

C A R M E N M O R I N

Music Mindset Podcast - Episode 8: The Three 'Instruments' of Piano Playing Episode 8 Transcript

Hello, everyone, and welcome to the Music Mindset Podcast. I'm your host, Carmen Morin, and this is episode number eight. Now, I titled this episode the three instruments of piano playing. And in this context, when I say three instruments, I'm not talking about three different musical instruments or brands or models of piano. What I'm talking about today are the instruments that you have at your disposal in the truest sense of the word for drawing out your full potential, and two of these are often very neglected and skipped when we learn.

This episode is sponsored by my signature piano training course Piano Foundation Formula, where we unpack this topic and so many others, learning how to actively work towards your full potential on the piano, but also learning about ourselves, our own learning habits, our mindset, and the keys to motivation. This program training has students around the world, and you can read about their experiences on pianofoundationformula.com/success-stories.

Piano Foundation Formula, as a course, it's an entire system with many golden nuggets throughout, but today I really want to focus on one of the reasons that I think the training has been so transformative for so many people around the world. Not only is it a whole system there, but also we don't just talk about what many people get stuck at, which is how to make sure that you're playing the right notes and putting the right fingers on the right piano keys. Instead, we really dive deep into how we make music at the piano, and we learn about what happens both internally and externally when we are building a skill like this one, like making music on the piano. For example, if you're a regular listener, you've probably heard me say and talk about that I truly believe that talent is not just sprinkled randomly throughout the population, that we are born lucky and talented or not. I believe that talent is something that we can and should actively shape. We all have seeds of talent within us, and there are specific things that we can do to really draw those talents out.

Now the process can be complex. So before we even begin our work, we can also do things that will set ourselves up for being on an entirely different path if we really take that time to prepare and essentially prime ourselves for what it is that we want to do. For example, say, you decide that you're going to learn to play the piano. So you pick up a method book that you've heard about, or maybe you jump onto one of those note-reading apps. So those might give you some knowledge or understanding about how to play the correct notes with the correct fingers. But music, as you know, is so much more than that.

Physically, playing the piano is actually one of the most complex activities that we can do with our bodies. Not only do we train these very fast, refined, miniature movements, they also have to be responsive in real time to our thoughts and our emotions. And the thing is these

C A R M E N M O R I N

Music Mindset Podcast - Episode 8: The Three 'Instruments' of Piano Playing Episode 8 Transcript

movements are exactly what will determine the quality of the music that you make. Those movements are what determine the quality of your sound. This is also what allows you to fully enjoy making music on your instrument because you have that clear flow, moving from your thoughts and emotions to the music that you are producing out of your instrument.

I have found time and time again through decades of teaching that if you take the time to explore the three instruments that you have at your disposal, that we'll talk about today in this episode, you can set yourself up on an entirely different path for your musical journey. Let's get started.

Now, instrument number one. If you are learning to play the piano, of course you might think, what is your instrument? It's the piano. Instrument number one I will always say is your mind. Our primary instrument when learning to play the piano is the mind, which is why in any of the programs that I offer or in my private lessons, we always begin our piano training here. So you might think of music as coming out of your fingers or into your ears, other body parts that you might identify with, but it's important for you to always remember that our physical and emotional responses to music are truly rooted in the brain and in the way that it processes music.

As humans, we are biologically built to be musical. We are musical beings. There are so many interesting facts around this topic. One, for example, is that our auditory systems of our brains are actually laid out in pitch order. So when you see an image of how it's laid out in our brains, it really does look a lot like a musical instrument. Now, if you'd like to see an image and example of this, I've included it in the free download and worksheet available with this podcast episode, it's on my website at carmenmorin.com/episode8. That's the number eight. So carmenmorin.com/episode8.

So some other things for you to know about how our minds will process music. When we process music in our minds, for example, it can change and reduce the stress response that we have as humans at the cellular level. This is why it's more often and increasingly used in healthcare and in healing. Music has tangible effects on our immune system, our nervous system. Our brains are structured to allow us to experience music emotionally and physically, and it's integral to how we socialize and connect to other human beings. So there is virtually no other activity that involves as many regions of the brain as music does, which is why we have to start our study of music and our training in music, trying to develop awareness of how we process it and experience it in our minds.

C A R M E N M O R I N

Music Mindset Podcast - Episode 8: The Three 'Instruments' of Piano Playing Episode 8 Transcript

Now, if we have all this evidence that we are built and wired as musical beings at the physiological level, why is it then that some humans seem like they possess way more musical qualities than others? I will often meet people that will be the first to tell me that they don't think they're musical or artistic, but I am confident that musicality is our genetic birthright as human beings. But so many people are still apprehensive about taking hold of it, harnessing it, or maybe they're apologetic about how they express themselves through it. We are all built and wired with the capacity to learn and communicate through music. So it's so important that you know and truly believe that you have everything you need to be successful in this. You are, in fact, in full control of the outcome if you really make yourself aware of not only how you're experiencing and processing it, but also the internal steps that you're taking as you learn and acquire it.

So before we start to learn the piano and start to practice and learn the piano keys and learn to read, I have learned that it is most important that people take the time to try to understand how it is that we can actively build talent and shape our skills. Take the time to talk about what things we might experience in our minds as we are building these new skills and learning. And then work with clear tools of how these processes can really propel us forward, instead of just leaving us to spin our wheels or feel frustrated about it.

If you were to look at two different people practicing the piano, from the outside looking in, it may seem like they're both practicing and learning notes. However, awareness of what is happening internally in your own mind will be what sets apart so much of what can be accomplished, retained and acquired in each practice session. I could talk for hours on the topic of skill acquisition, practice, and learning. I touch on it quite a bit in other podcast episodes, but if you want to go a little bit more in depth in podcast episode number five that I called 'the most important thing you don't know about practicing', does a little bit more about this internal process that's going on when you are practicing. That's available on my site, carmenmorin.com/podcast.

If you are learning the piano or any new skill, what I want you to take from this episode is that it is important to know that the first and primary instrument that you want to sharpen and refine is your mind.

Next, let's go on to instrument number two. Now, if the primary instrument we train when learning the piano is the mind, then the next important instrument is going to be your body. Many piano students make the mistake of believing that learning to play the piano is about training your fingers to press the right keys. Of course, we learn about the piano keys, but this is not how you would sum up how you make music. This common misconception limits what you

C A R M E N M O R I N

Music Mindset Podcast - Episode 8: The Three 'Instruments' of Piano Playing Episode 8 Transcript

can play, it causes tension, it also causes so many people to hit roadblocks and their ability and their expressivity, and it's just not necessary.

So think about it. When you learn to play the piano, we have to be aware not only of what's happening within our mind as we learn and acquire, but we have to be aware and in control of these miniature movements. Remember that musicians are often called the athletes of the small muscles. So much is happening beneath the surface that is often invisible to the untrained eye. So lack of physical and bodily awareness stops you from being able to play without pain or tension, or stops you from things like playing with speed and power. But most importantly, it blocks the connection of your thoughts and emotions from translating through to the sounds that you produce in your music. And that's really what training highly refined skill is all about so that you have that connection where you can make those thoughts and emotions really come out with refined control through the musical instrument that you're playing.

For example, students in a typical classical training examination system, they might learn a wide variety of scales, chords, exercises, and they might work on these for a decade. Now, at the end of those 10 years, many of those students are still not clear or might not be able to articulate or explain what the movements they are trying to refine or isolate are. They've learned what notes to play. They've learned the key signatures. They know the theory. They can probably play them at the appropriate speeds, but what does that mean if we don't know how these exercises relate to the movements of your body, and most importantly, how those high quality movements will produce the sounds that you want? How can you apply these skills to a musical context? So in that case, you can play all the scales, all the Charny, all of the exercises in the world, that does not necessarily mean that you will refine or develop a piano technique that can help you to communicate through the music that you make.

So if you aren't training awareness and attention to that high-quality miniature movements that you are involved, when you're playing the piano, then it's very possible that you aren't even reinforcing the skills that you want. Sometimes people don't consider body movement at all, and they just focus piano playing on playing the right notes. They never make that connection that it's the quality of your movement that is exactly what will determine the quality of your playing and the quality of your sound and the music that you make. This is what allows you to also fully enjoy and draw the most joy and richness in making music, expressing yourself through music.

For example, in Piano Foundation Formula, we spend the entire first section in what I call the deconstruct phase. This is when we take all of these complex movements that seem like there are so many things happening at once, there are, but we break them down to their smallest

C A R M E N M O R I N

Music Mindset Podcast - Episode 8: The Three 'Instruments' of Piano Playing Episode 8 Transcript

component parts, and we train them to the highest quality level that we can in each individual component. In that training, I've paired down things so that I'm really only talking about the essential at the foundational level. I've gotten rid of a lot of the fluff, but there is still so much that we cover. And day after day, week after week, I hear from people who have played piano for years, but never realized or considered how much of the body is involved in playing. It's not just about your hands and making sure that your fingers press the right keys.

People who learned to oppress the right key at the right time, they were realizing that it's still not producing the sound and the effect and the communication that they want. So that is why I always say any technical exercise that you work on, if you're practicing scales or chords, or if you're doing any technique training, this is what it's for. Really your goal is to just isolate and refine any particular movement or a set of movements that will then allow you to freely produce the sound that you want in your music. The end goal is always to be able to freely express the sound, produce the sound that we want. So before you ever sit to practice any scales, chords, exercises, must make sure that you understand, first of all, what precise physical movement it is that you're refining. And then most importantly, how does that apply to a musical context. Listen and be responsive to what sound it produces when you make that high quality movement.

We dive deep into these things in Piano Foundation Formula far more than I could ever cram into a podcast episode. But what I have done is in the free download worksheet that I have for this episode at carmenmorin.com/episode8, that's the number eight, I've listed some of the key body parts that we focus on when we are in something like Piano Foundation Formula and we are training our piano technique and the physical movements involved. I'm willing to bet that you would be surprised not only at how many of the body parts and movements that we talk about, but which ones are even on the list. I've given you some space in that worksheet to write your thoughts and even just your observations of how you think they might impact your ability. Just by observing these areas of your body, I want you to see what you notice as you are playing the piano.

For example, one of my students, Chris, in Piano Foundation Formula, we had just finished the introductory sessions, just module one of the training. And he posted, "Wow, these things are so subtle, but just paying attention has freed up my movement so much. What sorcery is this? What magic is this?" And I said, it's not magic. It's just the importance of really understanding how to use your body efficiently, how to use your body and move in a way that fits with your body's natural design. Our bodies can do incredible things at fast paces and incredible speeds with control and refined movements, we just have to work within the design that is meant to.

C A R M E N M O R I N

Music Mindset Podcast - Episode 8: The Three 'Instruments' of Piano Playing Episode 8 Transcript

Another student in Piano Foundation Formula, Yemi, he's from the United Kingdom. He posted again, just after the first module when we started to break down these movements, he said, "I've never felt a scale feel as easy at such a speed. It's really quite an eye-opener. It's quite exciting."

So these are people that have worked for a long time, but all it takes is that awareness of really connecting with your body and being aware what mechanisms you need to tap into in order to just release what you're capable of. I could go on with lots more quotes like this, but it's important for you to know that first of all, these things will be a lot simpler than you may think. It's really about respecting and acknowledging that it's your body and the quality of your body's movement that is going to produce what you want from the piano. So training your piano playing, your technique, expression, it requires training your whole body. It's not just your fingers. It's not just your hands. It's not just your arms. It's training your whole body and its movements and training it to be responsive to the sound that you produce as well.

When you learn and you play and you train technique, it's not about again, putting your finger on the right note. It's about building like a toolbox of physical movements that correlates and connects with the sound that you want to produce. So that as you look at more music, you can have those movements and those skills at your disposal, and you understand them and you recognize what they feel like and the sound that they make. This is why when you approach learning the piano, it is of course most important that you first focus on what's happening internally within your mind, but I always say then that your second instrument to pay close attention to is your body.

Last but not least, now we are finally onto instrument number three. Only after we work through what is so important for you to know and become aware of when you are thinking about your first two instruments, first your mind, and then your body, is then we finally get to work on our third instrument. In our case, this is the piano. When you begin by focusing on the first two instruments in your arsenal, you are primed and you're ready to approach the skill and connecting to your musical instrument, the piano, with heightened awareness. Not just putting your finger on the right note at the right time. So we are talking about movement, freedom and ease, control and responsiveness in the mind. When you are prepared in this way, before you finally sit down to do your work at the piano, you come from an entirely different place for making music.

C A R M E N M O R I N

Music Mindset Podcast - Episode 8: The Three 'Instruments' of Piano Playing Episode 8 Transcript

On that same note, most people I've met who are learning the piano, even if they've studied for many years, they have not, again, taken the time to fully explore how their instrument works and what the key mechanisms are that they'll be working with. So of course there are thousands of moving parts in a piano. I am always fascinated to learn more and I'm sure I wouldn't be able to name all of them, but there are key things, basic mechanisms that we should all know and understand. If you really want to be able to fully connect and express yourself through your instrument, it's important for you to know how it all works. And I find that people don't know a lot of those basic ones.

For example, something simple like how is sound produced on the piano? Often people will say, "Well, you press the key and the sound comes out." But how important is it for you to know what the mechanisms are that are actually taking place to produce that sound? It will change the way that you hear your sound, not just when you first produce a sound, but as it sustains and as you learn to blend your sounds together. Things like, how do you produce loud sounds on the piano or soft sounds? People will often say things like, "Push hard to get a loud sound, push light to make a quiet sound." This is not the case. Do you know the answer? And if so, how much will it affect and impact those movements that you're training? And again, your internal process as you're trying to produce these things?

What happens to your sound on a piano after you first produce the sound? What happens compared to other instruments and why is that important for you to know? Things like, where should we focus our attention and listen when we are playing? Many people will focus on their fingers and the piano keys, but that's not where your sound is coming from. Can you name the parts of the piano?

These are ways that you can of course test your knowledge. And I've again included these questions and these ideas in the free worksheet that you'll find on the site, carmenmorin.com/episode8, but each of these are so important for you to really be able to fully enjoy and connect with your instrument. It's not about being a test of, can you name all the parts of the piano? It's about knowing those basic mechanisms of how your sound is being produced. And you will start to hear it in a different way when you are really aware of what's happening.

Knowledge and understanding of all three of your instruments is meant to be empowering. I meet students all the time who have spent hours and years focusing on repetition or doing what

C A R M E N M O R I N

Music Mindset Podcast - Episode 8: The Three 'Instruments' of Piano Playing Episode 8 Transcript

they think is practicing, but with just that, they're missing the information and the tools that they are able to understand what it is that they're trying to do, how it all and how it comes together to produce the music and the result and the expression that they want. So these are my top three that I always talk about when I start my students. These are the three core instruments that we will work on in lessons, whether my programs or my private lessons. These are things that you are constantly sharpening and developing and honing so that they come together in supportive synergy to allow you to communicate artistically and with a high level of skill. I encourage you and I am cheering you on to explore each of these. They are equally important to work together, to bring you to your highest potential.

Please stay in touch. I would love to hear if this helps you. Again, our worksheet for this episode is yours at carmenmorin.com/episode8. That's episode and then the number eight. And until next time, thank you so much for joining me. I'm Carmen Morin, and thank you for visiting me on this episode of the Music Mindset Podcast. See you soon. Bye-bye.