

A Sad Time Leads to Breakthrough

I got married to my first wife when I was 19. It was one of those pathetic kid things that was doomed to failure from the beginning, so when she threw me out, two years later, it was a statistically predictable thing; but it also defined one of the lowest periods of my life.

I got a little room in a college men's boarding house, a shared bathroom kind of thing, and slouched through the next three months like Atlas bearing the weight of the world on his shoulders. I sporadically attended classes, I worked a night job at the student union cafeteria, and I hung out with all my old bachelor buddies. My normal waking hours were from 12:00 noon until 4:00 in the morning.

I was so sad. I would wake up in the morning, feel my good morning stab of pain through the heart, and then drag myself to the clavichord, my part of the divorce settlement. I would sit and sigh, and play one note at a time for hours, out of a little study score of Bach's Inventions, Goldberg Variations, and the Italian Concerto. I just sat there, played a note, sighed, played another note, sighed, and so on.

I was not practicing slowly because of some clever stratagem—I was practicing slowly because I was completely depressed and had no energy to do anything the slightest bit fast. The surprising thing was this: after a couple months of slow depressed practice, I suddenly discovered that I had become a much faster and more accurate piano sight-reader. It was ironic because one of the sources of tension between myself and my first wife had been that I could not accompany her very well—it is ironic because accompanying has been one of my strongest suits as a pianist for the past 20 years.

It can be said that my career as a pianist, such as it has been, began at this point. Once I was able to read faster, I was able to take in much more literature, and learn what you're supposed to learn from being able to play the piano. Doing all this on a clavichord made it impossible to study the music of composers like Chopin, or Liszt, or Brahms, but I became something of an expert on the keyboard music of Bach.

The moral to this story is simply this: when you practice so slowly that you never miss a note, you get better and better at not missing notes;

when the sight-reading process becomes more enjoyable, learning new literature, in a serious or casual way, can become faster and more mistake-free.