perhaps because he was full of human impulse and his playing very far removed from mechanical perfection.

While, of course, the student must

play the notes, and all of the notes, in the manner and in the time in which the composer intended that they should be played, his efforts should by no means stop with notes.

Every individual note in a composition is important, but there is something quite as important as the notes, and that is the soul.

After all, the vital spark is the soul.

The soul is the source of that higher expression in music which cannot be represented in dynamic marks. The soul feels the need for crescendos and diminuendos intuitively. The mere matter of the duration of a pause upon a note depends upon its significance, and the soul of the artist dictates to him just how long such a pause should be held.



ESSENTIAL #10
**THE VITAL
SPARK**

**IF THE STUDENT RESORTS TO MECHANICAL RULES AND DEPENDS UPON
THEM ABSOLUTELY, HIS PLAYING WILL BE SOULLESS.**

Fine playing requires much deep thought away from the keyboard. The student should not feel that when the notes have been played his task is done. It is, in fact, only begun.

He must make the piece a part of himself. Every note must awaken in him a kind of musical consciousness of his of his real artistic mission.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

We hope you found Rachmaninoff's 10 Essentials Of Piano Playing helpful! If you're interested in learning more piano playing tips, we recommend checking out our growing catalog of lessons on tonebase.

In fact, a perfect follow-up to this PDF would be **Claire Huangci's lesson on Rachmaninoff's "Prelude In C# Major,"** one of his most famous works. In the lesson, Claire goes through the Prelude section-by-section, discussing important moments such as the "sighing motif" found in the A section and the "huge, two-page crescendo" in the B section.

To access Claire Huangci's full lesson, head over to **tonebase.co/piano** or simply click the image below!





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