

Bunger Prodigy/Fingering

My piano teacher, Richard Bunger, was a child prodigy; when he was 9 years old he could play the Chopin Revolutionary Etude—he said, "I was the only kid on my block who could play that piece."

"The thing is," he said, "I can't play the piece now; if I try to play now I remember all the childish bad habits, tensing, and stretching, and straining, that I had when I was nine, my brain reads back to the program of that piece that was put in when I was a kid. The only way I could play the piece now, is if I completely re-fingered it and made a completely new memory of it."

My teacher made a big deal about putting the programming for a new piece into your brain perfectly the first time, so you wouldn't have alternate versions running around in your memory waiting to mess you up in a performance. This is why he suppressed doing everything exactly the same way every time, which meant using exactly the same fingering every single time, which meant deciding on the fingering, creative process after all and writing in at the fingering for every single note, and doing that fingering every single time.

His fingering or so important to him, and that he kept all his concert music, music that he would be likely to be called upon to play for any kind of recital, in a safe deposit box at the bank. He was not keeping the music in the bank, he was keeping his fingerings.

The more performing I did, in my years as an active orchestral player and soloist, the more important this practice of completely editing the music, bowing, fingering, expression marks, etc., became. I am sometimes lax in insisting on this type of thorough editorial commitment from my students, but I believe the my students' music is still much more heavily marked up than that of most music students, and this is one of the recent my students tend to give solid, mistake-free performances.